ETHIOPIA

International Institute of Social Studies

Responding to the 2016 drought amid political protest and a state of emergency

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Key messages

WHEN DISASTER MEETS CONFLICT

- **The collaboration between government and non-state actors in the 2016 drought response helped avoid catastrophe but was less successful than portrayed**. The independent decision-making and operational space afforded to both Ethiopian and international humanitarian actors was highly constrained, and many bemoaned a lack of direct contact between humanitarian actors and the communities that made it harder to gather information, leading to low accountability and errors in implementation.
- **The 2016 protests and the state of emergency** made the drought response more politicized and led to additional security risks, logistical challenges, and positioning dilemmas for aid actors.
- Participants of all categories felt powerless in dealing with these challenges, but especially community members and Ethiopian NGO staff. **Self-censorship in words and action** was the preferred coping strategy, and some avoided conflict areas altogether. Self-censorship can only lead so far in dealing with disaster impacts associated with authoritarian low-intensity conflict settings. Issues that cannot be named are naturally harder to resolve. It would be in the interest of all parties to be able to openly problematize issues ranging from humanitarian access constraints to health impacts such as cholera.
- **While the issue of political bias might be too difficult to raise openly, it should be discussed at least internally within organizations**, or in structures such as INGO coordination platforms. These internal discussions would serve the purpose of mutual learning on strategies to overcome challenges and could help draw clearer limits on how far organizations are willing to compromise on unbiased, transparent and accountable relief programmes.
- The line between state sovereignty and the humanitarian space is hard to define and negotiate in practice, and compromises always have to be made. But these compromises are more justifiable when they are not implicitly embedded within an ever-shrinking civil society and humanitarian space, and stem from common and continuous reflection and evaluation.

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This research is part of the programme 'When disaster meets conflict'

Responses to disasters triggered by natural hazards have changed considerably in recent decades: away from reactive responses to disasters and towards more proactive attention to risk reduction, as well as away from state-centred top-down approaches towards more deliberately involving non-state actors and communities in the formal governance of disaster response.

However, in research and policy, little attention has been paid to scenarios where disasters happen in conflict situations, even though a significant proportion of disasters occur in such contexts. There is evidence that conflict aggravates disaster and that disaster can intensify conflict – but not much is known about the precise relationship and how it may impact upon aid responses.

This five-year research programme analyses how state, non-state and humanitarian actors respond to disasters in different conflict-affected situations. Because the type of conflict matters – for how disasters impact communities and for how aid actors support the people affected – we distinguish different conflict scenarios, notably high-intensity conflict, low-intensity conflict, and post-conflict.

The core of the research programme consists of case studies in conflict countries where disasters occur, but our interest extends beyond the disaster events. In particular, we seek to understand how the politicisation of disaster response affects the legitimacy, power and relations between governance actors.

Disaster response in low-intensity conflict scenario

Low-intensity conflicts constitute the largest share of conflicts worldwide and are generally under-researched.

In such settings, violence will often manifest itself through a repressive law, roadblocks cutting access to a separatist area, or structural discrimination of an ethnic group. While casualties are fewer than in high-intensity conflict, actual physical violence may suddenly erupt in the form of riots, targeted attacks or state repression. That is especially the case in intra-state low-intensity conflict, where the state is one of the conflict parties and (part of) society perceives it as unresponsive to their needs. To focus on heightened state-society tensions, an authoritarian state element can be found in all our low-intensity conflict country case studies.

The low-intensity conflict scenario provides an intriguing terrain to study aid-state-society relations and humanitarian governance. The legitimacy of the state, state-contesting groups and side-lined minorities as providers or receivers of aid is highly contested. The ways in which parties frame the causes and effects of a disaster and the response are inevitably political.

International actors must position themselves within these tense intra-societal, state-societal and global dynamics. Functioning and sovereignty-asserting state structures remain their primary interlocutors, even when they fail to respect humanitarian principles.

Drought in Ethiopia. Source: Marloes Viet

Introduction

2016 was a year of acute hydro-meteorological and socio-political stress for Ethiopia. The worst drought in half a century, triggered by the El Niño climatic phenomenon, left 10.2 million people in need of humanitarian assistance.[1] The drought coincided with large protests which the government tried to limit by declaring a state of emergency in October 2016, which further curtailed Ethiopians' already-restricted freedom of assembly and expression. Hundreds of protesters were killed and thousands imprisoned without trial.[2] [3]

This brief is based on research that focused on the co-governance of the 2016 drought response by state, societal and humanitarian actors in the context of political turmoil.

This research addressed the following questions:
- How is decision-making and implementation of the drought response shaped among state, societal and international humanitarian actors?
- How did the 2016 protests and state of emergency impact the drought response?
- How did Ethiopian and international aid agencies strategize around those impacts?
- What does this mean for the governance of disaster response in low-intensity conflict settings?

1   United Nations, *UN News - As New Drought Hits Ethiopia, UN Urges Support for Government's 'Remarkable' Efforts*, 2017
2   Jan Abbink, *Stable Instability: Renewed Turmoil in Ethiopia* (part 1), 2016;
3   Amnesty International, *Ethiopia: Draconian State of Emergency Measures*, 2017

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In a context where the conflict dynamics varied greatly by location and where state and non-state research participants may have their own motivations for participating or 'performing' in the research, it is important to acknowledge that all collected statements relate to the research participants' subjective framing of the disaster and of the conflict. This in itself is reflective of the conflict dynamics at play.
Ethiopia is included in this project as an example case study of the low-intensity conflict scenario, together with case studies Myanmar and Zimbabwe.

Risks, disasters and disaster response in Ethiopia

Ethiopia is exposed to droughts, floods, landslides and earthquakes. It ranks as the 16th most at-risk out of 191 countries, with high risk for associated increased conflict.[4] The country has been plagued by ten major droughts causing millions of deaths since the 1970s. Today, about 10% of the population of 90 million is considered chronically food insecure.
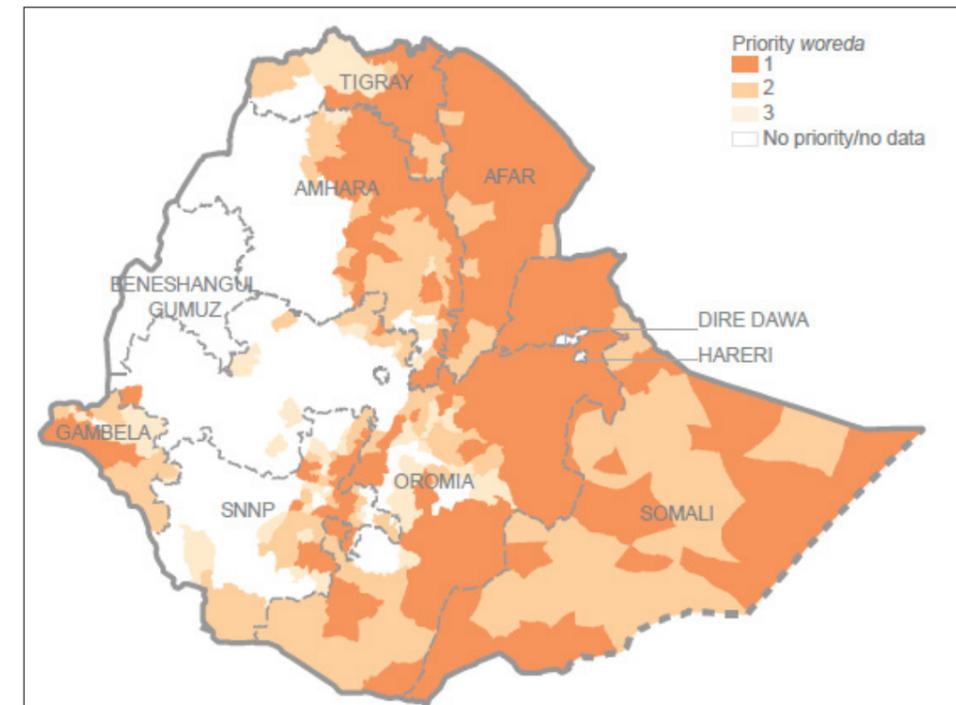
Disaster risk is further compounded by high vulnerability and low capacity in terms of access to health, infrastructure, communication and governance. Supporting millions of food-insecure people across remote various agro-ecological zones within an under-stress and competitive global humanitarian landscape is no easy logistical feat. The Government of Ethiopia (GoE) is engaged and proactive following its National Disaster Management Policy and Strategy and takes the lead role in drought preparedness and response, which it finances to substantial degree. An Investment Framework for international funding is in place, and state-international humanitarian collaboration has a long track record. Virtually all international humanitarian agencies and donors have permanent headquarters in Africa's diplomatic capital.

Yet, historically, drought response in Ethiopia has been highly politicized. The 1973 and 1984 famines were instrumentalized as part of counter-insurgencies to forcibly displace populations, and eventually led to the downfall of two regimes. More recently, the selection of chronically food-insecure people benefitting in the government's Productive Safety Net Programme has been politically driven,[5] and restrictions on humanitarian actors working in refugee care have been reported.[6] Civil society has been embattled since the contested 2005 elections, with implications for the role it can play in disaster response. The funding opportunities and scope of engagement of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were particularly constrained by the restrictive 2009 Charities and Societies Agency declaration and follow-up amendments.

Drought hotspot districts as of July 2016. Source: UN OCHA and Government of Ethiopia.[7]

Occurrence of riots and state violence in 2015-2016, as compiled based on internet and radio claims by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). Source: BBC.[8]

In recent political discourse and research, drought management has largely been treated as a technocratic, apolitical endeavour. The question is how the 2016 protests

4   INFORM Index for Risk Management: Inter-Agency Standing Committee Reference Group on Risk Early Warning and Preparedness and the European Commission, *Ethiopia 2018 INFORM Index for Risk Management*, 201
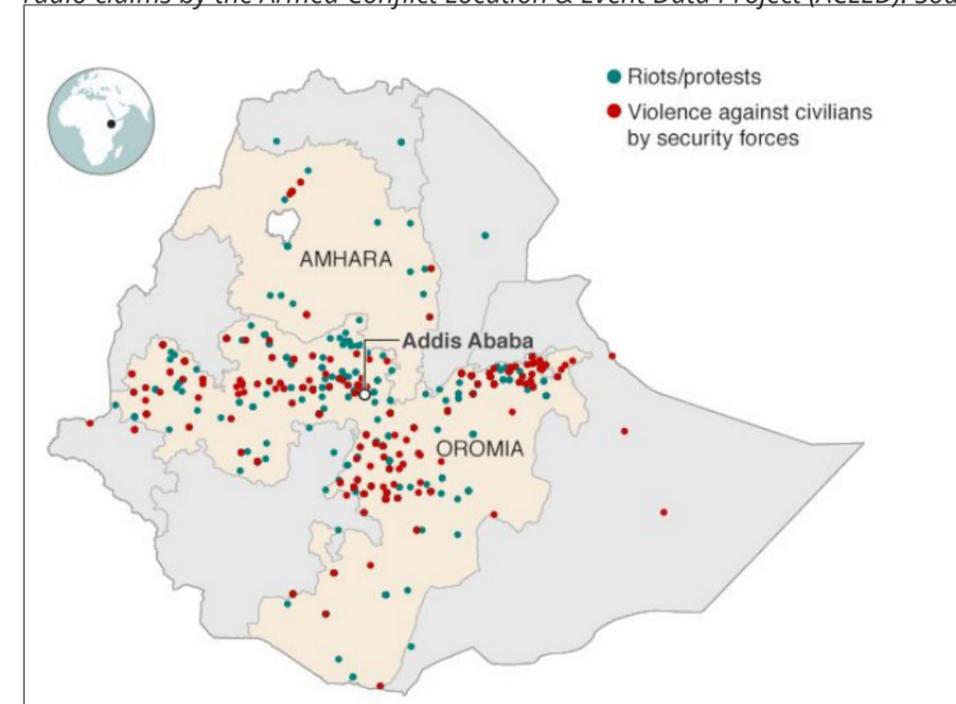5   Carly Bishop and Dorothea Hilhorst, 'From Food Aid to Food Security: The Case of the Safety Net Policy in Ethiopia, *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 48.02 (2010), 181-202
6   Alice Corbet and others, *Agents de l'État et Acteurs Humanitaires: Enjeux D'une Interdépendance Négociée. Étude de Cas à Gambella*, 2017

7   UN OCHA and Government of Ethiopia, *Ethiopia Humanitarian Requirements Document 2016 Mid-Term Review*, 2016, p. 3
8   BBC News, *Seven Things Banned under Ethiopia's State of Emergency*, BBC News, 17 October 2016

may have shaken this portrayal. The protests, which emerged in the Oromia region in November 2015 and expanded to Oromia and Amhara regions in 2016, were triggered by the proposed integrated urban master plan for Addis Ababa encroaching on the surrounding Oromia Zone. They also built on deeper-seated dissatisfaction with the pre-2018 political arrangement.[9]

Methods

Fieldwork was conducted between February and July 2017 in Addis Ababa and in drought-affected protest hotspots in the Amhara and Oromia regions. The researcher further attended a donor trip to a drought-ridden area in Somali region, informal gatherings of the humanitarian community, and conducted observations while based in local and international NGO offices in the capital and in Oromia.

A total of 190 participants participated in the study, out of whom 122 took part in-depth semi-structured interviews or focus group discussion. They included community members, government officials, and NGO and international NGO (INGO) staff. Participants' confidentiality was preserved at all times, with especially strict rules for community members residing in 2016 protest hotspots. Supplementary data were collected through secondary sources such as official humanitarian reports and press clippings. All material was thematically coded in NVivo.

Main findings

This section describes challenges and lessons learned concerning the 2016 drought response in low-intensity conflict Ethiopia.

The failed 2015 *belg* spring rains, the erratic 2015 *kiremt* summer rains, and multi-agency assessments observing water shortages and a crop loss of 50-90% in some areas, presaged Ethiopia's worst drought in decades. A rise in malnutrition, outbreaks of Acute Watery Diarrhoea (how cholera is referred to by Ethiopian authorities and international aid actors in country), livestock deaths, forced displacement and school absenteeism were among its many impacts.

The GoE tried to respond on its own before belatedly appealing for international support in January 2016. In April 2016, it released the national hotspot classification, allocating drought-impacted *woredas*, or districts, into three priority zones. Non-state actors then followed this prioritization for their own area selection.

According to joint UN and government reporting, international donors contributed close to US$1 billion and the GoE at least $735 million over the course of the 2016 drought response. These resources were instrumental in mitigating drought consequences and preventing deaths, funding activities in the sectors of food, nutrition,

9   Jan Abbink, *Stable Instability: Renewed Turmoil in Ethiopia* (part 1), 2016

health, WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene), agriculture, education, protection, logistics and emergency shelter. The response was mainly carried out by Ethiopian authorities, international organizations and INGOs. Except for the Ethiopian Red Cross Society and some INGO 'implementing partners', Ethiopian NGOs were often dismissed as 'not capable enough' responders by government and international actors, had less access to funding, and were therefore less engaged in the response.

1. The collaboration between government and non-state actors in the 2016 drought response was less successful than portrayed

- **Ethiopia is often regarded as a humanitarian success-case**, building on close collaboration between a (financially) dedicated government and the long-present international humanitarian community. Many research participants suggested that the organised presence of the GoE down to the lowest governance level – backed by strong and comprehensive disaster risk reduction policy and mechanisms – makes the distribution of aid more effective and helps avoid replication.

- However, participants also stressed the **highly constrained independent decision-making and operational space** afforded to both Ethiopian and international actors. The GoE controls the timing, geographic scope and content of each response activity: non-governmental actors have to wait for GoE emergency appeals, drought hotspot classifications and activity permits. The GoE also controls information flows. One INGO worker interviewed in May 2017 said: 'Information sharing is such a sensitive issue in Ethiopia. What you state should always be linked to a government source.' At local level, the final lists of food-aid beneficiaries are largely compiled by government officials.

- **This has important implications for disaster response**. All participants, including some government officials, bemoaned a lack of direct contact between humanitarian actors and the communities they serve. This makes it harder to directly gather information, leading to **low accountability** and **errors in implementation**. For instance, the author witnessed community members in Amhara receiving supplies of decaying food after it had been left for days at the warehouse location; they then had to pay to transport the supplies to their home areas hours away. People in need were reportedly excluded from the distribution of food, and many households received the same 'flat' amount even though family size was supposed to be taken into account.

- The disconnect between aid agencies and communities **also increases the risk of the politicization of aid distribution**. As stated by an Oromia government official (12 May 2017), 'If INGOs had the chance to get direct contact with the community [to decide on, implement and monitor activities], that is my wish. Now the government is the one communicating and deciding. So there is a big chance in using that for other purposes.' A resident of the same community

said: 'Donors should participate in the activities we prefer. The contact with us should be direct. Without interference. Now it is not direct contact.'

2. The 2016 protests and the state of emergency made the drought response more political and led to additional challenges

- The protests, which could erupt suddenly and violently, especially in Oromia, posed **security risks** and **logistical challenges.** Warehouses, aid transport and government facilities were reported burned, and there were incidents of government officials 'taking over' NGO cars for their own purposes. In the studied Oromia community, drought-response activities by the government (e.g. in health posts, school-feeding programmes) and NGOs (e.g. food aid distribution) halted as violence increased. Week-long internet and telecommunication network outages made planning difficult.

- The protests also posed more profound political challenges and **positioning difficulties** for humanitarian actors, who felt forced to take sides. For example, a grain storage facility, managed by an INGO, was attacked and grain was stolen. The government then assigned soldiers to protect the warehouse. The INGO feared this would look like they were siding with the government, but neither could they demand the soldiers left because there was unrest and 'we must keep a good relationship' (as recounted by an INGO official interviewed 23 March 2017).

- Although the state of emergency helped restore order and ultimately helped prevent destruction, injuries and very possibly deaths, it made access to international work permits, visas and reliable information more difficult.

- **Aid was reportedly distributed or withheld, as reward or punishment**, for some communities or specific drought-affected people. There were cases where access to some communities, particularly those involved in the protests, was denied by the military command posts which had taken control during the state of emergency.

- Just as it hampered people's right to assembly, there were indications that the state of emergency also hampered **community-based drought support mechanisms,** such as those of the traditional *Gada* Oromo governance system.

3. Participants of all categories felt powerless in dealing with these challenges, but especially community members and Ethiopian NGO staff. Self-censorship in words and action was the preferred coping strategy

- **Very few instances of confrontation or direct negotiation with Ethiopian authorities were mentioned**. One exception was members of an international organization asking diplomats based outside of Ethiopia to raise the issue of

limited humanitarian access during the 2016 protests with the federal government. One INGO decided to leave the country in 2017, but they were alone in deeming the context too problematic to remain.

- The limited actions some took mostly consisted of dealing with the constraints of the existing system and 'fighting bureaucracy with bureaucracy'. However, their strategies – including naming external donor conditions, trying to compute different statistics on the situation, or reporting bias in beneficiary selection to officials – hit the same system boundaries. Data collection requires the government's blessing, and the officials that local aid staff tried to engage with to address distribution bias are often part of the problem – but 'that is the only route, we can't jump' (Ethiopian NGO member interviewed 17 May 2017).

- Most actors kept quiet. One INGO participant (interviewed 10 May 2017) referred to the protests and initial state of emergency period as 'our hibernation'. **Self-censorship** emerged as the main strategy used to deal with the challenges, and took three forms:
  1. Self-censorship of words, such as framing challenges as logistical instead of political in multi-actor discussion rounds. Conflict could be mentioned a bit more easily if framed as 'ethnic' or 'tribal', but not in terms of protest against or conflict with the state.
  2. Self-censorship of actions, such as refraining from visiting a borehole construction site situated in an area with violent clashes, because then 'the government would know that we know' (INGO member interviewed 1 March 2017).
  3. Self-censorship by deliberately staging ignorance, such as referring to drought casualties as outside of the organisational mandate ('death is none of my business', as stated by an Ethiopian NGO member interviewed 12 April 2017), or interpreting the humanitarian principle of neutrality to mean avoiding conflict areas altogether. This 'self-censorship in knowing', or staged naivety, is referred to as 'ignorancy' by Hilhorst.[10]

- Research participants recounted **three narratives on the limited humanitarian space** in Ethiopia:
  1. One group of participants, predominantly headquarter-based non-Ethiopian staff of the large and longer-established international organisations and INGOs, seemed to have fallen into a comfortable routine and did not mind the restrictions.
  2. Another group of participants, from both international and Ethiopian organizations, took a pragmatic view and described the compromises as necessary to maintain a presence in the country.
  3. A third group of participants, usually members of Ethiopian NGOs, of the globally more advocacy-oriented INGOs, but also international organisation/INGO

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10   Dorothea Hilhorst, Classical Humanitarianism and Resilience Humanitarianism: Making Sense of Two Brands of Humanitarian Action, *Journal of International Humanitarian Action*, 3.1 (2018), 15

staff members recently arrived in the country, were very critical of the situation, and especially how the 2016 protests and state of emergency had been handled. To them, taking a stronger stance was required to push for a proper humanitarian space, and the highly politicized 2016 drought response would have been a good opportunity to do this.

Conclusion

Zooming in on how Ethiopian and international humanitarian actors and government officials from the lowest *kebele* to the highest federal government level responded to the 2016 drought in the context of political turmoil provides insights into the intermingling of disaster response and low-intensity conflict.

The case study highlights a gap between how humanitarian governance is generally portrayed in Ethiopia and research participants' descriptions of the daily operations and community impact surrounding disaster response. Although this cannot be generalized to all Ethiopian territories and disaster response processes, the state monopoly on decision-making and information was starkly felt by almost all participants. They detailed profound implications for the accountability and transparency of the response and the independence of the humanitarian space.

A strong and dedicated Ethiopian government, together with a well-established and extensive humanitarian community, were instrumental in largely avoiding catastrophe in 2016. But the case also highlights how self-censorship can only lead so far in dealing with the impacts associated with authoritarian low-intensity conflict settings. Issues that cannot be named are naturally harder to resolve. In Ethiopia it would be in the interest of all parties, and especially the drought-impacted communities, to be able to openly problematize issues ranging from humanitarian access constraints to health impacts such as cholera.

While the issue of political bias might be too difficult to raise openly, as suggested even by high-ranking officials from international organization, it should be discussed at least internally within organizations, or in structures such as INGO coordination platforms. These internal discussions would serve the purpose of mutual learning on strategies to overcome challenges and could help draw clearer limits on how far organizations are willing to compromise on unbiased, transparent and accountable relief programmes.

The line between state sovereignty and the humanitarian space certainly is hard to define and negotiate in practice, and compromises always have to be made. But these compromises are more justifiable when they are not implicitly embedded within an ever-shrinking civil society and humanitarian space, and stem from common and continuous reflection and evaluation.

More information

- Find the project details <u>here</u>. The findings are further elaborated on in an <u>open access article</u>[11]
- For more information, please contact the author at <u>desportes@iss.nl</u>
- Find the project details <u>here</u>.

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11   Isabelle Desportes, Hone Mandefro, and Dorothea Hilhorst, <u>The Humanitarian Theatre: Drought Response during Ethiopia's Low-Intensity Conflict of 2016</u>, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 57.1 (2019), 1-29