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The Dynamics of Humanitarian Diplomacy During Wartime: Insights from Tigray Crisis in Ethiopia

Mulubrhan Atsbaha Geremedhn¹ and Hafta Gebreselassie Gebrihet^{1,2,*}

¹ Department of Civics and Ethical Studies, College of Social Sciences and Humanities, Adigrat University, Adigrat 50, Tigray, Ethiopia; mulubrhan.atsbeha@adu.edu.et

² Department of Pedagogy, Religion, and Social Studies, Faculty of Education, Arts and Sports, Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, 5063 Bergen, Norway

* Correspondence: hafta.gebreselassie.gebrihet@hvl.no

Abstract: This study examines the role of humanitarian diplomacy during the Tigray humanitarian crisis in Ethiopia, a humanitarian disaster marked by severe shortages in food, healthcare, and essential services that deeply affect civilians. A qualitative approach using both primary and secondary data grounds the study by exploring key actors in humanitarian diplomacy, their successes, and barriers to aid delivery. Humanitarian actors, such as UN agencies, international NGOs, donor countries, the EU, the US, and the African Union, have engaged with the Ethiopian government, the TPLF, and the Tigray Transitional Government to alleviate the crisis. Notable achievements in humanitarian diplomacy include negotiations, information gathering, communication, civilian needs assessment, resource mobilization, advocacy for international law, and distressed civilians. Humanitarian diplomacy has facilitated international aid operations, saving lives during critical periods, despite practical difficulties. Diplomatic efforts have faced significant interruptions due to access restrictions imposed by the Ethiopian government, security threats from ongoing fighting leading to attacks on aid convoys and casualties among aid workers, and bureaucratic obstacles imposed by the Ethiopian government. This study highlights the necessity for effective humanitarian diplomacy in accounting for complex political landscapes in conflict-affected regions, developing flexible strategies that enhance access to aid, and improving humanitarian interventions.

Keywords: humanitarian diplomacy; Tigray crisis; access restrictions; conflict resolution; international aid



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1. Introduction

Throughout history, diplomacy has been crucial for addressing humanitarian crises caused by armed conflict and natural disasters. From ancient civilizations like the 5th century ancient Greece to the 15th century Italian city-states and 15th century France, diplomacy has been instrumental in negotiating truces, protecting from wars, combating famine and diseases, and facilitating humanitarian aid (Weisbrode 2014). Historical frameworks, such as the ancient Egyptian and Persian rules of warfare, the European Articles of War of 1621, and the American Lieber Code of 1863, emphasize the obligation to protect civilians of hostile nations in armed conflicts (Jämtin 2004).

Humanitarian diplomacy, which aims to create safe environments for humanitarian operations amidst armed conflicts, natural disasters, and other disaster situations, has significantly evolved from Henry Dunant's experiences at the Battle of Solferino in 1859, in parallel with the inception of modern humanitarian aid, which was formally recognized in 1990, reflecting the increasing role of non-state actors in conflict resolution negotiations and increased international operations for civilian protection (Donelli 2017). This approach involves collaboration among multilateral organizations, international and national NGOs, donor states, and regional bodies to deliver humanitarian aid in conflict zones (Bogatyreva 2022). The four Geneva Conventions of 1949 symbolize humanitarian

diplomacy's global commitment to assisting vulnerable populations, especially civilians, during armed conflicts (Chin et al. 2022).

Advancements in transportation and communication, coupled with the rising presence of NGOs, have expanded humanitarian aid globally, shifting the focus from a Eurocentric view to a more global perspective, particularly in developing African countries during the late twentieth century (Jämtin 2004). Humanitarian crises in Africa, particularly during the mid-1960s and Nigerian civil war (1967–1970), underscored the significance of humanitarian diplomacy in addressing suffering in developing nations (Rysaback-Smith 2015).

Ethiopia has been in humanitarian distress since its formation in the nineteenth century, and has received aid since the late 1940s (Chanie 2021). Political upheavals, such as the 1974 military coup by the Derg, the Ethio-Somalia War (1977–1978), and a 17-year civil war (1974–1991), alongside natural disasters, have rendered Ethiopia heavily reliant on humanitarian assistance. This reliance has prompted humanitarian actors to employ diplomacy to protect vulnerable populations (Mwansa and Simbila 2022). Notably, the Derg regime manipulated aid during the 1980s' droughts, worsening famine, and forced relocations, which resulted in numerous civilian deaths (Fantahun 2024). Recent conflicts, such as the 1998–2000 war with Eritrea, and ethnic violences, such as the 2018 Guju-Gedeo and 2019 Sidama civil unrest, further highlight Ethiopia's vulnerability and the critical role of humanitarian actors in humanitarian crises (Mwansa and Simbila 2022).

The Tigray conflict (2020–2022) positioned Ethiopia at the center of Africa's humanitarian crisis. Driven by political complexities, including Ethiopia's ethnic-based federalism, governance failures, delayed democratization, a lack of national cohesion, and the disputed election of the TPLF, the conflict in Tigray escalated into a significant humanitarian disaster. Framed as a 'law enforcement operation' against the TPLF, the conflict evolved into a civilianized form of war leading to severe civilian suffering (Musau 2021). The international community, including UN agencies and NGOs, engaged in humanitarian diplomacy to address the plight of civilians in Tigray and often encountered access restrictions and security challenges (UNHCR 2021).

The Tigray crisis exemplifies the complexities of humanitarian diplomacy in contemporary conflicts. Rooted in Ethiopia's ethnic-based federalism, the crisis stemmed from political tensions, governance failures, and grievances between the federal government and TPLF. What began as a military offensive, labeled a 'law enforcement operation', quickly escalated into full-scale conflict, resulting in severe consequences for civilians. The prolonged nature of the crisis, marked by repeated ceasefire violations and a fragile peace process, has left millions of people in desperate need for humanitarian assistance. With reports of widespread atrocities, including mass displacement, sexual violence, and the destruction of infrastructure, the Tigray crisis has become one of the most severe humanitarian emergencies in African history. This situation has attracted international attention because of access restrictions, diplomatic friction, and competing narratives, making it a key case for examining the role of humanitarian diplomacy in negotiating aid delivery, protecting civilians, and navigating wartime diplomacy. Through this study, the intersection of geopolitical interests and local political dynamics in humanitarian efforts is explored, shedding light on the challenges of upholding humanitarian principles in such complex environments.

Despite the growing body of research on the role of humanitarian diplomacy in crisis management (Jämtin 2004; Barnett and Weiss 2011; Régnier 2011; Weisbrode 2014; Rysaback-Smith 2015; Donelli 2017; Chanie 2021; Musau 2021; Bogatyreva 2022; Chin et al. 2022; Mwansa and Simbila 2022), gaps remain, particularly concerning their application during ongoing conflicts, and the specific mechanisms employed by humanitarian actors. Previous studies have often focused on theoretical frameworks, neglecting the complex interplay between political dynamics and humanitarian efforts. This study seeks to fill this gap by exploring humanitarian diplomacy during wartime and emphasizing its role in enabling humanitarian actors to provide aid in Tigray.

The contemporary relevance of humanitarian diplomacy cannot be overstated given the intensification of global conflicts and the evolving challenges humanitarian actors

face. Current crises, including wars in Ukraine, ongoing tensions in Gaza, and protracted conflicts in Syria, Yemen, and the Democratic Republic of Congo underscore the complexities of humanitarian operations in politically sensitive environments. These conflicts demonstrate how humanitarian diplomacy plays a critical role in negotiating access to aid, ensuring civilian protection, and upholding international humanitarian law. The theoretical foundation for this discussion is rooted in the interplay between traditional diplomacy and humanitarian action, as discussed by scholars such as [Barnett and Weiss \(2011\)](#) and [Régnier \(2011\)](#), who emphasize the dual function of diplomacy as both a protective measure and a negotiation tool in complex emergencies.

This study moves beyond descriptive accounts of past events by employing a theoretical framework that examines how political agendas shape humanitarian strategies and affect the effectiveness of aid delivery in contemporary conflict zones. This approach not only situates humanitarian diplomacy within current academic debates but also provides a critical lens to understand how it functions amidst shifting geopolitical landscapes.

In light of these complexities, this study is guided by the following research question: How do humanitarian actors engaged in the Tigray crisis navigate political, security, and bureaucratic barriers to delivering aid, and what does this reveal about the effectiveness of humanitarian diplomacy in conflict zones, particularly in the context of protracted warfare and political complexities?

The contribution of this study is twofold. First, it enhances the literature on diplomacy by examining the intersection of international humanitarian law and diplomatic efforts during the Ethio-Tigray conflict. Second, it broadens the discourse on humanitarian aid by addressing how political agendas can impede the application of the Fourth Geneva Convention, underscoring the need for a deeper understanding of diplomatic strategies for protecting human rights in conflict zones.

The study is organized into seven sections: this introduction, a review of the evolution of humanitarian diplomacy, a methodology section outlining the qualitative approach, a findings and discussion section focusing on humanitarian diplomacy during the Tigray crisis, bridging theory and practice in humanitarian diplomacy, and the final section with policy implications and recommendations to enhance humanitarian efforts in future crises. The seventh section addresses the limitations of the study and provides directions for future research.

2. Brief Overview of the Evolution of Humanitarian Diplomacy

Diplomacy has played a crucial role in addressing crises from ancient Greece to France, where diplomats negotiated truces, protected civilians, and facilitated aid ([Weisbrode 2014](#)). Historical examples, such as the European Articles of War of 1621 and the American Lieber Code of 1863, set obligations for warring parties to safeguard civilian citizens of hostile nations during armed conflicts ([Jämtin 2004](#)). Humanitarian diplomacy has evolved significantly, shaped by changing global politics and the complexity of humanitarian needs. It is rooted in the history of humanitarian action dating back to the 19th century, evolving in parallel with the evolution of humanitarian aid from Henry Dunant's experience at the Battle of Solferino in 1859, which resulted in the establishment of the International Federation of the Red Cross. A pivotal moment in international humanitarian aid was the establishment of the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, which formalized humanitarian practices and set essential standards. This organization, along with others, has promoted principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence, making humanitarian diplomacy a part and parcel of international relations. Since the 1990s, humanitarian diplomacy has grown into its own distinct entity, with non-state actors increasingly involved in conflict resolution and international operations to protect civilians ([Régnier 2011](#)). These actors have often worked alongside traditional state diplomats to leverage their local knowledge, networks, and resources to negotiate access to conflict zones and to secure humanitarian corridors.

Humanitarian diplomacy encompasses activities such as gaining access to civilian populations in need, promoting international humanitarian law, and engaging in advocacy to protect civilians (Régnier 2011). It emphasizes the need for collaboration among multilateral organizations, NGOs, donor states, and regional bodies to deliver aid effectively in conflict zones, natural disasters, and other disaster situations (Donelli 2017; Bogatyreva 2022). These activities included efforts to create safe spaces for humanitarian operations aimed at saving lives, alleviating suffering, and maintaining human dignity for those affected by crises. From this perspective, humanitarian diplomacy involves a wide array of actions, such as negotiating the presence of international organizations, securing access to vulnerable populations, promoting respect for international law, and engaging in advocacy to support humanitarian goals (Minear and Smith 2007).

In many cases, the success of humanitarian diplomacy hinges on the ability of various actors to collaborate effectively despite differing mandates and priorities. For example, the ICRC has successfully negotiated prisoner exchanges and access to detainees in multiple conflicts by maintaining strict neutrality, while organizations like Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) have sometimes challenged this principle, advocating publicly for humanitarian access when diplomacy stalls. This divergence in approach demonstrates the nuanced roles of humanitarian actors: some prioritize quiet diplomacy to build trust, whereas others resort to advocacy and public pressure to achieve their goals.

Specific cases highlight the achievements and challenges of humanitarian diplomacy. During the 1990s, the humanitarian response to the Balkan conflicts demonstrated how multilateral organizations such as the United Nations, supported by NGOs and state actors, coordinated diplomatic efforts to provide aid amidst ethnic cleansing and siege warfare. The successful delivery of aid to Sarajevo, despite the city's encirclement, illustrates the effective collaboration among different actors. In contrast, the 1994 Rwandan Genocide exposed the failures of humanitarian diplomacy, as international actors failed to intervene effectively, and aid became a tool manipulated by genocidal forces. These examples underscore the diverse roles and responsibilities that humanitarian actors assume, with some focusing on logistical support and others prioritizing advocacy or direct negotiations.

Humanitarian diplomacy is defined as efforts to create safe spaces for humanitarian operations to save lives, alleviate suffering, and maintain human dignity for the benefit of people in need who are or are at risk of becoming affected by armed conflicts, natural disasters, or other disaster situations. Its objective is to encourage humanitarian actors to develop and utilize diplomatic skills to promote respect for international humanitarian law and facilitate access to civilian populations in need of humanitarian assistance. From this perspective, humanitarian diplomacy encompasses the activities carried out by humanitarian organizations to obtain space from political and military authorities within which to function with integrity. These activities comprise efforts to arrange for the presence of international humanitarian organizations and personnel in a given country, negotiating access to civilian populations in need of assistance and protection, monitoring assistance programs, promoting respect for international law and norms, supporting indigenous individuals and institutions, and engaging in advocacy at a variety of levels in support of humanitarian objectives (Minear and Smith 2007).

Humanitarian diplomacy is practiced by state and non-state actors, especially NGOs and international organizations. Multilateral UN agencies such as the World Food Programme (WFP), World Health Organization (WHO), UNICEF, UNHCR and OCHA, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), regional organizations, and local non-governmental organizations play vital humanitarian diplomatic roles (Bogatyreva 2022). Humanitarian diplomacy enables actors to navigate politically charged environments and promotes international humanitarian law to secure access to assist and protect communities during crises (Régnier 2011). Humanitarian actors navigate complex political landscapes while adhering to the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence (Lie 2020). Unlike traditional diplomacy, in which state officials dominate, humanitarian diplomacy involves a range of interlocutors, often with differing levels of legitimacy and

authority (Minear and Smith 2007). During international and non-international armed conflicts, civilians and non-combatant members of the armed forces are the subjects of humanitarian diplomacy, while during peacetime, affected communities are subjects of humanitarian aid (Régnier 2011).

Despite its growing importance, humanitarian diplomacy is facing challenges, particularly in conflict zones. The politicization of aid undermines neutrality, complicating efforts to operate effectively and restricting access. The safety of humanitarian workers is also a key concern, underscoring the need for strategies to protect them (Régnier 2011). The COVID-19 pandemic has further complicated humanitarian operations, demonstrating the need for adaptive diplomatic strategies to address global crises. The pandemic has strained resources and created new barriers to aid delivery, highlighting the importance of flexible approaches in rapidly changing situations (Bogatyreva 2022).

While theoretical discussions of humanitarian diplomacy exist in academic literature, practical applications remain under-explored, especially in ongoing conflicts (Barnett and Weiss 2011). Examining the successes and shortcomings of humanitarian diplomacy over time provides crucial insights into how humanitarian actors can better navigate political and logistical obstacles to aid delivery, protect civilians, and maintain impartiality in conflict zones. The Tigray crisis in Ethiopia exemplifies the difficulties humanitarian actors face in politically volatile settings that this study seeks to address.

3. Materials and Methods

This study employs an exploratory qualitative research approach aimed at understanding humanitarian diplomacy within Ethiopia's Tigray crisis. This design is suitable for generating new insights into the complex nature of humanitarian efforts during war. By emphasizing the contextual settings, this study contributes to the existing discourse on humanitarian diplomacy in conflict situations.

3.1. Data Collection

Data were obtained from primary and secondary sources to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem.

- **Primary data:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 51 key informants directly involved in humanitarian efforts during the Tigray crisis. The key informants included representatives from United Nations agencies, international humanitarian non-governmental organizations (HINGOs), local NGOs, Tigray regional administration officials, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and conflict-affected community members. This diverse participant pool ensured a well-rounded exploration of humanitarian diplomacy from multiple perspectives. The participant sample was robust given that 67% were experts in the field, which helped minimize any power imbalances. The inclusion of experts also mitigated the risks of power imbalances and social desirability bias, ensuring credible and balanced analysis.
- **Secondary data:** Secondary sources included scholarly articles, agreements, government documents, and reports related to humanitarian diplomacy and conflict. These materials enrich the analysis by situating the findings within the broader context of international humanitarian law, diplomatic actions, and crisis management.

The use of both primary and secondary data was crucial for triangulation, enhancing the credibility of the study and minimizing potential biases. Primary data collected through semi-structured interviews with 51 key informants provided in-depth insights from those directly involved in the Tigray crisis. This diverse participant pool, including experts from international organizations, local NGOs, regional officials, and affected communities, allowed for a multifaceted perspective on humanitarian diplomacy. Secondary data drawn from scholarly articles, government documents, and reports complemented the primary data by situating the findings within a broader framework of international humanitarian law and diplomatic practices. This combination of sources enabled the study to validate

the information through cross-verification, thereby enhancing reliability and mitigating potential data biases.

3.2. Sampling Technique and Participants

A purposive sampling method was employed to select participants with significant involvement in humanitarian efforts during the Tigray crisis. This method ensured a diverse participant pool, including experts with a professional knowledge of humanitarian efforts. This diverse range, comprising representatives from international organizations, local agencies, and community leaders, aimed to provide a balanced perspective. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the study participants, detailing their institutional affiliations, roles, and number of informants from each group.

Table 1. Overview of study participants.

Participant Group	Institution	Role	Number of Informants
United Nations Agencies	World Food Programme (WFP)	Humanitarian aid	5
	World Health Organization (WHO)	Health and medical assistance	5
	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF)	Child protection and assistance	2
	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)	Refugee protection and assistance	2
	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)	Humanitarian coordination	2
International NGOs	Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF)	Medical assistance	3
	International Rescue Committee (IRC)	Emergency response	2
	International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)	Humanitarian aid	5
Local NGOs	Ethiopian Red Cross Society (ERCS)	Humanitarian aid	5
	Relief Society of Tigray (REST)	Humanitarian aid	5
Media	Tigray Television	Journalist	2
Tigray Region Interim Administration	Tigray Communication Affairs Bureau	Information dissemination	1
Foreign Policy Expert	Adigrat University	Researcher	2
Internally Displaced People	N/A	Insights into access restriction and aid delivery	10
Conflict-Affected Community Leaders	N/A	Insights into access restriction and aid delivery	7
Overall Total			51

Source: Authors' combination: 2024.

3.3. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to identify and categorize recurring themes from interview transcripts, supported by secondary sources, and uncovered key insights without preset hypotheses. Key thematic areas include conflict, diplomacy, humanitarian diplomacy, humanitarian needs, humanitarian actions, humanitarian aid, underlying factors fueling the Tigray crisis, stakeholder involvement, and the success and challenges of humanitarian diplomacy. This flexible analytical method, ideal for exploratory research, facilitated the identification of recurring themes, patterns, and insights, enabling a comprehensive understanding of humanitarian diplomacy within the context of the Tigray crisis.

The researchers manually coded the data and reviewed the transcripts and notes to identify key themes. Each independently coded section of the data and then compared their findings to ensure consistency. A consensus approach was used to resolve any discrepancies in coding and regular team meetings were held to discuss emerging themes and refine the analysis. This process helped ensure the validity and reliability of the findings.

The researchers have a diverse background in humanitarian diplomacy, aid, and conflict studies. Their positionalities were considered throughout the study as they had

varying levels of personal and professional involvement with the Tigray crisis. This diversity helped to mitigate potential biases and enrich the analysis. However, the authors recognize that their positions and backgrounds may have influenced the interpretation of the data. To address this, both engaged in regular discussions to reflect on their biases and to ensure objectivity in their analyses.

3.4. Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitivity of this study, ethical considerations are paramount. All participants were informed of the study's purpose and objectives and their consent was obtained prior to participation. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained, particularly for participants who may have been at risk, owing to the sensitive nature of their involvement. To ensure confidentiality, the names in the documents and notes were coded and stored separately by identifying information. The research team used both digital and analogue methods for data collection. The digital files were encrypted, and the physical notes were securely stored in locked cabinets. Both digital and physical data are only accessible to authorized researchers. No participant names were mentioned in the findings section, ensuring that their identities remained protected. This information was explicitly communicated to the participants before the study began.

In addition, the researchers had first-hand experience observing the evolving conflict in Tigray, with one of them having been selected, participated in, and awarded a certificate of appreciation by the Tigray Genocide Inquiry Commission. This experience was leveraged to ensure objectivity and to mitigate bias throughout the research process.

4. Finding and Discussion

The findings section presents the actors of humanitarian diplomacy, the success achieved, and the challenges encountered in the humanitarian response in Tigray.

4.1. Actors of the Humanitarian Diplomacy in Ethiopia

During the Tigray conflict, three groups of humanitarian actors actively provided essential assistance. The first group consists of multilateral organizations, primarily the United Nations (UN), which play a pivotal role in addressing extensive humanitarian needs. Agencies such as the World Food Programme (WFP), World Health Organization (WHO), UNICEF, UNHCR, and OCHA have also become integral to diplomatic efforts. As a WFP official stated, "We are here not only to provide aid but also to advocate for the rights of the people caught in this conflict. Each day is a battle to gain access and ensure the delivery of assistance amid political hurdles". This highlights the UN's dual role of delivering aid and advocating for human rights, emphasizing that without such advocacy, humanitarian efforts may fall short.

The second group includes international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), such as Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), the International Rescue Committee (IRC), and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). These INGOs adhered to the principles of the 1949 Geneva Convention in their humanitarian diplomatic efforts. An aid worker with MSF remarked, "Every day, we witnessed the human costs of this conflict. Our teams work tirelessly to deliver medical aid, but access to the most affected areas remains a significant barrier". The ICRC also offers support to those affected by conflicts in different areas of the Tigray Region. "The needs are enormous and increased response from government and all its partners is a must", stated Jeremy England, Head of Operations for the ICRC delegation in Ethiopia (ICRC 2021).

The third category encompasses national non-governmental organizations that partner with international groups to provide independent aid. The Ethiopian Red Cross Society, established in 1935, focuses on disaster preparedness and capacity-building (IFRC 2023). A volunteer from the Ethiopian Red Cross shared, "We are deeply rooted in our communities. People turn to us in the darkest moments. It is our mission to provide support and hope,

even when the situation seems hopeless". This indicates that local organizations possess unique insights and capabilities that make them indispensable during crises.

The Relief Society of Tigray (REST), established in 1978 as the TPLF civilian relief arm, was another notable actor. Despite political challenges, the REST has continued to provide substantial food assistance during this conflict (Stoddard et al. 2021). A REST representative noted, "Despite political challenges, we continue to deliver food assistance and support to people. Our history as part of the TPLF does not define us; our commitment to humanitarian principles does". This suggests that commitment to humanitarian principles can transcend historical divides, underscoring the importance of humanitarian action over political consideration.

Donor states also played a crucial role in providing essential funding for humanitarian initiatives. A representative from the UNHCR stated, "Our commitment to supporting Ethiopia during this crisis is unwavering. However, it is imperative that our funding translates into real, actionable support on the ground". This finding implies that financial support must be coupled with effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to ensure that aid reaches those needed.

Transnational organizations that engage in bilateral assistance to the Ethiopian government support humanitarian actions. An International Rescue Committee (IRC) coordinator remarked, "Transnational support not only helps in funding but also in advocating for policy changes that allow emergency response to reach those in dire need". This suggests that diplomatic advocacy is critical and that successful humanitarian diplomacy requires a multifaceted approach.

Regional organizations have shaped diplomatic efforts during humanitarian crises by raising awareness, promoting compliance with international humanitarian law, and negotiating access to aid workers (Novotny et al. 2013). However, during much of the conflict, the African Union (AU) was less effective because of its close ties with Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. A foreign policy expert from Adigrat University noted that "The AU's initial hesitation to intervene was largely due to political allegiances, resulting in a significant delay in addressing urgent humanitarian needs". This implies that political allegiances can hinder effective humanitarian responses, suggesting the need for regional organizations to balance political relationships with humanitarian imperatives.

As recipients of humanitarian aid, the Ethiopian government played a crucial diplomatic role during the crisis. Despite the accusations of blocking humanitarian access and restricting aid from the international community, the Ethiopian government stated that its priority was to maintain order and protect sovereignty. Humanitarian access is vital; however, it does not compromise national security. This indicates that, while the government acknowledges the importance of humanitarian assistance, it prioritizes national security, suggesting that political considerations often shape humanitarian policy decisions. By contrast, humanitarian actors emphasize the urgency of unhindered access to aid. Reuters (2022) reported that the International Rescue Committee announced on Saturday, 15 October that one of its aid workers was among three civilians killed in an attack in Tigray, where the Ethiopian and Eritrean forces initiated an offensive. An IRC worker asserted, "We cannot let politics dictate the humanitarian response. Lives are at stake". This underscores the need to maintain a strict separation between humanitarian efforts and political agendas for effective responses, as political interference can jeopardize lives.

The Tigray conflict underscores several crucial challenges for humanitarian action in conflict zones, particularly the roles of multilateral organizations, INGOs, and national NGOs. The involvement of the UN and its agencies such as the WFP and UNICEF highlights the need for international bodies to provide both aid and diplomatic advocacy to navigate political obstacles. INGOs such as Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) stress the importance of adhering to international humanitarian laws while noting that operational access remains a key challenge. National NGOs, including the Ethiopian Red Cross and the Relief Society of Tigray (REST), demonstrate the importance of local knowledge and trust in delivering aid amid

complex political dynamics. Donor states and transnational organizations must ensure robust funding and monitoring mechanisms. The Ethiopian government's prioritization of national security over humanitarian access highlights the tension between political interests and humanitarian needs, emphasizing the importance of separating politics from aid delivery.

4.2. Humanitarian Diplomacy and Its Accomplishments

International humanitarian actors have adeptly navigated the Ethiopian government–the TPLF conflict–to tackle urgent operational challenges by negotiating aid access, gathering crucial information, assessing civilian needs, advocating for humanitarian law, and ensuring assistance delivery despite significant obstacles.

4.2.1. Negotiating on Operational Activities

International humanitarian actors have engaged in substantive humanitarian diplomacy to negotiate with political and military authorities, addressing critical operational issues amid the complex dynamics of the Ethiopian government and TPLF. The negotiation objectives encompassed humanitarian needs assessments, identifying vulnerable social groups, establishing aid delivery modalities, ensuring access to aid for civilians, devising protection measures, monitoring emergencies, and fundraising from various donors.

Negotiations have focused on three main operational issues: access to affected populations, the safety and security of personnel and material assets, and coordination challenges. To address these operational issues, the United Nations signed an Enhanced Coordination Agreement in November 2020 with the Ethiopian government, on behalf of the humanitarian community. This agreement aimed to facilitate humanitarian access, requiring clearance of goods and personnel from the Ministry of Peace (Stoddard et al. 2021). The UN has also implemented a Humanitarian Access Strategy focusing on safe and sustained access to Tigray, outlining objectives such as impartial assessments, safe passage for displaced persons, cross-border movement, rapid assistance delivery, communication restoration, and functional Complaints and Feedback Mechanisms (UNFPA 2020).

Recognizing the need for flexibility, the Ethiopian government transitioned from a clearance mechanism previously implemented under the coordination agreement to a more flexible notification system in March 2021. Under this notification system, international humanitarian staff only needed to notify the government of their presence in Tigray via email to the Ministry of Peace, eliminating the need for prior authorization, and the government would no longer require authorization. Similar notification mechanisms were established for the movement of aid cargo by the National Disaster Risk Management Commission (NDRMC) and the Logistics Cluster, allowing humanitarian actors to move humanitarian commodities by informing the NDRMC 48 h ahead of any cargo movement into Tigray without waiting for clearance. This streamlined the process and improved the presence and activities of relief actors, particularly in areas with heightened insecurity (UNICEF 2021). A foreign policy expert from Adigrat University remarked, "This shift was crucial; it allowed aid workers to mobilize resources and respond faster to the needs of the people. However, this did not eliminate the uncertainties that they faced". This indicates that, while procedural changes can enhance efficiency, inherent uncertainties remain, which can hinder timely responses.

Aid actors continued negotiations, expecting meaningful results from the Ethiopian government's unilateral ceasefire to lift the humanitarian blockade on 28 June 2021. The ceasefire was expected to facilitate aid distribution and enable farmers in Tigray to engage in seasonal agricultural activities (Blanchard 2021). However, this yielded minimal results, prompting further negotiation. Under international pressure, the government and the TPLF secured a "humanitarian truce" in March 2022 to allow unfettered access for humanitarian assistance. From the perspective of aid agencies such as OCHA, UNICEF, UNHCR, and WFP, this truce was a crucial step forward, leading to a relative improvement in humanitarian access and supplies, signaling a potential alignment of humanitarian concerns with

political and military negotiations, but they added that they still face immense logistical challenges. Access is one thing, and delivering aid is another. This underscores that while formal agreements may indicate progress, the practical challenges of aid delivery remain complex, emphasizing the need for ongoing engagement. To the worst, subsequent conflicts in August 2022 indicate failure to fully address humanitarian issues.

A pivotal moment in the negotiations between the Ethiopian government and the TPLF was the signing of the 'Cessation of Hostilities Agreement' on 2 November 2022. This agreement was facilitated by the African Union, with support from the United States and the United Nations in Pretoria, South Africa. This landmark agreement established a permanent cessation of hostilities outlining key provisions, including the disarmament and demobilization of TPLF forces, restoration of essential services, protection of civilians and humanitarian access, and the formation of an interim inclusive regional administration in Tigray. The subsequent implementation agreement signed by both parties on 12 November 2022 in Nairobi (Kenya) further solidified the peace accord and officially ended the protracted conflict (Pichon 2022). Overall, the negotiation process for operational activities in the Ethiopian conflict reflects an intricate balance among humanitarian needs, political considerations, and security concerns. The evolution of strategies and agreements demonstrates the resilience and adaptability of humanitarian diplomacy in addressing complex operational challenges and fostering sustainable solutions.

4.2.2. Information-Gathering and Communication

International humanitarian agencies in Tigray prioritized the acquisition of reliable information for operational purposes. These agencies require accurate data from both Ethiopia and the field to effectively execute initiatives and provide donors with relevant information for accountability regarding fund allocation. However, these efforts have been complicated by the strained relations with the Ethiopian government. Accusations of surveillance and perceived biases towards Tigray forces led the Ethiopian government to declare seven high-level UN humanitarian officials, including the heads of UNICEF and UNOCHA, as *persona non grata*. A humanitarian worker from UNICEF and UNOCHA noted that the environment has become increasingly hostile with efforts to gather information perceived as threats rather than necessities. This has led to the challenge of navigating significant trust issues. This indicates that deteriorating relationships hinder operational capacity and undermine the trust required for effective collaboration. Additionally, the suspension of operations by the Norwegian Refugee Council and Doctors Without Borders due to alleged interference in internal affairs signals the precarious nature of humanitarian access in Tigray (European Union Agency for Asylum 2022). "It is heart-breaking that we were unable to reach our target of serving more than half a million people in need across Ethiopia in 2021", Jan Egeland, NRC Secretary General said in a statement.

Establishing communication channels both internally within the country and externally with the outside world is crucial for humanitarian operations in Tigray, which are driven by security concerns and logistical necessities. A senior humanitarian official from the WFP stated, "Our ability to communicate effectively can mean the difference between life and death for those we serve. Establishing reliable communication channels is crucial not only for operational coordination but also for ensuring accountability". This underscores that disruptions in communication can lead to life-threatening delays in aid delivery, thereby affecting the well-being of vulnerable populations.

Moreover, exposing conflicting parties to public scrutiny has proven an effective tool for exerting positive pressure. Humanitarian agencies rely on media exposure to highlight their efforts and bring attention to the urgent needs of affected populations. Two journalists from Tigray Television pointed out that media could be a double-edged sword. On one hand, it plays a crucial role in raising awareness and applying pressure on parties to address humanitarian needs. However, if not managed cautiously, media coverage can inadvertently put humanitarian staff at risk by exposing them to danger, particularly in conflict zones. This delicate balance underscores the importance of strategically using

media to ensure visibility and safety. This also reflects the complex implications of media engagement, in which the potential for increased accountability must be balanced against the risks posed to staff safety. The implicit threat of media attention encourages cooperation with humanitarian action. However, humanitarian agencies face challenges in communication because of the inadequate quality of information from the government, which is worsened by intermittent telecommunications (Minear and Smith 2007). A WFP director expressed, “The lack of reliable data from the government makes our work exceptionally challenging. We often rely on field reports that may not reflect the full picture, complicating our response efforts”. This highlights how reliance on incomplete information can hinder effective strategies, ultimately affecting agencies’ ability to deliver timely and appropriate aid.

4.2.3. Assessing Civilian Needs Delivering Aid and Mobilization of Actions

Robust humanitarian diplomacy is essential for assessing and addressing urgent humanitarian needs in Tigray, where UN agencies, international and local NGOs, and authorities have identified critical requirements for life-saving materials including food, health, nutrition, water, sanitation, shelter, and protection services (Annys et al. 2021). In response to humanitarian needs, the Ethiopian Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) developed a Humanitarian Preparedness Plan aimed at assisting nearly two million people, requiring USD 75.7 million in funding to provide life-saving aid across the Tigray, Afar, and Amhara regions (UNFPA 2020). On 28 April 2021 the UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee launched a Humanitarian System-Wide Scale-up for northern Ethiopia. This response plan requested USD 853 million to assist 5.2 million people affected by the Tigray conflict. Its key goals include reaching all 5.2 million people in need through the Food Security Cluster, providing nutritional support to 1.4 million vulnerable individuals, and extending protection services to 1.4 million people in 2021, as outlined by the Protection Cluster. Additional funding was requested for emergency shelters, agricultural aid, healthcare, Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) services. The extension of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) System-Wide Scale-Up mechanism for Ethiopia until 6 September 2023 highlights the continued challenges in the region. The UN Under-Secretary-General and Emergency Relief Coordinator Martin Griffiths extended the scale-up, initially activated on 28 April 2021 due to the worsening conflict in Tigray and the deteriorating humanitarian situation. This extension covered both conflict- and drought-affected areas, aiming to strengthen humanitarian capacity and coordination in response to the crisis in northern Ethiopia and the broader Horn of Africa emergency.

Multilateral agencies and transnational NGOs have employed various tactics to respond to humanitarian emergencies that require a multifaceted and resource-intensive endeavor and demand strategic negotiation for the mobilization of diverse resources—technical, human, logistical, material, and financial. Globally, the OCHA is responsible for overseeing humanitarian responses. In Ethiopia, the Ethiopian Humanitarian Country Team (EHCT), led by a Humanitarian Coordinator, is the main body that makes decisions on humanitarian policies. The Humanitarian Resilience Donor Group (HRDG), made up of major donors, works closely with the EHCT to coordinate funding efforts. Since the war in Tigray began, the UN Country Team (UNCT) boosted its capacity, initially appointing a Deputy Humanitarian Coordinator in Tigray, who was later replaced by a Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for East Africa, focusing on Tigray. Key agencies in the Country Cluster System, such as WHO (health), UNICEF (nutrition, water, and sanitation), WFP (food security), and UNHCR (protection), have taken the lead in coordinating and delivering international aid to Tigray (Kahsay 2021). In Ethiopia, the overall coordination of humanitarian efforts is led by the Disaster Risk Management Commission (DRMC) under the Prime Minister’s Office.

The National Emergency Coordination Center (ECC), established in Addis Ababa in 2020, improves response capabilities. The Refugee and Returnees Services (RRS), also under the Prime Minister’s Office, collaborate with the UNHCR to manage refugee re-

sponses through a joint Refugee Task Force. After the TPLF took control of the Tigray region on 28 June 2021 regional administration and DRMC came under its influence and were later replaced by an interim government appointed by the federal government. The Tigray Emergency Coordination Centre (EOC), activated by the NDRMC in Mekelle, brings together local government offices, UN agencies, and international NGOs to enhance humanitarian response coordination (USAID 2021). OCHA plays a key role in reactivating and managing regional EOC, which reports to the national ECC and helps mobilize resources (Kahsay 2021).

Despite diplomatic efforts, the humanitarian situation in Tigray continues to dire. For example, displaced individuals are living in dire conditions, as a humanitarian worker from WHO noted, "The conditions in which displaced people live are dire; they lack basic necessities, and their vulnerability is increasing daily". The urgency for aid is underscored by the voices of the displaced: a father of three expressed, "We've been here for months, and every day feels like a battle. There is no medicine for my sick wife, and my children go to bed hungry". His words highlight the perilous reality that many families face, in which a lack of necessities threatens survival. A young mother added, "We lost everything when we fled. My baby is weak because there is no proper nutrition, and I fear that she will not survive if help is not provided. We are forgotten here". These testimonies reflect the growing desperation among families, especially among mothers and children, stressing the need for targeted interventions that focus on nutrition and healthcare.

In addition, an official from the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) stated that the aim of ongoing diplomatic endeavors is to ensure that no one is left behind. Therefore, immediate needs must be addressed when planning long-term recovery. However, delivering humanitarian aid remains fraught with challenges owing to ongoing conflicts, access restrictions, and logistical difficulties. A humanitarian worker from the WFP remarked, "The scale of need was overwhelming, and getting supplies through was a constant battle". Such challenges reflect the broader issues faced by humanitarian actors, in which bureaucratic and security obstacles impede immediate assistance and undermine operational credibility. Voices from displaced people highlight the human dimension of these challenges. A displaced woman shared, "We are living in terrible conditions. My children are weak, and we have not received enough food for weeks". Her comments underscore that civilian suffering is exacerbated by systemic failures in aid delivery, raising ethical questions regarding the responsibilities of international actors. By mid-2021, multiple organizations were working to provide aid, with the WFP delivering food assistance to 1.05 million by June. However, significant gaps remained, as a WFP interviewee expressed frustration: "While we can provide food, the logistics of getting it to the people is still a major hurdle". A displaced community leader emphasized the importance of local knowledge in aid delivery: "We understand the situation here better than anyone". The international organizations try to help, but they must listen to us more". Furthermore, a respondent from the UN Office for OCHA stated, "Coordination among agencies is essential...but with the current political climate, that collaboration has been a challenge". Without effective coordination, humanitarian efforts risk duplication or misalignment, waste resources, and prolong suffering.

Moreover, humiliation towards humanitarian organizations also presents barriers, with some aid groups perceived as biased, and their buildings and facilities destroyed. The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) reported that buildings intended to serve refugees were among the numerous structures destroyed in Ethiopia's Tigray Region. A school and health clinic in the Hitsaats and Shimelba refugee camps were also damaged and set on fire. The humanitarian response plan for Tigray aimed to reach 4.5 million people, yet as of July 2021, only 1.9 million had received assistance, exposing systemic issues in aid delivery where military operations, bureaucratic hurdles, and funding shortages have hindered efforts. The humanitarian crisis in Tigray will likely worsen without addressing these barriers, necessitating a reevaluation of current aid delivery strategies.

4.2.4. Promoting Humanitarian Law and Advocacy for Humanitarian Goals

The international community views negotiating a fair solution to the Ethio-Tigray conflict as essential for the safety of Tigrayans. Until a political agreement was reached, there was substantial support for Ethiopia in implementing the 1949 Fourth Geneva Convention, which aimed to protect civilians during armed conflict by mandating humane treatment, medical care for the injured, and provision of basic necessities. It asserts that humanitarian organizations have the right to assist those affected by conflict and that denying aid is unlawful (Jämtin 2004). However, humanitarian workers face significant challenges in ensuring compliance with international laws. An ICRC worker stated, “Despite our continuous calls for humanitarian access, access was often denied or severely restricted, prioritizing security over humanitarian concerns”. This finding highlights how political agendas compromise aid delivery and exacerbate civilian suffering.

An MSF representative remarked, “While international laws guarantee protection, the on-ground situation is complex. Sometimes, aid was politicized, leading to suspicion of humanitarian agencies from both sides”. This underscores that the politicization of aid undermines neutrality and fosters distrust, complicating aid delivery and endangering those in need. International resolutions such as those from the UN General Assembly and Security Council reinforce the legality of humanitarian aid. The International Court of Justice has ruled that humanitarian aid, when administered impartially to save lives, does not infringe upon a country’s sovereignty (Jämtin 2004). The International Bill of Human Rights stresses the necessity of humanitarian assistance, especially in emergencies in which the rights to life, security, food, and medical care are threatened. The 1951 UN Convention on Refugees mandates protection for refugees, with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) mandates protection for refugees and is responsible for ensuring their rights (Jämtin 2004).

Local organizations, such as the ERCS have raised concerns about the application of international laws. A representative stated, “International laws are clear, but physical and bureaucratic blockades hinder the aid process. The situation often contradicts international law, especially when aid is used as a bargaining chip”. This reflects a disconnect between established laws and ground realities, which can impede humanitarian action and jeopardize lives. Recent legal developments such as UN Security Council Resolution 2417 (2018), which condemns starvation as a weapon, highlight a growing emphasis on protecting civilians during conflicts (UN Security Council 2018). However, many interviewees noted difficulties in enforcing these laws, particularly in conflict zones such as Tigray, where military and humanitarian efforts overlap. An MSF worker shared, “We were unable to reach the communities because military checkpoints blocked the roads. It seemed a deliberate attempt to control the flow of aid, violating the Geneva Conventions”. This underscores that obstructing humanitarian aid not only contravenes international law but also shows a disregard for civilian well-being, leading to increased mortality and suffering.

The 1949 Geneva Conventions and UN General Assembly Resolutions outlined four key principles for humanitarian aid: humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence (Lie 2020). Humanitarian organizations must ensure that these principles guide their operations, remind armed conflict parties of their obligations, and provide practical assistance to victims. Despite the international community’s push for respect for humanitarian law, Ethiopia has shown reluctance towards generous assistance approaches. This resistance complicates the addressing of the urgent humanitarian needs in Tigray. A government official noted, “There’s a balancing act between maintaining sovereignty and allowing humanitarian interventions, but the government’s resistance often slows critical aid distribution”. This reflects the tension between state sovereignty and humanitarian imperatives, suggesting that, without a shift in governmental attitudes, the humanitarian crisis in Tigray is likely to persist.

Advocacy plays a crucial role in supporting humanitarian objectives, particularly in conflicts, such as those in Tigray. Governments, non-state actors, and international organizations work tirelessly to ensure unhindered humanitarian assistance, cessation

of hostilities, and accountability for human rights abuses. However, progress is often obstructed by sovereignty, geopolitical interests, and conflict complexities. Among those engaged in advocacy, frustration is palpable. An interviewee from the WFP remarked that, despite their relentless push for humanitarian access, the political hurdles they face on the international stage make it nearly impossible to reach those in need. Jan Egeland, the Secretary General of the NRC, expressed his disappointment in a statement, noting that it is heart-breaking that they could not achieve their goal of serving over half a million people in need across Ethiopia in 2021. This situation underscores how systemic barriers to international relations hinder timely humanitarian responses, leaving vulnerable populations at risk of political conflict.

A government official from the Government Communication Service (GCS) of Ethiopia defended Ethiopia's position: "We cannot allow external forces to dictate our internal matters under the guise of humanitarian assistance". This implies a challenge in balancing respect for national sovereignty with the urgent need for humanitarian intervention, which can stall necessary action and prolong civilian suffering. Concerns regarding the effectiveness of the African Union (AU) have been expressed widely. Gebrihet (2023) highlighted the AU's inadequate handling of the war in Ethiopia, warning that such failures threaten peace and security across Africa. He described the organization as a "toothless lion", indicating that its potential for action is severely limited by the lack of robust enforcement mechanisms. This weakness highlights a fundamental flaw in the AU's operational framework: while it can propose policies and advocates for change, it lacks the authority to implement decisions or hold member states accountable. Consequently, advocacy efforts within AU often struggle to achieve meaningful results, raising critical questions about their role in addressing urgent issues on the continent, especially in conflict situations where decisive action is essential for protecting vulnerable populations and upholding human rights.

On-the-ground workers expressed their concerns. An ICRC worker said, "What use is money if we cannot reach the people in Tigray? We need the political will to open corridors for assistance". This underscores that financial support is insufficient without concurrent political efforts. While the U.S. has utilized direct diplomatic pressure and sanctions, a U.S. official remarked, "The visa restrictions were meant to send a clear message". Yet, an MSF representative emphasized, "Sanctions may have hurt the Ethiopian government, but they did not necessarily improve conditions for civilians". This highlights that punitive measures may have unintended consequences, complicating advocacy efforts.

Humanitarian diplomacy during the Tigray crisis highlighted the need to balance political navigation, operational access, and effective coordination. Diplomatic strategies must be sufficiently flexible to adapt to changing political and security conditions. Shifting from clearance to a notification system improved aid delivery; however, deep-rooted political and trust issues remained. Accurate, timely information is critical for an effective response; however, strained relations with host governments hinder these efforts, making trust-building vital. Media engagement is complex because it can enhance accountability and endanger aid workers. Agencies must balance their visibility and safety. Sustained engagement with political stakeholders is crucial for translating agreements such as the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement into tangible benefits. The crisis also revealed gaps in international coordination despite responses such as the UN's System-Wide Scale-up. Local actors with invaluable contextual knowledge are the key to bridging these gaps. Addressing bureaucratic, security, and infrastructure challenges requires strong international advocacy, enhanced operational strategies and continuous global cooperation.

4.3. Challenges Flagged to Humanitarian Diplomacy in the Crisis in Tigray

Humanitarian diplomacy in Tigray faces significant challenges, such as access restrictions, fragile security, and bureaucratic hurdles, severely hampering aid delivery efforts.

4.3.1. Access Restrictions

Access to the Tigray region during the conflict posed significant challenges for humanitarian aid delivery largely driven by political motivations. Aid experts criticized the Ethiopian government's control over procedures, with approval systems for supplies and personnel creating insurmountable obstacles. The Enhanced Coordination Agreement of November 2020 was meant to facilitate aid, and instead became a tool for obstruction, as clearances were often denied. One aid worker from WFP noted, "It became almost impossible to get approval to move supplies, let alone personnel". This frustration illustrates how bureaucratic restrictions delay critical aid and heighten vulnerable populations, reinforcing the need for more flexible humanitarian policies.

Local-level challenges compounded the situation, as humanitarian organizations faced restrictions from local authorities and armed groups. Some agencies managed to negotiate access early in the conflict, but an MSF worker pointed out, "We had to constantly negotiate with multiple factions, checkpoints, and power brokers. Each day, it brought a new challenge". This highlights the fragmented authority in conflict zones, making robust local partnerships essential for effective aid delivery.

From June 2021, the de facto blockade of the Ethiopian government has severely restricted humanitarian access. Basic services such as banking and telecommunications were cut off, worsening the crisis. Bureaucratic hurdles, threats from armed groups, and damaged infrastructure have hindered aid deliveries. The UN estimated that approximately 100 truckloads of supplies were needed daily, but only 12% reached Tigray between July and November 2021. Prolonged periods without aid convoys have resulted in severe shortages, with skyrocketing prices for essential goods.

Reports have indicated that Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers blocked or stolen food aid, further complicating efforts. A WHO worker remarked, "Soldiers stop the convoys, take what they wanted, and send the rest back. It was heartbreaking". Such actions undermine the effectiveness of aid and contribute to the further marginalization of affected communities, eroding trust, and complicating future relief efforts.

In March 2022, a humanitarian truce temporarily improved the situation, but the amount of aid remained insufficient. A WFP worker lamented, "Even during the truce, we could barely scratch the surface of what was needed". This disconnect emphasizes the need for sustainable solutions rather than short-term fixes, which can lead to dependency rather than a genuine recovery.

When the fighting resumed in August 2022, access was again cut off until the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement on 2 November 2022 which lifted many government aid restrictions. Despite intermittent breakthroughs, humanitarian access has fluctuated significantly since December 2020. The blockade intensified in mid-2021, and while the Pretoria agreement offered hope for improvement, the challenges persisted. The voices of those affected reveal an urgent need for a more coordinated, responsive, and community-focused approach to humanitarian diplomacy in Tigray, emphasizing the importance of local input and trust building in restoring effective aid delivery.

4.3.2. Fragility of the Security Situation

The security situation in Tigray severely challenged both the affected population and the humanitarian operations. Aid organizations struggled to deliver essential services, and security issues undermined their efforts. This impact manifests in two primary ways.

First, criminal activities disrupted government warehouses, hospitals, and health centers, particularly during the first eight months of the conflict. Equipment, medicines, and furniture were frequently destroyed, stolen, or vandalized, with blame often placed on the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) and other looters. "We saw hospitals stripped of everything", said a WHO aid worker in Mekelle. "The medicines, even the beds, were taken. It was heartbreaking". Such widespread destruction devastated infrastructure, leaving civilians without essential services and making their survival more difficult. Loss of medical facilities compromises immediate health needs and fosters long-term public

health crises, whereas the resulting lack of trust discourages the affected population from seeking help.

Second, ongoing fighting makes aid delivery both dangerous and complex. Armed clashes and ambushes are constantly threatened. A WFP logistics officer explained, “One minute you’re travelling through a ‘safe’ area, and the next, there’s fighting everywhere”. Aid workers often face military checkpoints where they are searched and delayed. The soldiers confiscated some of our supplies, and we were told to leave; one worker recalled. The military regularly stopped aid convoys, severely hindering the ability to reach those in desperate need. “We were helpless”, said an ICRC coordinator.

These encounters highlight the urgent need to reassess security protocols for humanitarian operations. A fragile security environment makes the transportation of goods increasingly dangerous. “Every day felt like a gamble”, shared a WFP aid worker. Delays often cost lives, as one worker noted, “We had people dying of hunger while we were stuck in endless negotiations”.

The escalating violence endangered humanitarian workers, with over two dozens of people losing their lives. “We were constantly on edge”, said one worker from MSF. As reported by Reuters (2022), the International Rescue Committee (IRC), a US-based organization that supports individuals affected by humanitarian crises, announced that one of its employees succumbed to injuries sustained during an attack while providing aid to women and children on Fridays. The IRC further noted that another staff member was injured during the incident, which also resulted in the deaths of two other civilians and injuries to three or more individuals. Moreover, MSF President Paula Gil stated that “there was intentional killing of three humanitarian aid workers” during the Tigray War (Tessema and Wasike 2022). While Tigray did not witness a deliberate campaign against humanitarian operations, the overall security situation remained hostile towards aid delivery. This reinforces the need for a comprehensive strategy that incorporates security assurances and greater international support for humanitarian operations amid ongoing conflicts.

4.3.3. Institutional Challenges

Humanitarian agencies in Tigray face significant challenges due to their limited capacity and resources, hindering their ability to effectively analyze needs. Funding scarcity has made it increasingly difficult to meet overwhelming demands. “We were overwhelmed by the needs, but our budgets were stagnant”, lamented a WFP worker. Initial funding difficulties arose as many donors struggled to provide rapid support to NGOs, while the UN faced federal-level obstacles (OCHA 2021).

Pervasive reluctance to take risks continues to affect aid communities, even amid pressing humanitarian needs. This hesitance stems from a deep-seated fear of potential dangers that aid workers might encounter in conflict zones. Critics within the community have directed their discontent towards the UN Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS), arguing that their overly cautious approach hampers humanitarian efforts. One WFP worker expressed frustration, stating, ‘It felt like they were prioritizing safety over the lives we were trying to save’. This reluctance not only affects immediate assistance delivery but also undermines the morale of aid workers committed to alleviating suffering. As the gap between urgent needs and available aid widens, it becomes increasingly critical to balance personnel safety by fulfilling the humanitarian imperative of reaching vulnerable populations.

Bureaucratic challenges further complicate efforts, including difficulties in relocating staff and delays in bringing Ethiopian personnel back to the region (Stoddard et al. 2021). Coordination among humanitarian agencies has proven inadequate, significantly hindering operational effectiveness. A logistics coordinator highlighted the critical challenges faced by aid workers and stated that private truck drivers are terrified to work in certain areas; “Who can blame them? It’s a war zone out there?”.

Government-imposed communication restrictions exacerbate the challenges humanitarian agencies face. “We couldn’t communicate with our teams effectively”, explained a WFP officer. Poor connectivity complicates coordination and obstructs the flow of vital information, leading to delays in aid delivery. Furthermore, an increasing focus on development within aid organizations constrains humanitarian responses, risking the neglect of immediate survival needs. Humanitarian organizations must reclaim their mandate, ensuring that responses remain rooted in humanity, impartiality, and neutrality to address urgent challenges.

The Tigray crisis has key implications for humanitarian diplomacy, highlighting the need for a more adaptive and locally integrated approach. The severe access restrictions driven by political and bureaucratic hurdles underscore the need for flexible policies to ensure timely aid delivery. Political interference complicates coordination and forces agencies to negotiate factions and checkpoints. This fragile security situation increases the risks to aid workers and affected populations, stressing the need to reassess security protocols. Destruction of critical infrastructure worsens long-term health crises. Institutional challenges, including limited capacity and funding, call for reasserting humanitarian principles and improving coordination. Addressing these issues requires flexible policies and enhanced security and institutional support.

5. Bridging Theory and Practice in Humanitarian Diplomacy

This section connects the empirical findings of the Tigray crisis with broader theoretical frameworks of humanitarian diplomacy. It illuminates the challenges humanitarian actors face while advancing our understanding of the strengths and limitations of existing theories in real-world contexts.

The core theory of humanitarian principles—humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence—remains foundational in guiding humanitarian actions (Slim 2020). In the context of Tigray, international agencies such as the UN and Médecins Sans Frontières had to navigate a politically charged environment while adhering to humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence (Leader 2000). However, the findings indicated that adherence to these values does not guarantee safe and unimpeded access to conflict zones. This case shows that adhering to these principles does not guarantee access, as political interests often override humanitarian imperatives, underscoring how theory must accommodate the realities of political manipulation in conflict zones (Minear 2002). Political manipulation often supersedes humanitarian imperatives, as seen in the Ethiopian government’s prioritization of national security. This echoes the observations by Barnett and Weiss (2011) that humanitarian diplomacy must accommodate political realities while striving to maintain core humanitarian values. The Humanitarian Space further underscores the necessity for continuous dialogue with conflicting parties to safeguard the integrity of aid operations, as demonstrated by the negotiation of access routes and safety assurances during the Tigray conflict (Collinson and Elhawary 2012).

Humanism 2.0, which expands on traditional humanitarian principles to include a proactive stance against the root causes of suffering (Bogatyreva 2022), is particularly relevant to the Tigray case. The findings of this study show that while agencies such as the International Committee of the Red Cross focused on immediate relief, there was also a push for broader advocacy efforts to address human rights violations. This aligns with Humanism 2.0’s call to integrate humanitarian action with long-term efforts towards social justice and human dignity. These findings support the need for humanitarian actors to balance urgent aid delivery with advocacy for systemic change, suggesting that theories should account for the dual pressures of immediate relief and long-term stability in volatile regions.

Multi-Track Diplomacy, which advocates collaboration among diverse actors, was clearly reflected in the Tigray response (Wehrenfennig 2008; Donini 2012). Empirical evidence shows that international agencies, local NGOs, and regional organizations like the African Union, played crucial, if uneven, roles in aid delivery. This underscores the impor-

tance of inclusivity and cooperation in achieving effective humanitarian outcomes. The theory aligns with the findings of this study, demonstrating that multi-track diplomacy's emphasis on leveraging different actors' strengths, such as local knowledge and international resources, is essential for creating comprehensive solutions. This approach enabled humanitarian actors to navigate access barriers and engage with a range of stakeholders from local communities to international governments.

The Tigray crisis illustrates that successful humanitarian diplomacy requires flexibility, supporting theories by [Slim \(2020\)](#). For example, the shift from a rigid clearance system to a notification-based model in 2021 allowed for faster responses, although political and security uncertainties persisted. These changes align with the theory of Humanitarian Negotiation, which emphasizes the importance of adjusting strategies to fit evolving conflict dynamics ([Régnier 2011](#)). Negotiators must maintain a balance between diplomatic engagement and operational pragmatism, reflecting the need for a flexible approach in rhetoric and practice. This finding suggests that humanitarian diplomacy must evolve to adapt to local contexts and unforeseen challenges.

The theory of Humanitarian Space is integral to understanding empirical findings related to access restrictions in Tigray. Despite diplomatic agreements, the Ethiopian government's control over humanitarian corridors has highlighted the limitations of traditional access negotiations. This finding supports the observations of [Mackintosh and Duplat \(2013\)](#) that political barriers can prevent the full implementation of legal norms, such as the Geneva Conventions. Humanitarian actors negotiated constantly with both state and non-state actors, striving to maintain a space where they could operate effectively. This reality underscores the need for humanitarian diplomacy to be resilient and adaptable in securing and maintaining humanitarian space amid political opposition ([Wheeler 2003](#)).

The theory of Disaster Diplomacy or intervention diplomacy, which focuses on the role of international cooperation in disaster response, emphasizing rapid and coordinated efforts to deliver aid ([Donini 2012](#)), has particular relevance to this study and to the Tigray case. In Tigray, diplomatic pressure from international actors has facilitated temporary ceasefires and humanitarian truces, albeit with mixed results. The findings of this study suggest that, while disaster diplomacy can temporarily improve access and resource mobilization, it often struggles with sustainability in protracted conflicts. This aligns with theories by [Donini \(2012\)](#), which stress the need for diplomacy that goes beyond immediate crisis management to address structural vulnerabilities and long-term recovery.

These findings illustrate how political interests often override humanitarian goals, reinforcing [Weiss's \(2004\)](#) argument that aid is never politically neutral. In Tigray, the Ethiopian government's emphasis on sovereignty and security consistently conflicted with the humanitarian actors' calls for unrestricted access. This supports the need for humanitarian diplomacy frameworks to incorporate a deeper understanding of the political agency of local actors who may view international intervention with suspicion or as a challenge to state authority. In line with Humanism 2.0, humanitarian diplomacy in Tigray has revealed the necessity of addressing both immediate needs and the underlying political dynamics that shape access and trust.

This study highlights the critical role of local NGOs, such as the Ethiopian Red Cross and the Relief Society of Tigray, which were able to navigate access barriers more effectively because of their deep local ties and understanding. This finding supports the theories proposed by [Collinson and Elhawary \(2012\)](#), who emphasize the importance of recognizing local capacities in humanitarian diplomacy frameworks. The concept of Humanitarian Space, which underscores the fact that local actors are often best positioned to establish trust and gain access in conflict zones, is also relevant to this study. Future theoretical models must integrate local perspectives to enhance the effectiveness of humanitarian strategies, acknowledging the central role of community-based organizations ([Duffield 2001](#)).

6. Conclusions and Policy Implications

Humanitarian diplomacy, notably the United Nations agencies, international and national non-governmental organizations, the European Union, and the African Union, has prominently addressed the urgent humanitarian needs of Tigray. Humanitarian diplomacy has enabled humanitarian actors to deliver assistance and save lives; however, this is difficult to prove in practice. Despite efforts to negotiate operational issues, assess the needs of civilians, promote international laws, and advocate efforts, the international response to the Tigray humanitarian crisis has been feeble, with the situation remaining dire and rapid, exacerbating human suffering.

The humanitarian crisis in Tigray highlights the complex interplay between access restrictions, security challenges, and the entrenched development mindset of aid organizations. The prolonged conflict and the Ethiopian government's stringent control over humanitarian operations have created formidable barriers to delivering essential services to humanitarian aid, which has been severely hindered by bureaucratic obstacles such as the need for government clearance for supplies and personnel. Armed confrontations, theft, and security threats further complicate this precarious situation, making it increasingly dangerous for aid workers. Reliance on a single delivery route has led to substantial delays, leaving many civilians without adequate food, healthcare, or other critical services and resulting in high levels of malnutrition, disease, and mortality. Moreover, the development-focused structure of many aid organizations has constrained their ability to respond effectively to immediate humanitarian needs. The prioritization of long-term development goals has limited operational independence and effectiveness during an acute crisis. This reluctance to criticize the government has resulted in a fragmented response that fails to address urgent needs.

This study is guided and supported by key theories of humanitarian diplomacy, including humanitarian principles, Humanitarian Space, Humanism 2.0, Multi-Track Diplomacy, Humanitarian Negotiation, and Disaster Diplomacy. The findings demonstrate that, while these theories provide a valuable framework, they must adapt to the political realities and complexities of conflict zones. This study highlights the importance of flexibility, collaboration, and local knowledge in navigating challenges and ensuring effective humanitarian responses, underscoring the need for humanitarian diplomacy to evolve in response to both immediate needs and long-term political dynamics.

To mitigate the crisis and enhance humanitarian operations in Tigray, significant policy and practical changes are urgently required, as follows.

1. Diplomatic engagement with the Ethiopian government is necessary to lift restrictions and facilitate the movement of humanitarian supplies and personnel.
2. Coordination among humanitarian actors can streamline efforts, improve communication, and reduce logistical challenges.
3. Donors should establish flexible funding mechanisms for the rapid disbursement of NGOs during crises, allowing for timely assistance.
4. Humanitarian agencies must invest in staff training to navigate complex crisis environments and to encourage critical engagement with government policies.
5. Organizations should prioritize advocacy for human rights and address government actions that hinder humanitarian efforts.
6. Implementing monitoring and evaluation systems is crucial for aligning efforts with the needs of the affected populations.
7. Strengthening partnerships with local organizations enhances the responsiveness and contextual understanding of humanitarian efforts.

7. Limitations and Future Research Directions

While his study provides significant insights into the role of humanitarian diplomacy during the Tigray crisis, some limitations must be acknowledged.

The study relies on qualitative data, which enables an in-depth exploration of complex dynamics, but may limit the generalizability of the findings to other humanitarian crises.

In addition, the rapidly evolving nature of the conflict and diplomatic efforts in Tigray may mean that some developments are not captured within the timeframe of the study, potentially limiting the study's capacity to present a fully updated picture of the ongoing humanitarian situation.

Social desirability bias is a potential limitation in sensitive research contexts, especially when participants frame responses to align with perceived researcher expectations. However, this risk was mitigated, as 67% of the participants were professionals, reducing concerns that they might seek to influence the findings for material benefits. Moreover, the presence of high-level experts helped balance power dynamics and fostered a more equitable dialogue between researchers and participants.

The researchers' Ethiopian backgrounds and direct connections to the conflict may have influenced the data interpretation. Regular team reflections, discussions, and a structured consensus-driven approach to thematic analysis aimed to minimize bias. While these steps helped maintain objectivity, complete neutrality was challenging in this context. Involving a diverse pool of participants, including 67% of experts with significant humanitarian experience, further contributed to balancing researcher perspectives and ensuring a robust analysis.

Despite these limitations, this study's findings highlight the crucial aspects of humanitarian diplomacy that are often overlooked, particularly the intersection of political dynamics and humanitarian efforts. Future research could expand on this work by examining other conflict zones where similar diplomatic efforts are in play, comparing the Tigray case to other regions, such as Sudan, Palestine, Yemen, Syria, and Ukraine, to draw broader conclusions about the effectiveness of humanitarian diplomacy. Further studies could explore the role of community-level diplomacy, which this study has not fully addressed. In addition, the impact of technological advancements on humanitarian operations, including digital diplomacy and the use of artificial intelligence in resource mobilization and coordination, offers a promising avenue for future exploration. Subsequent research can build on this study to deepen our understanding of humanitarian diplomacy in complex political environments.

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