BETTER ASSISTANCE IN CRISES RESEARCH

Conflict Disruptions to Social Assistance in a Multi-Hazard Context: Assessing Responses to the Northern Ethiopia Crisis (2020–22)

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Summary

This paper focuses on both the responsiveness and resilience of Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) to large-scale conflict shocks. Focusing on how PSNP systems and implementation responded during the 2020–22 conflict in northern Ethiopia, the paper considers the possible scope of the programme's design and delivery structures to address vulnerabilities related to future large-scale conflict shocks.

The crisis illustrated just how critical it is that social protection for chronically vulnerable households and humanitarian support for people in acute need complement each other to ensure broad and effective coverage. The PSNP did not and could not scale up to meet additional needs created by conflict. Instead, humanitarian aid covered some proportion of these needs, particularly for those who were not already programme beneficiaries, as well as for PSNP clients who were displaced and could not be reached through PSNP channels. Still, the provision from the different sectors progressed in a stop-start, reactive, and piecemeal way, with limited strategic coordination.

The PSNP's success in delivering timely, predictable, and adequate transfers requires ways of strengthening the programme's effectiveness. This would encompass measures to ensure that the programme avoids causing further unintentional harm; maintains the systems and structures to ensure that basic programme functions continue; and mobilises an adequate response to the additional needs generated by conflict, including through improved coordination with humanitarian channels.

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List of acronyms and abbreviations

BASIC	Better Assistance in Crises
DFID	Department for International Development
EDRI	Ethiopian Development Research Institute
EDRMC	Ethiopian Disaster Risk Management Commission
ENDF	Ethiopian National Defence Forces
ETB	Ethiopian birr
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office
FFH	Food for the Hungry
HFA	humanitarian food assistance
IAHE	Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation
ICFRP	Integrated Cash and Food Response Plan
IDPs	internally displaced people
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
IFPRI	International Food Policy Research Institute
INGO	international non-governmental organisation
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IPC	Integrated Food Security Phase Classification
JEOP	Joint Emergency Operational Program
KII	key informant interview
NDRMC	National Disaster Risk Management Committee
NGO	non-governmental organisation
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
PSNP	Productive Safety Net Programme
REST	Relief Society of Tigray
RFSA	Resilience Food Security Activity
SPIR	Strengthen PSNP Institutions and Resilience
TDF	Tigray Defence Forces
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Front
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WFP	World Food Programme

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1. Introduction

Globally, in recent years there has been significant interest in, and efforts towards, making social protection programmes and systems responsive to large-scale natural, economic, and political shocks (O'Brien *et al*. 2018). This groundswell reflects an aspiration to harness the delivery structures, capabilities, and operational reach of existing social protection programmes and systems to mitigate and respond to disasters and emergencies. Necessarily, this requires efforts at the intersection of development work and emergency humanitarian response – a so-called 'nexus' approach to policy and programming. Social protection responses to the Covid-19 pandemic (Gentilini *et al*. 2022) and climate-associated events have highlighted both the potential and limitations of deploying social protection instruments and resources to address the needs generated by large-scale acute shocks. Yet, the emphasis on shock-responsive social protection has deflected attention from an equally significant challenge: the resilience of existing social protection systems and programmes when a large shock occurs. This is especially the case in settings where large-scale conflict and associated displacement not only generate new vulnerabilities and needs for assistance, but also have disruptive effects on the operations of social protection programmes and the scope of delivery.

This paper focuses on both the responsiveness and resilience of Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) to large-scale conflict shocks. Historically, the Government of Ethiopia's crisis response has focused on climate-associated food insecurity. The PSNP is no different in this respect, as it has sought to address the needs of chronically food-insecure populations, most of them living in highly precarious agro-ecological settings. Over the past 20 years, the PSNP has been the foundation of Ethiopia's strategy to address chronic food insecurity. Evaluations have consistently shown considerable improvements in food security for PSNP beneficiary households in the highlands where the programme has been running for the longest (Abay *et al*. 2020; Berhane, Hirvonen and Hoddinott 2015; Berhane *et al*. 2011). Impacts are less clear in the lowlands (Hoddinott *et al*. 2015). In addition, the development of systems and structures over time to support implementation of the programme at subnational level, some of which was independent of PSNP design and delivery such as the deployment of development agents, has helped to bring government services closer to people.

In 2021, Ethiopia began implementation of phase 5 of the PSNP (PSNP 5), which incorporates measures to strengthen shock responsiveness through expanding coverage, improving early warning systems, and incorporating contingent early responses (vertical and horizontal expansion of PSNP cash transfers). The rollout of PSNP 5 coincided with the eruption of a major conflict in the northern part of the country in late 2020, centring on the Tigray region and areas of the adjoining Amhara and Afar regions. Yet even in the years preceding the northern Ethiopia crisis, conflict flared up in many other areas of the country, resulting in the destruction of livelihoods and the displacement of millions. The International Organization for Migration reports that conflict was the primary cause of displacement in Ethiopia in 2020, accounting for more than two-thirds of the overall displaced population (IOM 2021). Figures in 2020 (estimated before the onset of the conflict in Tigray) showed an improvement from 2019, when more than 3 million people were displaced internally. The Ethiopian government launched a nationwide initiative in 2019 to return or relocate internally displaced people (IDPs). Yet, despite this push, the displaced population still hovered near 1.8 million by mid-2020 before the crisis unfolded in the north of the country.

Against this backdrop of spreading conflict and widespread displacement, the PSNP was designed to function within otherwise peaceful and stable political and social environments. The fact that conflict now affects many areas where the PSNP is operational has two seemingly contradictory effects. Conflict in contexts that were previously stable brings an obvious interruption to the delivery of social protection, when an otherwise functioning system is strained by political and social divisions and violence. Yet, it is precisely in these areas where the system becomes weakened that populations could be most in need of social protection. The insecurities and vulnerabilities that conflict promotes and exacerbates mean that the future of the PSNP is in the balance, as policymakers must inevitably decide whether it will become part of wider responses to conflict, displacement, and return.

This paper contributes to evolving thinking about the PSNP, its relationship with humanitarian assistance architecture, and the programme's resilience and responses to conflict- and displacement-related shocks. Focusing on how PSNP systems and implementation responded during the 2020–22 conflict in northern Ethiopia, the paper aims to critically reflect on the possible scope of the programme's design and delivery structures to address vulnerabilities related to future large-scale conflict shocks.

A key motivating question underpinning this work is whether the PSNP is fit (or should be fit) for conflict and multi-hazard contexts. A related objective is to identify opportunities to strengthen the programme's conflict sensitivity. At a broader level, the findings from this paper hold interest for both scholarly and policy communities struggling to chart a way forward in designing and delivering social protection in multi-hazard contexts, where conflict causes overwhelming disruptions in systems and institutional and personnel capacities. Given the limited case study and empirical evidence existing in this area, the central aim here is to better inform policy, programming, and the design of social assistance in crisis settings.

1.1 Research method

This study is informed by a literature review, interviews with 31 key informants, and the study team's extensive experience of working on the key topics over the lifetime of the PSNP.[1] The literature review identified and appraised policy and programme documents on Ethiopia's safety net, spanning PSNP and humanitarian stakeholders and interventions. First, as the contextual background to our study, the review charted the evolution of the design features of the PSNP in relation to contingency and shock response, as well as to displacement and migration. Second, the review focused on the design of PSNP 5 and the operational response to adjust social protection provision by the Government of Ethiopia and development and humanitarian actors when conflict escalated in Tigray from November 2020 to November 2022. We identified relevant research and evidence through online searches in English, snowballing from reference lists, and key informants' document recommendations (including unpublished material). We undertook interviews with key informants during 2022, including with government agencies at federal and regional levels, multilateral and bilateral donors, aid agencies, and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs).

[1] Our findings were enriched by, and triangulated with, a complementary qualitative *woreda* (district)-level study by BASIC researchers, which, through focus group discussions explored how the PSNP responded to situations of conflict, displacement, and return in three *woredas*: Babile (Oromiya), Babile (Somali), and Tehuledere (Amhara) (Tefera Taye *et al*. 2024).

2. Evolution of Ethiopia's policy and programming for shock response

2.1 Ethiopia's shock response: vision and reality

The PSNP is renowned for its contribution to reducing extreme poverty and food insecurity in Ethiopia. Over time, the programme has evolved to support responses to shocks, with funders beginning to appreciate the PSNP as an instrument to avoid even worse famine following major crises, such as the 2011–12 Horn of Africa food insecurity crisis (Hobson and Campbell 2012).[2] This section focuses on how the PSNP shock response architecture has developed over time, and the experience of the programme in attempting to implement this.

From the outset, donors funding the PSNP intended the programme to fulfil two functions: (1) to provide predictable support to chronically food-insecure populations; and (2) to scale up to enable a response to increased local needs at times of shocks (specifically climate- and drought-related shocks), thereby avoiding automatic reliance on emergency appeals (World Bank 2004). This scalability was built into the original PSNP design (Phase 1, 2005–06) through regional and *woreda* (district) contingency budgets,[3] and subsequently from PSNP phase 2 (2007–09) through the addition of a drought risk financing facility that would trigger a federal-level contingent grant (World Bank 2006). However, in the early years of the programme, contingency budgets tended to be used primarily to augment the (inadequate) PSNP response to the regular caseload, rather than as a shock response mechanism (Slater and Bhuvanendra 2013).[4]

The first proof of the PSNP's importance as a shock response instrument came in 2008. To meet the heightened vulnerabilities of people affected by rapidly rising food prices and drought, the PSNP provided transfers to 1.49 million transitory food-insecure households, followed by additional transfers to 4.43 million affected beneficiaries, as well as increasing the value of the transfer to respond to high inflation (World Bank 2009). Consequently, phase 3 of the programme (2010–15) introduced a federal-level risk financing mechanism (with a pre-positioned fund of US$25m), to enable rapid draw-down of funds to resource timely post-shock scaling-up of the programme (World Bank 2009). The programme's design also included investment in strengthening the government's early warning system (which would be used to trigger the risk-financing mechanism), as well as *woreda* shock response planning (World Bank 2009, 2013).

In response to the 2011 Horn of Africa drought crisis, the PSNP successfully scaled up to support 'an additional 3.1 million beneficiaries for three months and extending the duration of transfers for 6.5 million of the existing 7.6 million beneficiaries', and 'was widely credited with preventing the worst impacts of the drought, leading to comparatively less severe impacts within Ethiopia relative to its neighboring countries' (World Bank 2022: 10). Research has shown that this enabled a more timely and cost-effective response compared with traditional humanitarian emergency operations.[5]

[2] In remarks on the Horn of Africa food crisis in 2011, then United States (US) Secretary of State Hillary Clinton referred to the role of the PSNP in helping to reduce vulnerability to deepening food insecurity during the crisis. See: *Hillary Rodham Clinton: Remarks on the Food Crisis in the Horn of Africa*.

[3] The value of the contingency budgets was set as equal to 20 per cent of the base programme costs, with 15 per cent managed by regional authorities and 5 per cent at the *woreda* level (World Bank 2004). By PSNP 4 (2015–20) the *woreda* contingency budget amount was specified as '5 per cent of transfers budget (both permanent direct support and public works and temporary direct support) plus capital budget plus administrative budget' (Ministry of Agriculture 2014). The original focus of the *woreda* contingency budget was on providing for people wrongly excluded from the programme and meeting additional needs caused by localised shocks; over time, its remit expanded to include responding to shocks (World Bank 2004, 2009, 2014).

[4] For example, some households needed to receive the PSNP transfer for more than the envisaged six months (for public works beneficiaries) to meet their food gap. In other cases, the PSNP transfer value required augmenting to be enough to impact on households' consumption (given the practice of sharing support with other needy households not in the programme) (Slater and Bhuvanendra 2013).

[5] The time lag for PSNP support (from identification of need to disbursement) was two months, compared with the typical eight months for emergency humanitarian support; the cost of the PSNP response was 'an estimated

By phase 4 (2015–20), PSNP design documentation set out a sequenced 'continuum of response' to the transitory needs of food-insecure households during a shock (World Bank 2014, 2017). This continuum was envisaged to operate through three tiers, with caseloads identified through twice-yearly needs assessments by the government and the United Nations (UN) (World Bank 2014):

- PSNP resources covering chronic needs in the first instance;
- Followed by PSNP contingency budgets to cover transitory needs; and
- The humanitarian response meeting any additional needs not covered by PSNP resources.

To support this continuum, the PSNP's pre-positioned crisis response financing was turned into a 'more flexible' federal contingency budget (World Bank 2017: 45). There was also investment in developing clearer early warning indicators and thresholds for triggering different levels of response; a slightly increased share of the contingency budget held at *woreda* level (as this had proved more rapid and effective); better *woreda* disaster risk management systems (risk profiles and contingency plans); and improved reporting and accountability of contingency budgets (*ibid*.).

By 2020, the World Bank reported that alongside the 8 million registered regular beneficiaries of PSNP transfers, each year, PSNP assistance is scaled up to reach the needs of an additional 3.8 million people, on average, who are affected by shocks (World Bank 2020b). Independent programme evaluation has shown that the PSNP crisis response 'protects households from drought and enables them to bounce back faster after a drought has occurred' (World Bank 2022: 10; Knippenberg and Hoddinott 2017). Further, a 2017/18 evaluation found that emergency humanitarian food assistance (HFA) and PSNP together did provide a continuum of support, with PSNP transfers reaching, on average, chronically food-insecure households and the humanitarian aid targeted to more acutely vulnerable households (Sabates-Wheeler, Hirvonen, Lind and Hoddinott 2022).[6]

Yet challenges persist, impeding the effectiveness of Ethiopia's shock response. A key issue is the limited coordination between the PSNP and humanitarian assistance, underpinned by institutional divisions within the Government of Ethiopia. PSNP operations are managed by the Ministry of Agriculture, while humanitarian assistance comes under the purview of the Ethiopian Disaster Risk Management Commission (EDRMC).[7] Divided responsibilities and parallel distribution structures have slowed decision-making, leading to late and unpredictable emergency assistance and sub-optimal coverage of aid, with limited information sharing leading to gaps and overlaps in beneficiary targeting (Ministry of Agriculture 2021; World Bank 2020b).

These issues came to the fore in the shock response to the severe drought related to El Niño in 2016. In response, the government, with the support of international donors, set out reforms to consolidate PSNP and HFA delivery systems into a single framework with coordinated procedures and institutional arrangements (World Bank 2017; Sabates-Wheeler, Hirvonen, Lind and Hoddinott 2022). These included consolidating PSNP and HFA food and cash management with (1) the food management unit in the National Disaster Risk Management Commission (NDRMC) responsible for the storage, delivery, reporting, and auditing of food resources; and (2) channelling HFA cash transfers through the Ministry of Finance-managed PSNP financial management system (World Bank 2017). The Integrated Cash and Food Response Plan (ICFRP) was intended to coordinate PSNP and HFA targeting (European Commission 2019). At the subnational level, the cabinet and councils at *woreda* (district) and *kebele* (sub-district) levels are responsible for overseeing both the HFA and the PSNP, while the Kebele Appeals Committee was intended to respond to complaints from both HFA and PSNP clients (World Bank 2017). Despite these efforts, overlapping roles and responsibilities between government agencies at all levels have persisted, moves to consolidate operations have met 'significant resistance', and coordination between the HFA and PSNP operations remains a challenge in

US$53 per beneficiary compared with US$169 per beneficiary targeted through the UN- and NGO-managed pipeline' (Development Initiatives 2012: 77).

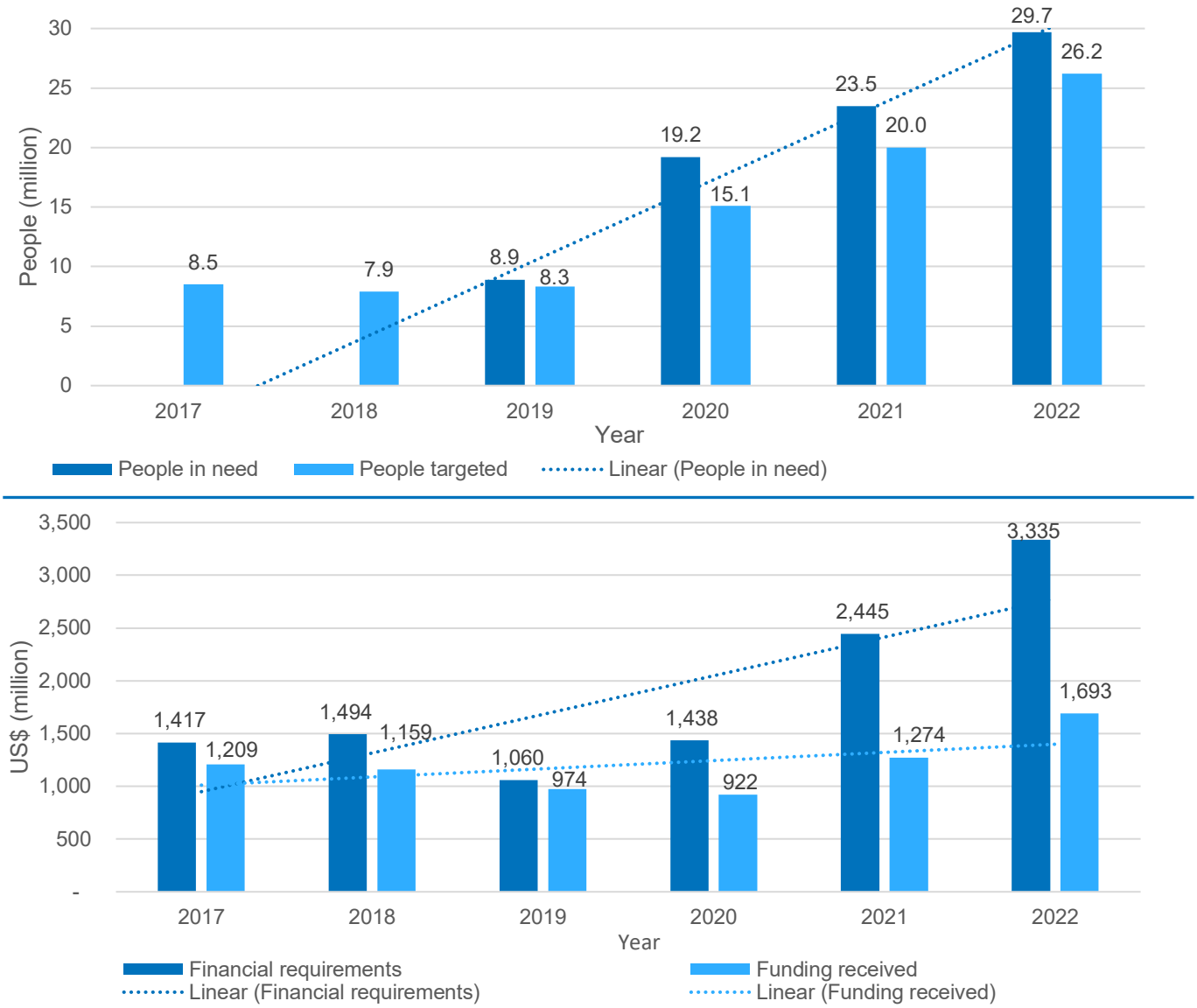
[6] The research cited here was identified from a summary by Hirvonen (2023).

[7] The EDRMC was formerly known as the National Disaster Risk Management Commission (NDRMC). The NDRMC was established in 2015 by splitting the disaster risk management and food security remits within the Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources into two and moving the NDRMC to report directly to the deputy prime minister (World Bank 2017). In late 2021, the NDRMC – by then called the EDRMC – was relocated to report directly to the prime minister (EDRMC 2022).

practice (World Bank 2020b: 40). Across and between regions, subnational institutional setups of PSNP and HFA continue to vary, in some locations managed through one office, in others through separate institutions.

Meanwhile the busy humanitarian landscape further complicates coordination, both between humanitarian and PSNP activities, and also among humanitarian actors and interventions. Humanitarian needs in Ethiopia have risen dramatically in recent years. In 2022, 29.7 million people were estimated to be in need, a 233 per cent increase in humanitarian needs since 2019 (OCHA 2022, 2023; FCDO 2023b). Multiple actors are involved in financing and delivering emergency aid – some of whom also support the PSNP.[8] OCHA (2023) reports that 192 organisations were involved in delivering the 2023 humanitarian response. At the same time, reflecting global trends, aid resources have not kept pace with increased need: recent emergency appeals have been substantially underfunded (see Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1: Humanitarian response in Ethiopia (2017–22)



Source: Authors' own, using data from OCHA (2022, 2023).

[8] Along with the World Bank, in 2022, donors who reportedly supported the PSNP included the Danish International Development Agency; the European Union; the Government of Ireland; the United Kingdom Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office; the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands; the United Nations Children's Fund; the United States Agency for International Development (USAID); and the World Food Programme (World Bank 2022).

At the start of 2022, an estimated 20.4 million people needed food aid, requiring US$1.68bn in funding (which accounted for 54 per cent of the total humanitarian response funding ask) (OCHA 2022). Three operators implement HFA: the Government of Ethiopia through the EDRMC; the United States (US)-funded Joint Emergency Operational Program (JEOP, a consortium of NGOs led by Catholic Relief Services); and the World Food Programme (WFP, which subcontracts 23 NGOs) (see Table 2.1). These three coordinate through a 'one-*woreda*, one-operator' principle (OCHA 2023). For example, in the food aid response to conflict impacts in Tigray, the region was divided into three areas, each allocated to one of the actors, with the government covering Western Tigray (IAHE 2023).

WFP is the largest international humanitarian operator in Ethiopia. In 2022, the organisation provided food, nutrition, or cash assistance to 10.2 million Ethiopians and refugees (of whom, 6.4 million were provided with relief food assistance in Afar, Amhara, Somali, and Tigray regions) (WFP 2023b). This achieved 82 per cent of WFP's initial plan, with the shortfall due to the impacts of conflict, funding, and supply shortages, while the funding gap also led to cuts in rations (WFP 2023a, 2023b). As a result, WFP calculated that out of an estimated 22.6 million food-insecure people, 55 per cent (12.4 million) did not receive any assistance from the organisation (WFP 2023a).[9]

By far the largest donor to the humanitarian response is the US, in 2022 accounting for 57.2 per cent of total humanitarian financing reported to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) (Germany, the next largest donor, gave 9.5 per cent).[10] Previously operating across four regions, in 2023 JEOP operations were scaled up with the launch of JEOP 2.0, with US$331m funding, the intention being to provide US-sourced emergency food commodities to 8.5 million people in six regions impacted by conflict and drought (USAID 2023).[11]

In June 2023, the UN and the US government temporarily halted humanitarian food assistance in Ethiopia, with evidence of widespread theft of aid deliveries (following suspension of WFP's food aid in Tigray in May 2023).[12]

Table 2.1: Snapshot of PSNP and HFA operations in Ethiopia (2022)

	PSNP	HFA
Nationwide	By June 2022, the PSNP had reached nearly 7 million beneficiaries in the core caseload and scaled up to meet additional needs of 2.9 million beneficiaries (FCDO 2023a).	By the end of November 2022, food partners – the government, UN, and NGOs – had provided 16.3 million people with humanitarian food assistance under round 1, 12.3 million under round 2, and 7.1 million under round 3, with round 4 ongoing, aiming to deliver food aid to 5.1 million people (OCHA Ethiopia 2023).
Tigray	In 2022, PSNP operations were severely disrupted in Tigray due to the conflict and the breakdown in federal–regional relations, affecting 1 million beneficiaries (FCDO 2023a).	From October 2022 to January 2023, JEOP partners provided food assistance to a little over 2 million people (67 per cent of its planned caseload); WFP and its partners provided food assistance to 1.6 million people (76 per cent of its planned caseload of 2.1 million people); and EDRMC conducted one-off food distributions in some *woredas* in November (Ethiopia Food Cluster 2023). Still, the provision of HFA was patchy through the height of the crisis, reflecting the severe constraints on access that affected every sector.

Source: Authors' own, using sources cited.

[9] The US government and WFP suspended food aid in June 2023. Food assistance to refugees resumed in October (USAID 2024a; WFP 2024). On 14 November, the US government approved the resumption of deliveries to populations in need across Ethiopia, and the Joint Emergency Operational Program (JEOP) and WFP resumed food assistance in early December (USAID 2024a). USAID reported that 'nearly 1.1 million Ethiopians in need of life-saving assistance and an estimated 612,000 refugees had received food distributions as of December 31, according to USAID/BHA [Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance] partners and the UN [United Nations]' (USAID 2024a: 2).

[10] See: Financial Tracking Service – Ethiopia 2022 (accessed 20 November 2023).

[11] As a US Government-funded operation, JEOP food assistance was suspended June–November 2023 (USAID 2024a). USAID (2024b) posted on X: 'Since Dec. 2023, JEOP distributed 24,051.71 metric tons covering 110 *woredas* in five regions for 1,500,000 recipients.'

[12] See: 'UN Suspends Food Assistance as Ethiopia Wrestles with Aid Diversions' and 'WFP Plan Aims to Prevent Further Food Aid Diversion in Ethiopia'.

2.2 PSNP 5 and shock response, including to impacts of conflict and displacement

In 2020, the World Bank concluded that, 'the current combination of HFA, PSNP contingency budget support, and PSNP core transfers can be considered a scalable safety net but not a shock responsive one', because of the persistent slow decision-making impeding timely response and lack of coordination between the various operations (World Bank 2020b: 26). To address this, PSNP 5 sets out a series of reforms, including to achieve 'shock responsive social protection that can be easily scaled up to respond to climate-related and other types of shocks' (*ibid*.: 15).[13] The reforms include:

- Consolidating operations management of humanitarian food assistance and the PSNP under the Food Security Coordination Directorate of the Ministry of Agriculture, with the EDRMC continuing to be responsible for coordinating the early warning system and overall oversight of disaster preparedness and response.
- Investing in the government's disaster risk-financing strategy; early warning needs system; response planning (with the multi-hazard Integrated Cash and Food Response Plan informed by annual Drought Response Assistance Plans that are updated quarterly); and pre-negotiated shock response-financing mechanisms (with donor financing of shock-responsive cash transfers and the World Bank crisis response financing – through the Crisis Response Window Early Response Financing Contingent Emergency Response Sub-Component – to be channelled through the federal contingency budget).
- Expanding the PSNP to additional drought-prone *woredas* not currently included in the PSNP (about 60–100 *woredas*); undertaking a full PSNP retargeting, changing the target group from households that are food insecure to households living in extreme poverty; and recalculating *woreda* caseload allocations (across new and old PSNP *woredas*) without changing regional caseloads.
- Delivering all emergency assistance (including HFA) through core PSNP systems and structures (for targeting, registering, payment, delivery, and accountability); or, at a minimum, for some off-budget food assistance (with the US the largest in-kind provider)[14] to adhere to PSNP procedures.

PSNP 5 (like PSNP 4) was costed at US$2,284m, with the Government of Ethiopia committing US$590m, the World Bank US$512.5m, and the World Bank-managed trust fund and other donors (the US, United Kingdom, European Commission, and Ireland) US$986m. This left a funding gap of just over US$195m. In addition, the federal contingency budget had no pre-positioned funds agreed, impacting on preparedness to scale up the programme in response to shocks.

As PSNP 5 has been rolled out, the context has undergone considerable changes, with Ethiopia facing multiple concurrent crises, including drought, conflict, desert locusts, high inflation of food prices, and the impact of war in Ukraine, and many people forced to move away from their homes and communities. PSNP 5 retained the programme's original drought focus, while noting that improved PSNP delivery mechanisms could be used for other economic shocks (e.g. economic impacts of Covid-19) (World Bank 2020b). In the 2020 programme documentation, use of the pre-allocated Crisis Response Window Early Response Financing for 'food insecurity primarily driven by political or conflict-related causes' is explicitly ruled out (*ibid*.: 32). The first additional financing agreement for PSNP 5 (for US$37.5m in 2021) maintained a focus on meeting drought-related needs; the second additional financing round (for US$350m in 2022) aimed to respond to food security needs of drought- and conflict-affected households (World Bank 2021, 2022).

[13] PSNP 5 also set out other programme reforms and additions such as: (1) new support for PSNP mothers and young children, including (but not limited to) linking to the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs' case management activities for families with children at risk; and (2) more intensive livelihoods support focused on fewer *woredas* and beneficiaries, and intensified focus on improving women's economic opportunities (World Bank 2020b).

[14] US government support to PSNP 5 is channelled through the off-budget Resilience Food Security Activity, which finances three activities: (1) Strengthen PSNP Institutions and Resilience (SPIR) II in 17 *woredas* of Amhara and Oromia regions led by World Vision in partnership with CARE Ethiopia and the Organization for Relief and Development; (2) Poverty Reduced Sustainably in an Environment of Resilient and Vibrant Economy (PReSERVE), which targets nine *woredas* in Amhara region, led by Food for the Hungry (FFH) and RTI International; and (3) *Ifaa* ('to bring forth light' in Afaan-Oromo) in nine *woredas* in Oromia region, implemented by Catholic Relief Services. These intend to 'provide cash and food assistance to the most vulnerable households and additional graduation model programming through complementary gender-sensitive livelihood, nutrition, and climate resilience activities' (IFPRI n.d.; RTI International 2022).

Yet, even while the World Bank secured funding for the PSNP's shock response budget, funding for the PSNP's core budget has shrunk. During the height of the conflict in northern Ethiopia in 2021 and 2022, several donors paused financing for Government of Ethiopia programmes. Meanwhile, Ethiopian treasury contributions to core PSNP financing increased, rising from 20 per cent in 2018/19 to 36 per cent in 2020/21, before dipping to 22 per cent in 2022/23. By 2022, implementation of the PSNP was still not conforming with the phase 5 design, as the funding shortfall for the programme pushed implementers to pare back the PSNP's functions to a core focus on delivering transfers. Programming features such as public works, which are financed through the programme's capital budget, were substantially reduced (and entirely suspended in conflict-affected areas); for example, in 2022, only 25 per cent of the capital budget was transferred to regions.[15] Other aspects, such as the *woreda*-level contingency budgets, were dormant. While programmatic attention focused on delivering transfers, there was a reduction in payments;[16] and, as explored later, the wage rate was stagnant despite inflation and the greater needs experienced by the programme's clients.

While the PSNP core budget has been under immense strain in recent years, funding for humanitarian assistance has swollen, as noted above, though is still inadequate to cover the estimated increase in needs. In part this was due to the decision by key donors to redirect funding away from the PSNP to humanitarian channels during the height of the conflict in northern Ethiopia; it also reflected surging levels of those considered to be in need due to the war in that region, but also due to conflicts flaring up in several other parts of the country, alongside the impacts of severe drought and a locust invasion. As conflict-related impacts on poverty and vulnerability deepened throughout 2021, the PSNP was ill prepared to respond.

The design of PSNP 5 considered how the programme would meet the needs of PSNP clients displaced from their homes. The intention set out in 2020 was for internally displaced PSNP beneficiaries to remain on PSNP payrolls for at least one year after displacement; if they returned within a year, they would receive their backdated transfers from the period they were absent (World Bank 2020b). IDPs hosted in PSNP *woredas* could be assisted through the *woreda* contingency budget following community assessment of eligibility, and could be considered for inclusion on the PSNP's list of regular clients after having spent two years of their displacement within a PSNP *woreda* (*ibid.*). Yet, the funding pressures on the PSNP core budget meant that the *woreda* contingency fund was dormant, denying local-level implementers a critical capacity to respond. However, the impacts of conflict in northern Ethiopia cast a light on the inadequacies/limits of PSNP systems more generally to respond to the needs of populations affected by conflict-related processes, as the following sections explore.

[15] Key informant interview (KII) 11, donor, Addis Ababa, 23 June 2022.
[16] KII 8, donor, Addis Ababa, 22 June 2022.

3. How the northern Ethiopia conflict and assistance response unfolded (2020–22)

3.1 Overview

The conflict in northern Ethiopia tipped into military operations and widespread fighting in November 2020, following months of escalating tensions between the federal government and the regional administration in Tigray, which was led by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) party. Within a month of the armed conflict starting, an estimated 1 million people had already been displaced (IOM 2021), many of them internally within Tigray, but also with significant flows of refugees into neighbouring Sudan, where an estimated 50,000 people fled in the first four weeks of the conflict (OCHA 2020). Conditions within Tigray deteriorated sharply, with a spike in humanitarian needs happening at the same time as the federal government sought to close access to the region. Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF) quickly routed the TPLF, whose leadership and fighters fled the Tigrayan capital Mekelle. In January 2021, the federal government appointed an interim administration for Tigray.

However, this was only the opening act of a conflict that would unfold over two years. Tigrayan rebel forces had retreated to remote corners of the region, regrouping as the Tigray Defence Forces (TDF). By June 2021, the TDF had swept across much of Tigray, retaking Mekelle. In the ensuing months, the TDF pushed into neighbouring areas of Amhara and Afar, eventually striking an alliance with the Oromo Liberation Army and taking several towns during a march southwards across Amhara towards the national capital Addis Ababa, an advance culminating in November. An ENDF drone-led counter-response pushed back the TDF, whose forces largely retreated to Tigray. The focus of conflict returned to Tigray, with control of various key towns shifting back and forth between ENDF-allied forces and the TDF. A humanitarian truce agreed in March 2022 did not significantly increase aid access in Tigray. Over subsequent months, there was little progress in talks involving the TPLF and federal government to end hostilities, with conflict reigniting in August 2022. Tigrayan forces again pushed into areas of Amhara and Afar, with fighting spreading across both regions. African Union-mediated peace talks in South Africa would prove decisive in settling the terms of a Cessation of Hostilities Agreement, signed between the ENDF and TDF on the second anniversary of the conflict in November 2022. Two weeks later, a humanitarian agreement was signed to open access for aid in Tigray.

Before the conflict erupted, Tigray had been one of the regions where the PSNP performed better than in others, operating in 55 of Tigray's 94 *woredas* and reaching around 1 million beneficiaries, of whom 56 per cent were women (Government of Ethiopia 2022: 75). The conflict devastated the programme's delivery infrastructure and systems, with the PSNP ceasing to function across the region as all regular funding flows were stopped (including block transfers and other channel 1 programmes,[17] as well as telecommunications and banking services being cut). Neighbouring areas of Amhara and Afar affected by the spillover of the conflict also fared badly: 51 of 87 PSNP *woredas* in Amhara were affected, as were 21 of 34 PSNP *woredas* in Afar (Laterite 2022). However, a picture of war-induced collapse of PSNP systems in Tigray conceals a more complex reality, which involved efforts by social protection and humanitarian stakeholders alike to extend provision during different phases of the conflict. This unfolded across three periods, and with varying degrees of effectiveness in Tigray, Amhara, and Afar:

- The outbreak of the conflict and interim administration of Tigray (November 2020–June 2021);
- TPLF administration of Tigray, and the TDF offensive and occupation of parts of Amhara and Afar (June 2021 to the declaration of the humanitarian truce in March 2022); and
- The period following the truce until the signing of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement in November 2022.

[17] Essentially, these programmes represent domestic finance, rather than international aid.

3.2 November 2020–June 2021

As tensions mounted in 2020 between the federal government and Tigray regional administration, the federal government sought to shift the flow of funds away from the TPLF-directed regional government directly to *woredas* (although in practice there was no evidence of this happening). Federal funds – including those to implement the PSNP – continued to flow into the region until August 2020, when relations broke down. Thus, even before the outbreak of the war, PSNP systems were under pressure and in flux as conflict deepened between federal and regional authorities.

However, the PSNP did not immediately collapse even after the war started. While the federal government instituted stringent measures to control the flow of humanitarian aid into the region, interim guidelines were detailed for implementing the PSNP in the region. The public works component of the programme was suspended, while efforts were directed towards getting transfers to the population and expanding coverage to those who had been displaced by armed conflict. Some food aid destined for other parts of Ethiopia was instead directed to Tigray. The interim regional administration shared coordination of the PSNP with WFP and key implementing NGOs such as the Relief Society of Tigray. While the infrastructure to implement the PSNP under the interim administration was being put in place, federal authorities in May 2021 planned an assessment of implementation capacities, one month before the interim administration collapsed.

Yet, even while there were efforts to strengthen institutions for delivery, deepening needs and considerable restrictions on aid access in Tigray marked this period of the conflict. An assessment of humanitarian access in the region undertaken between February and March 2021 found that only a handful of relief organisations had been able to establish an operational presence, with access largely constrained to the biggest towns and locations near main roads (Stoddard *et al*. 2021). Affected populations and aid organisations reported that the principal impediments to humanitarian access were 'the government's reluctance to allow free travel and communications in the region, followed by volatility in security risks' (*ibid*.: 9).

Many areas of Tigray continued to be deeply insecure. Armed activity and the threat of violence during the conflict constrained the operations of agencies delivering social and livelihood assistance in various ways. Transport costs increased significantly, with a lack of transport providers and a spike in the cost of petrol. There was an effective blockade that almost entirely halted the movement of aid into Tigray for several months. Some supplies were looted in transit. The lack of banking services across the most severely impacted areas, including all of Tigray, meant that agencies were forced to transport cash to fund operations on the ground. Further, planning and monitoring and assessment of needs and operations were hamstrung by inadequate and the lack of up-to-date information, as telecommunications and access to the internet had been cut in Tigray. The following reflections from key informant interviews (KIIs) highlight some of the challenges that impeded delivery systems:

> *Accessing conflict areas is the major problem that causes delaying and skipping of transfers. So far, we planned for 5 rounds of transfers and were able to perform for 1.5 rounds in Tigray. This is mainly due to access problems. The absence of banking services and fuel for the transportation of food are also other challenges in facilitating the delivery of humanitarian aid in Tigray… We use the WFP–UN humanitarian service flight service to go there by paying about US$400 per person per flight.*[18]
>
> *We could only get cash into Tigray by suitcase.*[19]
>
> *The main problem during humanitarian food distribution in Tigray is that routes to deliver food are not always open and convenient due to the ongoing conflict in the area. In addition, fuel to deliver the food to the distribution sites is a big problem. We pay up to (Ethiopian birr) ETB 400/litre, when it is selling for about 35 ETB/litre in Addis.*[20]

[18] KII 1, international agency/organisation, Addis Ababa, 30 May 2022.
[19] KII 16, international agency/organisation, Addis Ababa, 13 November 2022.
[20] KII 1, international agency/organisation, Addis Ababa, 30 May 2022.

Thus, the humanitarian situation in Tigray steadily worsened during this period, with Tigrayan forces regrouping, raising tensions and threatening to widen the conflict in neighbouring regions. Meanwhile, in Amhara and Afar, PSNP operations during this period continued as normal, with implementation starting on phase 5 of the programme between January and June 2021.

3.3 June 2021–March 2022

As the TDF pushed beyond Tigray into neighbouring Amhara and Afar, the challenges of implementing the PSNP and delivering humanitarian assistance engulfed a wider area of northern Ethiopia. Ethiopian government estimates are that 335,000 PSNP beneficiaries in Afar and Amhara did not receive cash transfers during the peak of the conflict between July and December 2021 (Government of Ethiopia 2022: 75); this is in addition to the more than 1 million PSNP beneficiaries who lost access to their transfers in Tigray, as well as a significant population that was acutely vulnerable due to the conflict and required emergency support.

The PSNP had no resources to scale up vertically, to cover additional needs for existing programme clients, or horizontally, to address the needs of those who were not existing beneficiaries but were newly vulnerable due to the conflict. A multi-agency needs assessment in Amhara conducted in 2021 estimated that the conflict in the region had affected 8.7 million people who were in need of assistance. The JEOP and WFP launched a response that covered the needs of 60 per cent of this caseload.[21] This also covered the needs of PSNP clients who had been displaced. For some displaced PSNP clients, their food needs were covered by United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Resilience Food Security Activity (RFSA) pivot funds, whereas displaced people who were not previously registered for PSNP support were supported by the JEOP.[22] The food basket for the PSNP (RFSA) and JEOP was equivalent.[23] At the height of the crisis, JEOP operations centred on Tigray and neighbouring *woredas* in Amhara that were worst affected by the conflict.

Significant constraints on access to deliver aid in Tigray persisted, with many operational agencies providing humanitarian assistance relying exclusively on Tigrayan staff for delivery. Even when access was permitted, delivery costs remained very high due to high fuel and other logistics costs, such as the need for insurance coverage for all supplies being transported. As the conflict unfolded and intensified across Tigray, Amhara, and Afar, operational agencies sought to pivot their programmes away from a productive focus to supporting transfers and other life-saving assistance to conflict-affected populations. This was both in response to the changing needs of existing clients, but also to the needs of the population made newly vulnerable due to the unfolding conflict:

> *Livelihoods programming (in connection with the PSNP) halted when the conflict started. We had 150 staff through a partnership with REST* [Relief Society of Tigray] *in Tigray. They shifted to humanitarian* [operations]*, supporting the delivery of relief supplies including emergency agricultural inputs.*[24]

NGO implementers under RFSA submitted plans to USAID that enabled them to pivot operations from delivering the PSNP to providing humanitarian assistance to conflict-affected populations.[25] In Amhara, pivot funds covered the needs of 2.1 million PSNP beneficiaries. For example, funds allocated for livelihood support were redirected to restocking households affected by conflict-related looting.[26] Pivot funds were also used to support the rehabilitation of school classrooms and health clinics.

[21] KII 4, government, Bahir Dar, 1 June 2022.
[22] KII 5, international agency/organisation, Bahir Dar, 1 June 2022.
[23] KII 2, international agency/organisation, Addis Ababa, 31 May 2022.
[24] KII 15, international agency/organisation, Addis Ababa, 27 June 2022.
[25] KII 1, international agency/organisation, Addis Ababa, 30 May 2022.
[26] KII 3, international agency/organisation, Addis Ababa, 31 May 2022.

While some agencies sought to continue support to agricultural production in Tigray, supplies had to move through Amhara, requiring negotiations with leadership there that slowed down deliveries:

> *In June 2021,* [our agency] *bought seeds from Amhara region to be distributed to farmers in Tigray. But the leaders from the Amhara side prohibited us transporting seeds to Tigray, questioning how resources could be moved to them when we were in an active war against Tigrayan forces. Finally,* [our agency] *distributed the seeds within Amhara*.[27]

Within Amhara, Emergency Coordination Centres (established at regional and zonal levels) were responsible for prioritising and targeting people affected by the unfolding conflict.[28] The centres convened weekly meetings in some of the zones worst affected by the conflict, including North Gondar and Wag Hamra.[29] During the crisis, a federal-level Emergency Coordination Centre also met weekly, bringing together federal Ethiopian government officials, UN agencies, and key donors to review humanitarian needs and resources.[30]

3.4 April 2022–November 2022

As the TDF in early 2022 retreated from areas of Amhara and Afar that it had occupied, efforts were made to re-establish PSNP delivery systems, while also expanding distribution of humanitarian assistance to conflict-affected populations. The conflict had badly affected programme delivery infrastructure, including as a result of significant looting of and damage to PSNP vehicles, destruction of zonal and *woreda* food security, and the Ministry of Women and Social Affairs offices and equipment, destruction of food distribution points/warehouses, and damage to public works infrastructure such as water-harvesting structures and small-scale irrigation schemes (Government of Ethiopia 2022: 76).

An assessment of PSNP distribution conducted in eight *woredas* in Amhara and two in Afar between May and June 2022 provided a snapshot of the effectiveness of delivery systems 18 months into the conflict. The assessment was undertaken in the aftermath of Tigrayan forces withdrawing to Tigray. While PSNP systems were active in all *woredas* and most *kebeles* at the time of the assessment, they operated through several modifications. These included using security personnel to accompany cash in transit (a necessary adjustment for *woredas* where banking services had ceased to operate) and using manual methods to transfer cash; the *woreda* administration budget was used to escort cash to where IDPs resided.[31] Only three of ten *woredas* assessed had a functional safe box; yet, most *woredas* (seven) had access to a food warehouse.

PASS, the PSNP management and information system, was being used to track and generate attendance and payrolls. While approximately half of cash-eligible households had received only one transfer between February and April 2022, the assessment found that, rather than this necessarily having anything to do with the impacts of the conflict, it was a new requirement (under PSNP 5) that beneficiaries had bank accounts. Thus, despite the conflict's impacts, *woreda* implementation officials continued to make efforts to help PSNP beneficiaries to open bank accounts, as well as to educate those who were displaced on how they could claim payments that they may have missed while they were displaced (Laterite 2022).

In the aftermath of the TDF occupation of parts of Afar and Amhara, in January and February 2022 a 'traffic light assessment' was conducted of PSNP operations in both regions to support resumption of the programme's delivery systems. The assessment classified PSNP *woredas* into green, amber, and red categories. Classifications were determined by the status of staff availability, bank functionality, availability of vehicles for outreach, status of local committees such as appeal structures, and scale of displacement that had occurred (Government of Ethiopia 2022: 76). In restarting operations, *woreda* staff were instructed to prioritise transfers (to minimise potential delays), in effect to account for all resources in accordance with

[27] KII 1, international agency/organisation, Addis Ababa, 30 May 2022.
[28] KII 1, international agency/organisation, Addis Ababa, 30 May 2022.
[29] KII 6, international agency/organisation, Bahir Dar, 1 June 2022.
[30] KII 1, international agency/organisation, Addis Ababa, 30 May 2022.
[31] KII 9, donor, Addis Ababa, 22 June 2022; KII 11, donor, Addis Ababa, 23 June 2022.

PSNP procedures, and resuming public works only once an assessment had been conducted that determined it was safe and appropriate to do so.[32]

For PSNP funders, the traffic light assessment was a valuable mechanism to ensure that PSNP resources would reach the intended beneficiaries.[33] By June 2022, most PSNP *woredas* in Amhara had been classified 'green' (capacities existed for PSNP processes to function normally), whereas eight *woredas* were 'amber' (PSNP could operate but with modifications to standard delivery processes), and four others were 'red' (where it was not possible to deliver through the PSNP due to continued armed activity).[34] An assessment found that staff availability was surprisingly good considering the post-conflict setting, and that there was a rapid improvement in terms of reinstating staff and management.[35] The situation in Afar was more dynamic, changing from one week to another. However, regional and *woreda* officials adapted delivery in ways that permitted the PSNP to function in many places.[36] For example, key technical experts could move outside of their *woreda* to neighbouring *woredas* where such capacities were limited or non-existent.[37]

By early 2022, four *woredas* in Wag Hamra zone in Amhara remained under TDF occupation. In these areas, authorities sought to be flexible to enable access to PSNP clients who could not be reached through the usual PSNP delivery channels (RFSA/Strengthen PSNP Institutions and Resilience). For example, in Abergele and Zequala *woredas*, *kebele* authorities provided 'authentication letters' to PSNP clients, which were then presented to authorities in Sekota, the zonal centre where the distribution of PSNP transfers had resumed.[38] In this way, PSNP clients in areas under TDF occupation were able to get their transfers. Other displaced people who had temporarily settled in Sekota were also supported through a variety of humanitarian assistance channelled through RFSA.

Operational agencies assisting displaced populations worked with zonal and *woreda* government officials to share the lists of those registered in IDP camps, which were cross-referenced with the lists of those who had been registered for RFSA (PSNP) before the conflict. Displaced households that were existing RFSA beneficiaries were supported with RFSA pivot funds, whereas displaced people who had not been targeted for RFSA were instead covered by the JEOP.[39] Some agencies, such as Food for the Hungry (FFH) and World Vision, delivered across both channels, the RFSA and JEOP, using the same warehouses and distribution structures, though with different reporting lines.[40]

[32] 'Interim PSNP Implementation Guidance Note for Woredas in Amhara and Afar that are Impacted by the Conflict, but which Have Resumed PSNP Operations' (internal PSNP document).
[33] KII 9, donor, Addis Ababa, 22 June 2022.
[34] KII 13, donor, Addis Ababa, 24 June 2022.
[35] Amhara and Afar PSNP Traffic Light Assessment Results Analysis.
[36] KII 11, donor, Addis Ababa, 23 June 2022.
[37] KII 13, donor, Addis Ababa, 24 June 2022.
[38] KII 6, international agency/organisation, Bahir Dar, 1 June 2022.
[39] KII 14, international agency/organisation, Addis Ababa, 27 June 2022.
[40] KII 6, international agency/organisation, Bahir Dar, 1 June 2022.

4. PSNP programming and implementation during the conflict

In this section, we draw on interviews and a review of documentation to dive deeper into specific programming and implementation opportunities and constraints that presented themselves in relation to the conflict crisis. In particular, we focus on issues of targeting and eligibility, transfer values and modalities, adaptations to 'plus' components of the PSNP, and coordination challenges on the ground. We show that the PSNP did not and could not scale up to meet additional needs created by the conflict. Instead, HFA was critical to cover a proportion of these needs, particularly for those living in PSNP operational areas who were not already PSNP clients. HFA was also important to respond to the needs of PSNP clients who were displaced and could not be reached through PSNP channels.

The crisis illustrated just how critical it is that social protection for chronically vulnerable households and humanitarian support for people in acute need complement each other to ensure broad and effective coverage. Yet, in practice, the provision from the different sectors progressed in a stop-start, reactive, and piecemeal way, with limited strategic coordination. Many households were left without provision for their basic needs. Concerted thinking and effort need to be made to foster and build complementarities between these delivery channels.

4.1 Eligibility, targeting, and coverage

As discussed in section 2, in 2021, along with the usual re-targeting exercise, the eligibility criteria under PSNP 5 changed to respond to 'a mismatch' between the PSNP core caseload and 'extreme poverty rates across regions and across PSNP *woredas* within regions' (World Bank 2020b: 28). Despite the official change in criteria from food insecurity- to poverty-based targeting, several respondents from bilateral donors and INGOs reported that, for all intents and purposes, eligibility has not changed: 'I don't get it. On paper it is extreme poverty. In practice, the targeting is done by the community and it does what it always does – identifies the poorest through community-based targeting. The underlying data is IPC [Integrated Food Security Phase Classification]-based food security'.[41] A respondent from Catholic Relief Services corroborated this, stating that 'targeting remains based on the chronic food insecurity principle'.[42] Another respondent reported that, in practice, there was no major difference in targeting procedures under PSNP 5 compared with PSNP 4; it was conducted using a participatory wealth-ranking procedure, as always.[43] This confusion likely stems from the lack of clarity in programme documentation.[44]

[41] KII 17, donor, Addis Ababa, 14 November 2022.
[42] KII 2, international agency/organisation, Addis Ababa, 31 May 2022.
[43] KII 15, international agency/organisation, Addis Ababa, 27 June 2022.
[44] The design of PSNP 5 aimed to improve targeting 'to better reflect levels of chronic poverty and vulnerability to drought' (World Bank 2020b: 28). The new phase set out to reallocate the existing caseload across *woredas* already receiving the PSNP and new *woredas* that had not received PSNP support. The new *woredas* would be selected by their history of receiving drought emergency food assistance, drought shock frequency, and prevalence of extreme poverty; then the existing caseload within the region would be reallocated across existing and new *woredas*, informed by poverty data but also 'the high rates of vulnerability in lowland regions' and 'any political risks of significant caseload reductions'(*ibid.*: 125, 138). The project appraisal document notes that this change would have an operational impact on geographical caseloads, but 'limited impact on household targeting', with *kebele*-level community participatory identification of households to receive PSNP support continuing (*ibid.*: 124). At the same time, the move to a poverty focus was 'conceptually important as it shifts future thinking about the program and the evaluation of its outcomes' (*ibid.*).

Over and above changing eligibility criteria and the associated shifting caseloads across regions, the programme has faced a substantial budget shortfall in recent years and this has impacted, on average, both the number of payments and level of payments received (both in actual amount and in real terms) per household. According to a donor agency official, the government had only committed 54 per cent of funding for the year (in 2022).[45] A United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) official indicated that, as of late 2022:

> *The programme is still 30 per cent underfunded so the government had decided to reduce the number of payments. In other words, from January* [2023] *there will only be 10 payments to direct support beneficiaries, not the usual 12 payments.*[46]

Similarly, funds received from donors had fallen short of commitments.

On the ground, a respondent from a large INGO verified that 'mass targeting has been conducted as per the PSNP 5, but the targeting of beneficiaries has been reduced by 40 per cent of the original plan.'[47] In other words, the shift in criteria, geographical expansion to new *woredas* (with 77 new *woredas* receiving payments since Ethiopian year 2014 (World Bank 2023)),[48] and the reduction in budget meant that *woredas* saw significant changes (usually reductions) in their PSNP caseloads. A World Bank official reported that, 'in some places there is a 40 per cent replacement rate, while in other regions it was just 10 per cent.' They shared the example of one *woreda* in Somali region, where the caseload decreased from 80,000 households to 30,000 (see Table 4.1).[49]

Table 4.1: PSNP coverage by region, comparing programme phases 4 and 5

Region	Population (a)	Number of poor people pre-PSNP transfer (b)	Number of food-insecure people (self-reported) (b)	Number of PSNP beneficiaries (c)		Number of PSNP *woredas* (c)**	
		2016		2019/20	PSNP 5	2019/20	PSNP 5
Afar	1,823,000	488,569	151,221	562,082	515,712	32	35
Amhara	22,282,000	5,451,790	2,119,424	1,890,985	1,884,378	70	87
Beninshangul-Gumuz	1,136,000	264,158	84,535	0	0	0	0
Dire Dawa	499,000	38,543	15,140	64,702	64,702	1	1
Gambella	565,000	81,350	14,145	0	0	0	0
Harari	238,000	10,310	0	22,101	22,101	1	1
Oromia	39,622,000	7,993,015	3,495,489	1,733,628	1,778,249	90	105
SNNPR*	21,438,000	3,635,469	2,210,394	1,039,959	917,362	111	85
Sidama**					153,159		20
South West**					23,669		6
Somali	6,552,000	1,144,429	304,177	1,673,009	1,627,132	46	93
Tigray	5,826,000	1,415,335	610,640	1,010,752	1,010,752	31	56
			Totals	**7,997,218**	**7,997,216**	**382**	**489**

Source: (a) *Tenzig and Conway (2023: Table 7);* (b) *World Bank (2020a: Table 29);* (c) *provided by the Food Security Coordination Office.*
*Notes: * SNNPR = Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples region; **Sidama was formed on 18 June 2020. South West (formerly known as South West Ethiopia Peoples region) was formed on 23 November 2021. Both were previously part of Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples region. The difference in* woreda *numbers is due to (1) the expansion of PSNP 5 to new* woredas*; and (2) the administrative split of some existing PSNP* woredas.

[45] KII 11, donor, Addis Ababa, 23 June 2022.
[46] KII 16, international agency/organisation, Addis Ababa, 13 November 2022.
[47] KII 2, international agency/organisation, Addis Ababa, 31 May 2022.
[48] The Ethiopian year consists of 13 months; 2014 corresponds to 2021/22 in the Gregorian calendar.
[49] KII 11, donor, Addis Ababa, 23 June 2022.

As discussed previously, limited funding, mass displacement, and problems of access and insecurity meant that the PSNP had to coordinate with humanitarian channels (JEOP/WFP/EDRMC) to align responses and ensure coverage was as wide as possible. At the beginning of the conflict, there was a significant effort to keep the PSNP running in Tigray, as detailed in section 3; despite these efforts, PSNP operations were suspended in Tigray in June 2021. At that point, the government agreed to third-party implementation (that is, UNICEF and WFP were to oversee implementation of food distribution on behalf of the government). Therefore, all assistance in Tigray after June 2021 fell under the humanitarian assistance umbrella, with targeting, transfer values, and eligibility following different procedures to those laid out under the PSNP.

For programming purposes, Tigray equated to working in an active conflict, with PSNP operations paused for an extended period while continuing efforts were made to get as much humanitarian assistance into the region as possible. However, in the neighbouring regions of Amhara and Afar the working context resembled conflict spillover and 'post-conflict' scenarios; there were increased needs in PSNP *woredas* in these regions and therefore a need for either the scaling-up of assistance as part of the PSNP, or humanitarian assistance that complemented the PSNP. In these areas, coordination and harmonisation of development and humanitarian responses was possible and innovations emerged. The PSNP was never officially suspended in these regions; yet it was forced to halt operations in *woredas* that became severely affected by active conflict.

From our interviews, it is clear that the nature and extent of conflict necessarily has an impact on who is able to respond most effectively, the nature of provision, and the conditions for eligibility and targeting. For example, a respondent from a large PSNP graduation programme, Building Resilience in Ethiopia, said that at the beginning of the conflict they were based in Mekelle supporting the PSNP in planning and reporting; but with the onset of the conflict and the suspension of the PSNP they shifted into humanitarian work:

> [We were] *attending weekly meetings of the food security cluster and humanitarian operations as part of the JEOP. Where possible, PSNP lists were used to identify beneficiaries, yet, the collapse of PSNP systems due to damage, looting and destruction, and lack of staff meant that these systems could not be used to target and deliver transfers (either HFA or PSNP).*

In settings of active ongoing warfare, as existed for a period in Tigray, possibilities for a large-scale coordinated continuum of response break down. Yet, the continued active presence of personnel on the ground, making adaptations in real time, is perhaps where the continuum plays out.

Real-time coordination between local governments, NGOs, and communities around targeting was also evident during the conflict. One interviewee reported that in the context of large-scale displacement of rural populations to urban centres (specifically to Mekelle and Adrigat):

> *The Tigrayan government and representatives of communities are also involved in developing beneficiary lists. BOLSA (the Bureau of Labour and Social Affairs) is involved. They sit together to assess lists. Lists are also shared and discussed with the community, and people can make complaints. Targeting committees exist at every level. Targeting exists for the host population. But there is blanket distribution for the IDPs.*[50]

Beneficiary lists were also shared between the PSNP and humanitarian providers. In Tigray, PSNP lists were used for humanitarian aid provision. In *woredas* where USAID operated in Amhara and Oromiya, RFSA and JEOP coordinated on beneficiary and distribution lists, making an effort to avoid duplication in targeting: 'all partners implementing emergency assistance come together on a weekly or bi-weekly basis and provide updates on targeting in the sectors that they are involved in.'[51]

[50] KII 11, donor, Addis Ababa, 23 June 2022.
[51] KII 13, donor, Addis Ababa, 24 June 2022.

4.2 Transfer values and modalities

Inflation is a significant challenge for the PSNP programme as it undermines the value of the cash transferred: 'The transfer value, on average, should buy 15kg of wheat, but in reality it now buys 8kg.'[52] In the face of funding constraints, this has implications for programme design. For instance, should the programme work with a smaller caseload and increase the amount of cash transfers? Similarly, there are implications for humanitarian aid: should HFA be used to top up PSNP transfers?

One could argue that the inflation-eroded real value of the cash transfer justifies a switch to in-kind payments. This is pertinent in conflict-affected regions where food is in short supply due to access constraints and cash can be difficult to deliver due to disruptions in financial services. Yet, as one respondent pointed out: 'In the past, a metric ton of wheat was about US$270. Now, after the Ukraine conflict, it rose to about US$400'.[53] In other words, food price inflation reduces the amount of food that can be bought with the same (or a reduced) budget. One approach pursued was to substitute sorghum, which is cheaper than wheat, thus maintaining the quantity of cereals transferred, even though clients in many areas had a strong preference for wheat.

Related to inflation is the real value of the wage rate (the public works wage rate). The PSNP wage rate is 75 birr per person (at the time of research in late 2022, equivalent to US$5.50), which did not meet the minimum requirements of the humanitarian food basket. The programme's shock response is undermined by the lower real value of the wage rate and the transfer. While a fixed wage rate and inflationary pressures cause obvious problems, the underlying issue for the PSNP is the lack of finance and coverage for those requiring support. Unless this can be resolved, there is little opportunity for increasing wages or adding other components to the programme.

WFP was one of the key actors lobbying for a 20 per cent increase in the PSNP wage rate. While they are not PSNP actors, they report that the wage transfer value is set by the government and therefore dictates the amount that WFP can 'pay'. The low transfer value partially explains WFP's shift away from cash:

> *This year* [2022] *we are not using cash. The transfer value for the PSNP is too low for humanitarian provision. We have made the case for a different value using the market value. Beneficiaries are opting for in-kind rather than cash transfers, as the cash doesn't even cover half of the food basket.*[54]

In terms of the transfer modality, in the context of disrupted markets and lack of access to transport services, alongside security threats that make mobility difficult, many beneficiaries preferred food. However, food procurement by WFP and the Ethiopian government became costly due to food price inflation, as mentioned above. The Russia–Ukraine war has worsened inflationary pressure, particularly on imported wheat: 'Moreover, the situation has obliged some donors to revise food support quotas of some foods in the basket. For instance, the quota set for vegetable oil has been reduced by half.'[55] A UN official involved in social assistance programming in 2022 stated, 'people are not getting their full entitlements. In the initial stages of the crisis the government supply chain was from Djibouti; but this has now dried up.'[56] The same official reported that 'in fact, the humanitarian actors have been overwhelmed by the size of need and have been "over-ruled" by the problem', meaning that the same amount of food must cover a wider area/larger population.[57] So, while the Government of Ethiopia is widely promoting cash support (over food), inflation, and delivery and logistical concerns (particularly in the context of conflict), mean that the PSNP and HFA are unable to provide transfers at a level that is adequate to meet the heightened food security and nutrition needs experienced in a conflict-affected setting.

[52] KII 11, donor, Addis Ababa, 23 June 2022.
[53] KII 2, international agency/organisation, Addis Ababa, 31 May 2022.
[54] KII 18, international agency/organisation, Addis Ababa, 14 November 2022.
[55] KII 18, international agency/organisation, Addis Ababa, 14 November 2022.
[56] KII 16, international agency/organisation, Addis Ababa, 13 November 2022.
[57] KII 16, international agency/organisation, Addis Ababa, 13 November 2022.

E-payments started during PSNP 4, with mobile money being used in a third of PSNP *woredas* by 2020. Under PSNP 5, the intention is to expand e-payments to all cash *woredas* by 2025, addressing the challenge of service provision monopoly and introducing new types of e-payment services (bank cards, prepaid cards, and debit cards) (World Bank 2020b). One interviewee reported that 'Somali [region] is the only place you can reliably use mobile money', with the PSNP, WFP, and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UN Refugee Agency) all providing assistance through mobile payments there.[58] Payments through mobile phones can enable services to be sustained during displacement. In 2021, interim PSNP payment guidance was issued that proposed automatic e-payments to public works beneficiaries who had been displaced, enabling them to continue accessing benefits even when they were displaced outside their home *woreda* (Ministry of Finance 2021). However, conflict can interrupt mobile networks and delay contracting financial service providers (WFP 2023b). Further, while mobile phone ownership is rising quickly, 'it is lagging for rural women, particularly married rural women' (Warner, Mekonnen and Habte 2023).

4.3 Public works

Public works have been a key pillar of the PSNP since its inception, whereby households with labour capacity are expected to provide labour to a community works activity in exchange for their transfer. Over the years, there have been exceptions to the programme's requirement to participate in public works, where conditions have been loosened. These exceptions most commonly happen in the context of severe episodes of drought, where depleted and highly food-insecure households are relieved or partially relieved of the requirement to work, either being exempted for a period, or through a reduction in the number of hours or tasks required. Under PSNP 4, and subsequently since, pregnant and lactating women are also exempted and instead receive direct support transfers.

All key stakeholders reported that public works activities did not take place during the conflict in conflict-affected areas. It is difficult to know whether any specific public works were halted in response to the conflict, simply because the interacting effects of the Covid-19 pandemic meant that some public works had been halted previously or at a similar time to the onset of the conflict. One informant reported: 'Covid-19 has changed the PW [public works] working culture. This is because Covid-19 restrained movement people and imposed other work norms that changed the productivity of beneficiaries.'[59] Regardless, public works did not take place during the conflict and there are obvious reasons why this was the case. These include: (1) restrictions on movement to work sites in the context of ongoing violence; (2) PSNP clients having been displaced or injured; and (3) the inappropriateness of requiring food-insecure, insecure, and vulnerable populations to work for cash (the flow of which was severely interrupted in many places).

Furthermore, the shortage of core financing for the PSNP meant that there were scarce resources to implement public works according to the programme's design. Respondents from the Amhara Food Security and Disaster Risk Management offices reported that the main reason for this was lack of capital budget. Even in places where transfers were available and public works clients ready to work, the lack of budget meant that the public works activities could not easily be changed. An informant reported, 'PSNP implementing local level structures are there but there are no resources to actively engage them in rehabilitation works.'[60]

In response to the conflict, organisations shifted the focus of public works in some places to reflect the need to respond to conflict-related impacts. As of May 2022, senior staff at FFH reported that: 'FFH's PSNP (RFSA) is providing support to its clients affected by the conflict in three *woredas* of the Amhara region. This year FFH has pivoted US$2.5m from the regular PSNP budget to conflict responses.'[61] FFH reported that pivot plans were developed in line with the official government position to shift from conditional to unconditional transfers.[62] In addition to this, FFH and other INGOs pursued complementary initiatives to the PSNP to support recovery and rehabilitation, including restocking of livestock lost during the war;

[58] KII 16, international agency/organisation, Addis Ababa, 13 November 2022.
[59] KII 2, international agency/organisation, Addis Ababa, 31 May 2022.
[60] KII 4, government, Bahir Dar, 1 June 2022.
[61] KII 1, international agency/organisation, Addis Ababa, 30 May 2022.
[62] KII 3, international agency/organisation, Bahir Dar, 1 June 2022.

psychosocial support; and nutritional support to malnourished children and mothers in conflict-affected areas. Other INGOs reported adapting their programmes in the context of a pause in public works. One respondent indicated that the focus is on 'measures to support rebuilding damaged systems' and that the revised public works plans are 'focusing on damaged social infrastructures and small-scale irrigation facilities'.[63] Similarly, a respondent from RFSA's PReSERVE programme reported that 'there is a big focus on rebuilding war-damaged social infrastructures [e.g. schools, health facilities, etc.] and rebuilding war-ravaged family houses.'[64] Livelihood recovery initiatives and rebuilding were pursued in some *woredas*, including the provision of seeds and animal restocking.

A respondent from World Vision reported that, in addition to providing seeds, poultry, and cash transfers to support livelihoods, they also invested in mental health activities for conflict-affected people, especially women. For instance, prior to the conflict women were brought together in groups for 12–14 days to speak about issues and concerns affected their mental wellbeing:

> [Since the conflict started] *we now facilitate Group Management Plus, which encompasses men, youth, and women. The groups are brought together in both conflict and non-conflict areas. Even without the Amhara conflict, there was a lot of unrest – including boycotts of markets. So we wanted to understand how social unrest would affect the mental health of beneficiaries and, in turn, support them.*[65]

These various instances of pivoting – enabled and authorised by donor (USAID) flexibility – show the value and, indeed, necessity for operational agencies with mixed mandates to be nimble in responding to new conflict-generated needs for populations that might be usually served by longer-term developmental interventions. In one reported case, however, the timeliness of assistance was affected by a lengthy decision-making process to prepare and approve pivot plans and budgets, which ended up taking over two months.[66]

4.4 Coordination on the ground

Recent experience of delivering support to people affected by the conflict in northern Ethiopia has revealed how, during this crisis, there was minimal coordination between the PSNP and humanitarian channels of assistance. Aid to Tigray required an independent humanitarian response when PSNP operations were disrupted and ultimately suspended. In other words, when the safety net could not function, HFA stepped in, albeit it in a piecemeal way. This illustrates the significance of having a humanitarian channel to take over provision of support in a setting where the central government is itself a party to the conflict.

In surrounding areas in Amhara and Afar that were affected by direct and indirect conflict impacts, including high numbers of displaced people, at a minimum, humanitarian actors tried to identify who received PSNP support, then prioritised their emergency aid to households that did not receive PSNP transfers, in particular IDPs. In the past, WFP has tried to support regular PSNP public works clients for the six months of the year that they do not receive PSNP transfers.[67]

In many places coordination remained chaotic, impeded by slow needs assessments, and federal political divisions filtering down to *woreda* technical operations (notably, separate Food Security Coordination Directorate and HFA offices continue in some places; for example in Somali and Oromia regions).[68] Meanwhile various barriers limited the channelling of humanitarian cash assistance through PSNP systems and processes, despite some progress on this.[69]

[63] KII 6, international agency/organisation, Bahir Dar, 1 June 2022.
[64] KII 3, international agency/organisation, Bahir Dar, 31 May 2022.
[65] KII 14, international agency/organisation, Addis Ababa, 31 May 2022.
[66] KII 3, international agency/organisation, Addis Ababa, 31 May 2022.
[67] KII 18, international agency/organisation, Addis Ababa, 14 November 2022.
[68] KII 11, donor, Addis Ababa, 23 June 2022.
[69] Following a cash pilot in Somali region, funded by the European Commission's European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO) and the United Kingdom Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) in 35 *woredas*, WFP has being using PSNP structures for targeting and implementation, with 83 per cent of WFP cash-based transfers channelled through national social protection systems in 2021 and 62 per cent in 2022 (WFP 2023b; WFP 2022).

5. Social assistance in a multi-hazard context: directions for the PSNP

5.1 PSNP vision and ambition: should conflict response be integrated into the PSNP's design?

Until now, all PSNP programme and policy evolution, institutional setup, design, and delivery have taken place without reference to or consideration of the effects of conflict shocks on the proposed design and ambitions of the programme. The northern Ethiopia conflict crisis vividly demonstrates the limits of a programme designed for non-conflict conditions in responding to food insecurity and poverty, exacerbated by or as a result of conflict. Destruction or partial destruction of institutional structures and delivery systems, missing staff and lack of capacity, insecurity and lack of access to places where people are most in need, large-scale displacement of people, and political tensions nationally and internationally are all common to large-scale conflict situations; yet the PSNP was not designed to weather these disruptions and thus was unable to respond to these types of shocks.

There are, therefore, key questions for deeper reflection. Should the design of social protection systems (and the PSNP, in particular) consider and plan for operability in conflict situations, and what would this mean in practice? How can the humanitarian sector work with and through existing PSNP structures to respond to conflict more effectively? In a multi-hazard environment, what role should the PSNP have? What does a changing shock context mean for how social assistance and humanitarian assistance adapt, substitute, and/or complement each other over time?

The experience of PSNP and humanitarian assistance provision in response to the northern Ethiopia conflict mirrors similar discussions in other protracted crises on how to operationalise the development–humanitarian nexus (Sabates-Wheeler, Lind, Harvey and Slater 2022). One discussion is whether the recent focus on shock response detracts from the PSNP's original protective and 'productive' objectives. There is deepening concern that, with an increasing number of components introduced over the years, the PSNP's design has become over-complicated. A senior official in the Ministry of Agriculture opined:

> *Currently, there is a huge demand for multi-hazard shock response for landslides, floods, human and livestock diseases, crop damage due to pests and diseases, and conflict. However, the PSNP was not designed for all these events, due to limited funding. The programme is even struggling to address its core programme goal – which is a safety net.*[70]

The same official pointed out that a range of structures address various types of shocks. For instance, the Environment, Forest and Climate Change Commission addresses fire hazards, while the Ministry of Health holds the mandate for responding to human health shocks. Their point was that the demands on the PSNP appear to be overwhelming, if not unreasonable, in the current setting and given restricted financing for the programme. There is a risk that new features diminish a needed focus on achieving performance benchmarks on core programme operations (public works and cash/food transfers), which are fundamental to meeting the original programme objectives of addressing food insecurity and being a predictable safety net (DFID 2017).

Ethiopia's development partners hold similar views. An official from a bilateral donor agency funding the PSNP reflected that:

> *We see the PSNP as having a fundamental part in Ethiopia's safety net going forward. However, the PSNP has become its own worst enemy – it was profiled as a panacea even though it was not designed to be that and would not be able to achieve that.*[71]

[70] KII 22, government, Addis Ababa, 27 December 2022.
[71] KII 17, donor, Addis Ababa, 14 November 2022.

The sense that the PSNP has become encumbered by unrealistic expectations, particularly by those who have long-term engagement with and knowledge of the programme, is instructive for how the effectiveness of the PSNP is assessed. An official from a different bilateral agency commented:

> *The PSNP was the big programme aiding beneficiaries, but in the current situation emergency numbers have grown exponentially due to events – conflict, locusts, and drought. So, I think government is overwhelmed by multiple shocks and is in fighting mode rather than determining how we can respond better.*[72]

An official involved in the programme's design over many years added: 'The PSNP was designed to operate under normal, peaceful conditions. It is a safety net for chronic cases, not life support for those just on the edge'.[73]

The implication of these various sentiments – of those who have been close to the programme's design and implementation over many years – is that the ambition for the PSNP should be pared back to its founding premise to provide a reliable safety net for chronically food-insecure populations. By implication, other structures could better respond to the needs generated by large-scale conflict and displacement.

Seemingly, there is a caveat to this standard response. Through interviews with NGOs, such as FFH and PReSERVE, it appears that where third-party delivery of the PSNP is combined with support initiatives (such as those of RFSA) there is some space for pivoting PSNP resources towards addressing the impacts of conflict. In fact, adaptations in the use of PSNP resources to respond to the needs of conflict-affected communities appear to be the norm for some third-party implementers.

It is refreshing to note that PSNP-implementing INGOs have the flexibility to adapt plans in the context of conflict – they appear to be more nimble than the government PSNP system. This points to the benefits of a hybrid government–partner approach for working at the development–humanitarian nexus. Adaptations made by INGO and NGO providers on the ground will likely provide useful lessons for future shock-responsive and 'cash plus' designs of the PSNP and other social protection provision. One NGO reported being able to carry over PSNP resources from one year to the next and to use these resources flexibly.[74] The ability to flex and pivot may be a function of the advantages of smaller-scale and more bespoke provision that NGOs typically have over national government/donor provision. However, in-depth research into the comparative advantages of small-scale and local provision will be a useful next step to see if there are best practices to inform scaled-up programming.

An NGO implementer of RFSA described how the organisation was able to adapt its operations in three PSNP *woredas*. Importantly, the contingency reserve part of the project raises resources (food and cash) from the communities themselves for use in times of acute shocks on community.

While our research showed that USAID permitted RFSA-funded organisations to pivot their operations in the context of the dramatically changing situation, outside of USAID *woredas* it is unclear whether any pivoting of activities and funds occurred. In government *woredas*, with a healthy capital budget and transparent lines of accountability, adaptations of plans in the face of conflict would be ideal. Yet, with the realities of an underfunded programme and weakened PSNP systems as a result of violence and conflict, can we really expect non-humanitarian systems and actors to adapt fast enough to respond to the volatile nature of conflict in many parts of Ethiopia? Even in Tigray and Amhara, where violence reduces at times, are we confident that there is adequate PSNP capacity to reliably deliver cash and food? More evidence from monitoring and mapping system capacity during and in the aftermath of conflict will help the government and donors to know what providers and which avenues for delivery are most suited at any given time.

[72] KII 13, donor, Addis Ababa, 24 June 2022.
[73] KII 12, researcher, Addis Ababa, 24 June 2022.
[74] KII 3, international agency/organisation, 30 May 2022.

5.2 Coordination and consolidation

5.2.1 Barriers to institutional consolidation

As described in section 2, PSNP 5 set out an ambitious plan to bring the PSNP and HFA under one system. The idea was to consolidate operational management of the PSNP and HFA within the Ministry of Agriculture (moving HFA out from the EDRMC control) and delivering both the PSNP and HFA through core PSNP systems for targeting, registering, payment, delivery, and accountability, or at a minimum (for some off-budget food assistance), adhering to PSNP procedures. However, while the integrated PSNP-HFA shock response was clearly set out in the PSNP 5 project implementation manual, PSNP 5 had not yet been implemented 'as per the book'.[75] Moreover, institutional divisions appear to have become more entrenched because of a 2021 post-election ministerial restructure, which moved the EDRMC out of the Ministry of Peace and into the Prime Minister's Office, to report directly to the prime minister (World Bank 2022), increasing its political standing. Consequently, the intended (donor-driven) consolidation of the PSNP and HFA within the Ministry of Agriculture at federal level was stuck, even before the impact of increased conflict disrupted plans further.[76] The crisis caused by the northern Ethiopia conflict then meant that regions and *woredas* were moved to emergency response, subnational rollout of the new PSNP 5 programme design was interrupted, and longer-term reforms were parked.

Key informants during our research identified barriers to the federal-level consolidation reform shaped by shifting Ethiopian political power dynamics, and the overall context of multiple overlapping crises and violent conflict. In 2017, the PSNP and the Ministry of Agriculture had more funding, took on an emergency caseload in the drought response, and were reportedly 'in the driver's seat' on institutional reform.[77] However, with exponential growth in the numbers of people in need due to the impact of multiple crises (with communities facing overlapping food security threats from conflict, drought, locusts, and food price inflation), by the time the PSNP 5 programme design was launched in 2020, the EDRMC's attention was focused on leading the emergency response and avoiding being overwhelmed.[78] There was reportedly little political interest in prioritising consolidation reforms that would mean moving HFA responsibilities away from the EDRMC to the Ministry of Agriculture, with emergency humanitarian assistance now better funded than the PSNP (though still with resource shortages).[79] In 2022, the World Bank noted continued government assurances of commitment to institutional consolidation and extended the timeline to achieve this (World Bank 2022).

5.2.2 From consolidation to coordination: lessons from the conflict response

The need for independent humanitarian presence and capacity

The Tigray experience showed how, in some conflict-affected settings, depending on the circumstances, neither state nor humanitarian social assistance channels are able to function during this type of severe crisis. The biggest issue was the blockade of Tigray by the federal government, and stringent controls on humanitarian aid flows. The only appropriate response is to direct humanitarian aid to the region when and where possible. When the government is a party to the conflict, a neutral, impartial, and independent humanitarian response is imperative. International informants told us about the need for assurances that aid resources were reaching the right people. In the same vein, other research found that during the aid response to the Tigray crisis, having too many aid organisations tied to formal structures and processes 'inhibited rather than enabled access', noting the tensions between 'a government-controlled aid apparatus' and a principled humanitarian response (Stoddard *et al*. 2021: 15). The recent conflict in Ethiopia underscored both the limits of what the PSNP can and should do in response to a conflict, as well as the need to retain the capacity for an independent humanitarian response.[80] Yet, FCDO (2023) identifies that today there is still an insufficient humanitarian presence in remote areas, and limited expertise and infrastructure to rely on in today's highly restrictive and challenging operating environment in Ethiopia.

[75] KII 3, international agency/organisation, Addis Ababa, 31 May 2022; KII 7, INGO, Addis Ababa, 31 May 2022.
[76] KII 12, researcher, Addis Ababa, 24 June 2022.
[77] KII 13, donor, Addis Ababa, 24 June 2022.
[78] KII 13, donor, Addis Ababa, 24 June 2022.
[79] KII 9, donor, Addis Ababa, 22 June 2022; KII 13, donor, Addis Ababa, 24 June 2022.
[80] KII 9, donor, Addis Ababa, 22 June 2022.

Our research found that, while having a variety of actors and programmes in the aid domain can create coordination challenges, as conflict intensifies there are advantages in having a number of pre-positioned actors. Those agencies that had developed networks with local actors were well prepared and that had established contingency mechanisms were best placed to support the response to conflict-affected Tigray and surrounding areas (Stoddard *et al*. 2021).[81]

Practical steps to support a coherent emergency response

The conflict response exposed challenges in coordination between humanitarian actors, with alignment hampered across the three main humanitarian channels – the EDRMC, WFP, and US humanitarian response – as described in previous sections. The overwhelming levels of need and insufficient resourcing that both the PSNP and humanitarian response faced also affected attempts to improve coordination. While the technical design of PSNP 5 sought to consolidate the PSNP and HFA (through the EDRMC), the realpolitik of the situation that even among humanitarian channels there is inadequate coordination is a warning sign of the challenges involved.

One practical step to support a more coherent emergency response is to continue investing in the Donor Cash Forum and the revitalised Ethiopia Cash Working Group,[82] with dedicated coordination resourcing, and identification of entry points for practical linkages with the PSNP. Critical priorities include looking at how humanitarian cash support can be strengthened through improved harmonisation of transfer values and post-distribution monitoring to support regional meta-analysis, among others (Ethiopia Cash Working Group 2022). A UN informant reported that the Cash Working Group is enabling actors to reduce costs by sharing assessments, using PSNP community-based selection committees, and replicating these PSNP structures for humanitarian assistance in IDP camps.[83] Some humanitarian agencies have sought to align with the PSNP; one example is UNICEF's approach to modelling cash transfers on the PSNP design.[84] This is challenging for many reasons, one being the differences in humanitarian and PSNP wage rates; another being how to marry alignment with upholding humanitarian principles in practice.

5.3 Conflict-sensitive social protection

The findings of this study dovetail with a recent review of social protection policies and programmes in the Horn of Africa, which concluded that most do not consider conflict until they are forced to do so (Birch *et al*. 2023: 23). While PSNP 5 seeks to be shock responsive in its design, the programme was unprepared when the northern Ethiopia conflict flared up in late 2020. Yet, considerable efforts by policymakers and implementers at all levels since then have provided encouragement that the PSNP can be made more sensitive to conflict, and that there is political will to make it so.

Whichever way the programmatic focus of the PSNP evolves in the coming years, undeniably conflict will be part of the context in which the programme must operate. The effectiveness of the programme in delivering timely, predictable, and adequate transfers to households living in extreme poverty and the most vulnerable people requires considering ways to make the PSNP conflict sensitive. Thus, even if the PSNP will not be among the primary tools to address conflicts as they arise, it is essential to deepen understanding of how the programme interacts with implementation contexts. For the PSNP, a conflict-sensitive approach would encompass measures to ensure that the programme avoids causing further unintentional harm; maintains the systems and structures to ensure that basic programme functions continue; and mobilises an adequate response to the additional needs generated by conflict, including through improved coordination with humanitarian channels. There are four key opportunities for the Ethiopian government and its development partners to consider in further developing the conflict sensitivity of the PSNP.

[81] For example, JEOP's rapid food response was helped by the consortium having imported large food reserves in anticipation of potential election violence and increased needs as a result, while the United Nations Children's Fund's standing partnership agreements with the Red Cross and Médecins Sans Frontières enabled quick action (Stoddard *et al*. 2021).
[82] See overview of the Ethiopia Cash Working Group.
[83] KII 16, international agency/organisation, Addis Ababa, 13 November 2022.
[84] KII 17, donor, Addis Ababa, 14 November 2022.

The first opportunity is to consolidate learning and practice generated during the conflict in northern Ethiopia. Without existing guidance to inform how to approach implementation in conflict-affected settings, the traffic light system developed to guide the resumption of operations in Amhara and Afar in 2022 provides an initial approach. While it was only applied in two regions, it provides a basis for developing and instituting a system that could be applied in conflict settings elsewhere in the country, one that could help determine the relative roles and responsibilities of the PSNP and other humanitarian providers in addressing needs as they emerge. An official with a donor agency commented:

> *One of the takeaways from the challenges in Tigray and Afar is that it is hard to work with any government systems in these places (during the conflict). It is a context where you need impartiality and neutrality, otherwise the resources will become instrumentalised. Humanitarian principles need to be applied. We can talk about scenarios for social protection during conflict, but it is only during recovery that we can assess a role for social protection. During the conflict, we do not know what is happening.*[85]

Importantly, humanitarian stakeholders also found the system to be useful. This indicates that something like a traffic light system could support more effective coordination between PSNP operational structures and providers of humanitarian assistance during and following a conflict shock when the resumption of channel 1 delivery is a priority. To be explored is whether a traffic light system would be most suitable as a PSNP-specific function or be better undertaken as part of a cross-sectoral system of monitoring capacities to deliver services. The latter has advantages given the multisectoral nature of certain PSNP functions. Furthermore, building on the *ad hoc* guidance on IDPs that was also developed during the northern Ethiopia conflict, rigorous assessment of regional and *woreda*-level experiences of responding to displacement can inform updates to PSNP operating procedures across areas of client eligibility, targeting, and payments.

A related second opportunity is to ensure that mapping conflict-related risks is an integral part of evolving early warning systems. Early warning of conflict and fragility indicators could support *ex ante* programme planning, such as pre-positioning food, scaling back public works, initiating greater levels of coordination with humanitarian actors, and activating contingency plans. Ongoing monitoring of conflict risks can also provide critical evidence to support a traffic light system that informs the resumption of PSNP operations at the appropriate time. There is a danger that conflict risks, like other risks such as drought, human disease, or locust invasions, are monitored only through discrete systems, and thus aggravate existing fragmentation. There is a compelling case to move towards a multipurpose early warning system that is under the clear direction and coordination of the EDRMC, whose role would be to integrate data generated across various sectoral systems, and share focused analysis and access to underlying data. Of course, where a government is an active party to a conflict and lacks impartiality in assisting its citizens, this conflict risk monitoring cannot be carried out by a government body. Piloting ways to ensure collection of conflict-monitoring data is undertaken by third parties will be useful in charting a way forward.

A third opportunity is identifying and prioritising programme architecture that is best positioned to encourage conflict responsiveness. The recent pressure on the PSNP core budget has meant that programme features such as the *woreda* contingency budget were unfunded. Yet, contingency budgets accessible to lower-level programme implementers have clear advantages in supporting more rapid responses to conflict dynamics as they unfold, rather than relying on federal-level monitoring and authorisation. Complementary investments in regional-level rapid response teams could provide a key function in assessing the use of *woreda* contingency budgets, while also identifying technical capacity that could be sourced from elsewhere in the region to buttress *woreda* responses. Appeals committees (or a separate, independent appeals mechanism) could also be assessed to provide a greater function in relation to conflict. *Kebele* appeals committees focus on the individual as a beneficiary, and the effectiveness of the delivery chain in targeting and payments, as do accountability frameworks for social assistance programmes more broadly (Birch *et al*. 2023). There is limited consideration of how PSNP delivery could impact societal relations more broadly, either positively or negatively. However, such a function could help implementers and planners alike to identify stressors that might not be evident from a distance. In this way, the *kebele* appeals mechanisms could support programme responses to new and different needs – and social tensions around these – that are generated during conflict.

[85] KII 9, donor, Addis Ababa, 22 June 2022.

A fourth opportunity is to identify and nurture practices of adaptive delivery, which refers to undertaking everyday programme operations differently. It encompasses, 'a powerful blend of on-the-spot learning, thinking and decision-making. In this way, frontline workers come up with best guesses on what to do next, then test and correct in a continuous engagement and learning process' (Green and Guijt 2019: 18). Adaptive delivery is especially important in conflict settings, where systems require capacities to identify and address uncertainties, and avoid areas of ignorance (Caravani *et al*. 2022). Even in a situation without conflict risks, as the previous section explains, there is a gathering sense among funders, senior programme officials, and frontline delivery personnel alike that the PSNP has become too complicated and unwieldy. Necessarily, those delivering the programme at the regional, *woreda*, and *kebele* levels are generating and pursuing a raft of adjustments that enable the subnational delivery chain to function. Yet, adaptive delivery by lower-level officials is mostly undocumented; practices happen under the radar and remain largely unknown except by the officials pursuing them.

While adaptive delivery is often already happening, dedicated focus and resources are needed to nurture the skills and capabilities of lower-level implementers at anticipating risks, simultaneously tracking different sources of knowledge in real time, and translating these insights into timely action. Given the complexity of the PSNP and fraying competencies at the subnational level to implement the programme according to the Programme Implementation Manual, it is important to learn from adaptive practices by regional, *woreda*, and *kebele* officials. This would involve asking subnational officials to record adjustments more systematically; complementary analysis is needed to piece together different examples at multiple politico-administrative levels to generate wider learning. However, these learning efforts would require a cultural change among delivery personnel (encouraging more improvisation in critical thinking and problem-solving) and, importantly, encouragement and support from programming structures: 'reflexive, systemic learning… must be incentivized, supported, and rewarded' (*ibid*.: 12).

6. Conclusion

The context out of which visions for a productive safety net programme in Ethiopia emerged (back in 2002–04) meant that the programme was fashioned to respond to recurring droughts and the widespread state of chronic food insecurity. Over time, the PSNP has performed well in terms of reducing the food gap of chronically food-insecure populations. However, since its inception, the PSNP has evolved, with adjustments and additions being made in response to unanticipated droughts and climatic events, budget flows, monitoring and evaluation findings, donor preferences and mandates, government policies, and political tensions. Indeed, on paper, the programme (often in combination with other initiatives) now promises to deliver far more than basic food security for the most food-insecure people.

The ambitions of the programme are vast, comprising: protection of the most food-insecure and poorest populations against climate-related shocks; asset creation and protection; climate proofing of public works programmes; livelihoods promotion across multiple pathways and sectors; small business development; financial literacy; supporting nutrition and early childhood development; expansion to pastoralist areas; shock response facilities for unanticipated shocks; and a design sensitive to the needs of women and other vulnerable groups. Evaluations and assessments have, unsurprisingly, shown that the programme has struggled to deliver on all these ambitions. Yet, the programme has not scaled back its ambitions, despite a significant squeeze on financing, as well as a substantial increase in the population requiring assistance. Further, the operational context now is very different from when the PSNP was first introduced – even from when design work for PSNP 5 was undertaken, when the decision was taken to focus on improving responsiveness to drought- and climate-related shocks.

The conflict in northern Ethiopia illustrates the limits of a programme designed for a stable setting but implemented in an unstable one. And it is not just conflict. The lack of flexibility in the PSNP programme plans (setting out coverage, budget, and implementation guidance over five years) have proved unwieldy in the face of big changes in the operating environment (e.g. responding to the impacts of Covid-19; adapting implementation to respond to conflict dynamics and impacts, including large movements of people and large increases in the levels of humanitarian need) (Sabates-Wheeler, Hirvonen, Lind and Hoddinott 2022). All these challenges have been heightened by the overall constrained fiscal envelope for emergency response as a whole (the 2022 humanitarian country response plan was only 50 per cent funded (Development Initiatives 2023)), and for the PSNP in particular.

The impacts of the conflict in northern Ethiopia underscore the necessity of linking routine social protection provision for chronically poor households and humanitarian assistance for people in acute need, both to ensure the complementarity of different channels of support, as well as to extend coverage as widely as possible. The disruptions that the conflict has introduced to the effective functioning of the PSNP necessarily require that the design of the programme in the future must carefully consider how other sectors and actors – including disaster risk management and emergency response, as well as local actors and NGOs – can complement or substitute for the PSNP in different conflict and displacement situations. This kind of future scenario planning will be critical to ensure minimal disruptions in social assistance provision for those who are chronically poor, and to provide for those who experience acute need in the face of conflict.

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