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Ethiopia, Humanitarian Crisis

**Unraveling The Crisis In Tigray**

Deep in the mountains of northern Ethiopia, a crisis of immense proportions is boiling over, casting a long shadow across the lives of millions. Just 4 years ago, the Tigray region lit up in the flames of a massive war that saw upwards of 600,000 people lose their lives (Pilling, 2023), and its effects still linger. The ceaseless echoes of civil strife, exacerbated by a relentless drought, have plunged Tigray into a vortex of suffering and despair, made no better by the recent suspension of aid from the US and UN. However, the cessation of aid is but a symptom of a much broader and deeper malaise; one characterized by systemic failures, conflict-driven displacement, and the unyielding grip of famine. In exploring the multifaceted dimensions of Tigray's plight, it becomes evident that the suspension of aid is not merely a logistical setback but a stark reminder of the urgent need for comprehensive action to address the underlying causes of the crisis.

The nightmare started in November 2020 in Tigray when the local ruling party, the TLPF, and government forces engaged in live combat. The war was one of the bloodiest in modern times and saw over 5 million people become internally displaced or refugees (Ethiopia: Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons by Region), as well as a large track record of gross crimes against humanity with documentation and reports of widespread use of sexual violence throughout the war (Green, Lindsey), massacres of civilian populations (Ethiopia: Eritrean Forces Massacre Tigray Civilians), and an ethnic cleansing campaign (Ethiopia: Ethnic Cleansing Persists under Tigray Truce). The northern regions of Amhara and Tigray still contain the most displaced people, and by 2023, half of the displaced peoples have returned. But despite the ceasefire achieved in 2022, the nightmare continues.

The war is over, so why does the crisis continue to tighten its grip on Tigray? Despite the cessation of hostilities, the region finds itself besieged by a trifecta of catastrophes: the blocking of crucial humanitarian aid, relentless drought, and the specter of famine. Normally, during a crisis of this magnitude, global relief and aid organizations come in to prevent the type of famine that UNICEF warns is coming, but with around 400 Ethiopians dying from starvation, according to the Ethiopian Ombudsman's’ (Muhumuza, Rodney) it is abundantly clear that something else is going very wrong here.

Eritrean troops that aided the government in the war still occupy areas of Tigray. Not much news gets out of the region or makes the attention of western audiences, however, it is much needed as troubling reports about the lingering presence have been emerging. The Guardian, along with others, have reported on early humanitarian aid efforts being physically blocked from getting where they need to be. (People Are under Siege) Having been in an increasingly intensifying drought since 2019, the region needs aid, but the complex politics make this issue hard to navigate. Due to lack of media and political transparency, aid organizations are very limited in their functions, which not only concerns me about the future of this crisis but also makes me question the structure and efficiency of our current global aid programmes.

From the UN to the US, aid shipments to the region have been halted despite the magnitude of the crisis. According to USAID spokespeople, they have “uncovered that food aid, intended for the people of Tigray suffering under famine-like conditions, was being diverted and sold on the local market.”. This systematic failure by governments and agencies can’t be the end of it, though. Around 6 million people were wholly dependent on food aid in the region, and cutting off that resource will have catastrophic effects (Knickmeyer, Ellen), which has already shown because of the over 1300 people who have died of hunger in the years since the war, over 400 were in the last 4 months, after the halting of aid. If shipping in massive quantities of food from larger countries won't work, why haven't we considered more personal solutions, in touch with communities and their specific needs.

Due to the incredibly complex nature of the crisis in Tigray, innovative solutions are urgently needed to address the underlying causes of food insecurity and agricultural challenges exacerbated by the drought. Simply dumping mass amounts of food has proven difficult, and traditional farming methods are ill-equipped to withstand the harsh conditions brought about by climate change, necessitating a shift towards more resilient and sustainable practices. In this regard, agroecology presents a promising avenue for revitalizing Tigray's agricultural sector. By sending experts and volunteers into the region to help with and guide integrating ecological principles into farming practices, such as crop diversification, soil conservation, and water management techniques like rainwater harvesting and drip irrigation, farmers can enhance their resilience to drought and improve overall food security. Additionally, being able to empower local communities through capacity-building initiatives and providing access to climate-smart agricultural technologies can further bolster their ability to adapt to changing environmental conditions as well as give them relative economic stability as opposed to wiping out what industry farmers have with food imports. Collaborative efforts between government agencies, international organizations, and local communities are essential to promote the adoption of innovative farming techniques and ensure their long-term sustainability in Tigray. A programme of experts assisting farmers grow through the drought while supplemented heavily by need with food aid at the same time may be a viable option.

From a holistic approach to agriculture, agroecology emphasizes the integration of ecological principles into farming practices to create sustainable and resilient food systems. At its core, agroecology recognizes the interconnectedness of ecological processes, biodiversity, and socio-economic factors in agricultural production. Unlike conventional farming methods that rely heavily on external inputs such as synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, agroecological systems leverage natural processes and biodiversity to enhance soil fertility, pest management, and overall ecosystem health which will be crucial in ensuring the long term sustainability and regenerative properties of any solution. Despite these benefits, and recognized ability to restore the health of the land, there is a recognized disconnect when it comes to the politics of regenerative agriculture and agroecology. Organizations like (frontiers) have researched extensively the fact there has been a lack of government or commercial support for agroecology and regenerative agriculture has had a track record of being unconcerned about communities and prioritizes environmentalism over all else, which wouldn't work for our situation in Tigray. (Tittonell, Pablo)

Putting agroecology into practice involves a fundamental shift in agricultural paradigms, moving away from monoculture and chemical-intensive farming towards diversified, ecologically-based production systems which is already partially commonplace in Tigray which is already almost wholly subsistence agriculture. However, this transition entails adopting a range of agroecological practices tailored to local environmental conditions and socio-cultural contexts but mainly calculating and controlling techniques tailored for maximum efficiency during this period which proves difficult to convince local farmers, en-masse to commit their time and resources on a completely new status quo. Additionally, since an aid program of this design hasn't been done before, and the institutions to support such a venture and the government cannot be relied on for support, funding would likely have to be privately sourced and farmers paid as insurance for joining this program. The program would likely need to start small to prove to people in the area the effectiveness of the practice. Farmers can implement agroforestry systems, which integrate trees and shrubs into agricultural landscapes to provide multiple benefits such as soil conservation, water retention, microclimate regulation, and biodiversity conservation. Additionally, crop diversification, (planting a variety of crops in mixed cropping systems) can enhance resilience to pests, diseases, and adverse weather conditions while improving soil health and nutrient cycling.

Furthermore, agroecological approaches emphasize the importance of enhancing farmers' knowledge and skills to effectively implement sustainable farming practices. This involves providing training and technical assistance on agroecological principles, ecological management techniques, and participatory research methods. By empowering farmers to become active agents of change in their own agricultural systems, agroecology promotes local innovation, adaptation, and knowledge exchange within farming communities. This has and can be seen across the sahel in countries like Senegal where Trees For The Future has been responsible for partnering with and training local farmers to create “food forests” which have been largely successful in regenerating the soil and ecosystems of the quickly desertifying region.

In Tigray, implementing such agroecology practices requires a concerted effort involving collaboration among various international and local stakeholders, including government agencies, non-governmental organizations, research institutions, and local communities. Initiatives can be launched to establish demonstration farms and partnered research sites where farmers can learn about and experiment with agroecological practices suited to their specific environments. As government instability and lack of transparency is one of the main issues in this crisis it will have to be driven by NGOs primarily, however, cooperation with the government may help bridge the gap of trust and allegiance once again between the people and government. Additionally, extension services can be strengthened to provide ongoing support and guidance to farmers in adopting and adapting agroecological techniques to their local contexts. Also, policy support and incentives can be provided to promote agroecological practices, such as subsidizing organic inputs, providing access to funds for the transition, and creating new markets for agricultural products. By fostering a supportive enabling environment and empowering farmers to embrace new practice, Tigray can enhance its agricultural resilience and food security while promoting ecological sustainability and socio-economic development. Though this will not heal the pain and suffering endured by the people of TIgray, it will fill their stomachs and give them the stability and hope needed for greater healing.

*“Without food, man can live at most but a few weeks; without it, all other components of social justice are meaningless.” -Norman Borlaug*

Amidst the dire situation in Ethiopia's Tigray region, various organizations are stepping up to provide critical assistance to those affected by the crisis. Nonprofits like the International Rescue Committee (IRC), Abraham’s Oasis, IsraAID, and Consortium for Capacity Building (CCB) are actively engaged in delivering aid and support to displaced individuals and communities. The IRC is working to provide clean water, sanitation, healthcare, and other essentials to people who have been displaced from Tigray, while Abraham’s Oasis focuses on providing care for children and reuniting families. IsraAID is addressing the psychosocial needs of displaced Ethiopians, offering integration and support programming, particularly for women and children. Additionally, CCB is working on sustainable farming projects, teaching displaced individuals in Sudan how to grow their own food using resilient farming techniques. These efforts underscore the importance of collaborative initiatives in addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by communities in Tigray and highlight the critical role of humanitarian organizations in providing essential support during times of crisis.

The crisis in Ethiopia's Tigray region underscores the urgent need for comprehensive action to address its multifaceted challenges. Beyond the immediate humanitarian aid, innovative solutions and new types of assistance are imperative to tackle the root causes of the crisis and build resilience against future shocks. While the suspension of aid from international agencies like USAID and the UN exacerbates the already dire situation, various organizations are actively engaged in providing essential support, ranging from healthcare and psychosocial services to sustainable farming initiatives. These efforts highlight the resilience and determination of both local communities and humanitarian organizations to mitigate the crisis's impact and work towards long-term solutions. However, sustained international attention and support are crucial to ensure that the people of Tigray receive the assistance they urgently need to rebuild their lives and communities in the face of adversity. By fostering collaboration and innovation, we can pave the way for a more sustainable and resilient future for Tigray.

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