

# INTERSECTIONALITY, CLIMATE CHANGE AND CONFLICT: INSIGHTS FROM ETHIOPIA

## The Research

Ethiopia has been grappling with the effects of years of multiple conflicts which coupled with recurring drought and floods, increasing temperatures and erratic rainfall, have further degraded key natural resources such as grazing land and water, disrupting traditional pastoral livelihoods. Ongoing conflicts alongside extreme weather events, had resulted in widespread displacement. As of 2024, 4.5 million people were displaced while 90% of them had been displaced for more than one year, posing a significant challenge to peace and development.

Globally, climate change impacts are felt most urgently by the most vulnerable communities, especially those living in conflict-affected and conflict-prone regions, where a rise in state-based and non-state violent conflicts has caused complex and protracted humanitarian crises and development setbacks. Literature shows that whilst climate change is not a direct driver of violent conflict, it can exacerbate and multiply existing conflict drivers, and that this complex and multi-dimensional relationship needs to be examined in different contexts, keeping in mind that vulnerabilities are greatly shaped by compounding multiple forms of inequality.

To help address and further explore this knowledge gap, DCA, with funding from Denmark's development cooperation (DANIDA), commissioned a study in 2024, with the aim to capture and generate a refined understanding of the impacts, interactions, and interlinkages between the effects of climate change, the nature and dynamics of violent conflict, and the intersectional inequalities of vulnerable groups in South Sudan and Ethiopia. Drawing from data collected between October and December 2024 through key informant interviews and focus group discussions, the study sought to provide actionable insights that can enhance DCA's programming, advocacy, and strategic interventions in these highly vulnerable areas by formulating evidence-based recommendations and identifying best practices.

This brief presents a summary of the research findings and recommendations in the context of the Aysaita, Dupiti, Berhale, Dallol and Koneba districts in the Afar region, Ethiopia.

## The Findings

In short:

- Climate change and environmental degradation are worsening competition over key resources such as water, fertile soil and pastureland in the Afar region.

- Resource-based disputes often intersect with inter-communal and territorial conflict, compounding tensions in the region while the Northern Ethiopian conflict further exacerbates resource control issues in the Afar region.
- The compound impacts of climate change and persistent conflicts disproportionately affect women, children, and displaced persons. While there have been some shifts in gender roles due to the crises, women continue facing exclusion from decision-making and are at heightened risk of gender-based violence (GBV).
- There is an urgent need for climate-sensitive peacebuilding and governance interventions to support and strengthen community resilience strategies with a focus on fostering inclusivity and gender transformative approaches.

The Afar region is dealing with the **most severe drought in 40 years** with 6 consecutive poor rainy seasons. At the same time, **flash flooding** is occurring in low-lying parts of the region. Climate change together with overgrazing, deforestation, overuse of water sources like the Awash River, and encroachment of inedible weeds and invasive species, are severely impacting grazing land, disrupting traditional land use and further depleting water supplies. The compound impacts deteriorate pastoralist livelihoods, which approximately 90% of the Afar population depend on.

Beyond the loss of livelihoods and ways of life, the impacts of climate change include death of people and livestock, displacement in search for water and grazing land, and the spread of water- and vector-borne diseases due to floodings.

**With the loss of forests comes drought. When drought comes, it affects animals and people. Women are so tired. To mine gold, they dug the ground and cut trees, and all the trees were cut down. There were no trees in the country.**  
**Women's Group Member in Berhale, Afar Region**

The Afar region experiences **intercommunal, resource-based, and regional interethnic conflicts** with other ethnic groups such as the Tigray, Somali and Oromo. Inter-communal disputes are often triggered by competition over grazing land and water, particularly during periods of drought and resource scarcity. Clans also often have long-standing disputes over land and resource access rights, which are passed down through generations. Government interventions, the expansion of mechanised agriculture, and the presence of external actors extracting natural resources, e.g., through salt mining or oil exploration, have

further reduced the availability of communal grazing areas, leading to increased tensions. Furthermore, the border areas between the Afar and Somali regions have also been a hotspot for violent inter-ethnic conflict, primarily driven by disputes over critical areas near valuable resources such as the Awash River and key transport routes. The Afar region is also home to 40,000 Eritrean **refugees and a significant internally displaced population**, increasing competition for limited resources and straining already fragile ecosystems.

**...** Afar live together and have strong social and kinship bonds but stated factors related to climate and post-conflict consequences are deteriorating the social cohesion in the community. **Male FGD in Berhale, Afar region**

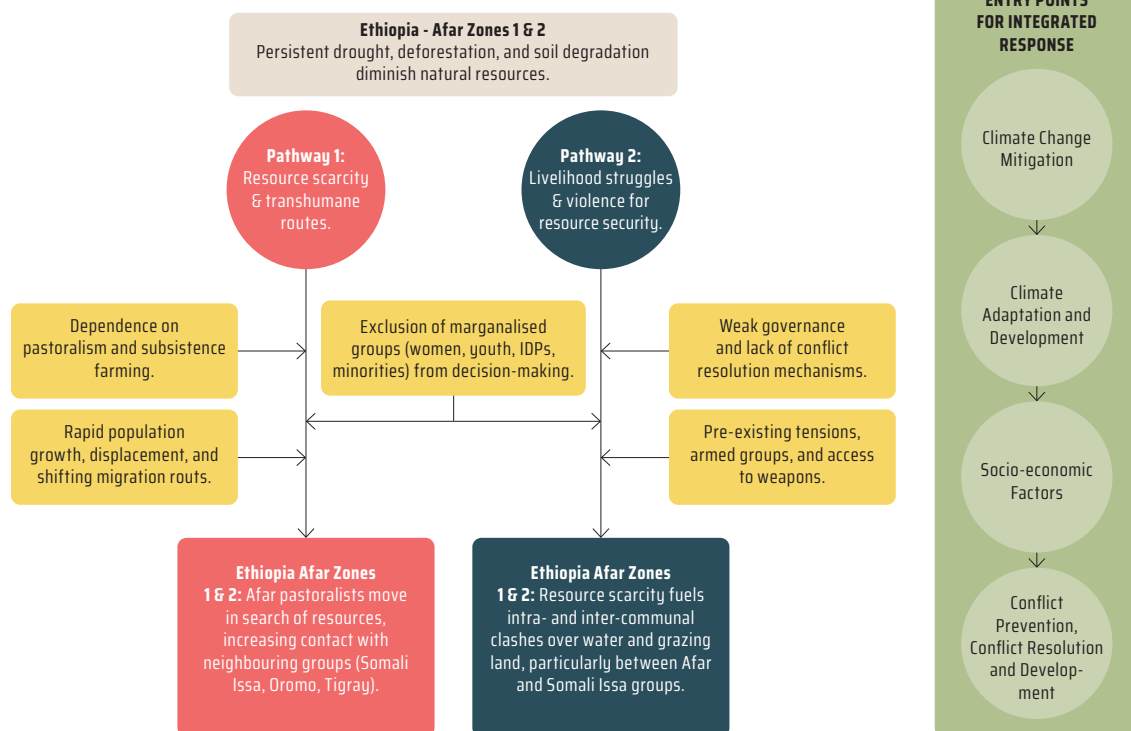
The overlapping impacts of conflict and climate change **affect disproportionately women, children, older people and displaced persons**. Women lack adequate legal protection, have limited access to land and livestock, to information on early warning or conflict-related news, and to support services such as healthcare, legal aid and psychosocial support. Patriarchal systems dominate where women are primarily responsible for domestic tasks, including water collection, food preparation, child rearing and tending to small livestock. These roles become more challenging as climate change intensifies water scarcity, forcing women to walk longer distances and to engage in the construction and maintenance of water infrastructure besides their already heavy work loads. Moreover, conflict and displacement forces women to navigate spaces where they are more vulnerable to sexual or gender-based violence (GBV), forced marriage, trafficking and other

forms of abuse. Additionally, the stresses imposed by displacement and resource scarcity often lead to increased rates of domestic violence, as families struggle with the distress and strain of loss, displacement and economic hardship.

Communities have developed **coping strategies** to address these challenges, but these are often overwhelmed by the increasing frequency of climate hazards and conflict:

- **Migration and mobility:** A practice deeply rooted in pastoralist traditions. Seasonal migration enables communities to locate water and grazing lands while temporary displacement to higher ground is common in response to flooding.
- **Community based resource management:** Plays a vital role in coping with environmental pressures, for example the practice of environmental enclosure “Desso” which promotes land regeneration and prevents soil erosion.
- **Traditional conflict resolution mechanisms:** Typically led by clan leaders and elders to manage disputes over resources, effectively preventing conflicts from escalating. For example, through the “QAFAR RE” or “QAFAR MADQA” mechanisms which are perceived as legitimate and fair.
- **Livelihood diversification:** Communities diversify livelihoods through agro-pastoralism, petty trading predominantly undertaken by women, engagement in small-scale irrigation schemes, brokering on livestock trade, and other income-generating activities such as beekeeping or goat fattening. Livelihood diversification can also include activities with negative impacts to the environment such as illegal charcoal making.

## CLIMATE CHANGE & ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES



## The Recommendations

To respond to the growing, interlinked and compounding impacts of the effects of climate change, violent conflict, and intersectional inequalities in Afar, DCA proposes that international, local and funding partners pursue an integrated approach across programming, strategy and political engagement, along the following guidance:

### **Informed, Inclusive and Integrated Programming Responses**

Prioritize responses that are well informed across disciplines; the design of new programmes should be informed by gender sensitive conflict and climate vulnerability risks analysis. Responses should promote inclusive decision-making processes that engage women, young people, and marginalised groups. Engaging local development councils and traditional leaders is key to ensure responsiveness to community priorities.

### **Strengthening Governance and Conflict Resolution Mechanism**

Initiatives should support local leaders, traditional conflict guarantors, and community-based organisations with training, resources, and protective measures to mediate disputes effectively and safely, including mechanisms for resource sharing. Programming should consider trainings and awareness raising on land rights, property ownership, and gender equality, to ensure meaningful participation of women, young people, and marginalised groups in decision-making.

### **Improving Climate Resilience and Livelihood Diversification**

Climate resilient and conflict sensitive resource management initiatives, e.g. agroforestry, water harvesting and conservation systems, and

other agroecological practices should be supported, focusing on community-led projects that integrate traditional ecological knowledge. Mentoring to local water user associations and traditional leaders can help manage resources more effectively. Initiatives should include livelihood diversification strategies that are economically viable and climate-resilient with a focus on supporting young people.

### **Addressing Vulnerabilities and Transforming Inequalities**

In addition to the inclusion of vulnerable groups, gender-transformative programming needs to be prioritized, including the promotion of women's participation in local governance structures. Interventions may include education, vocational training, and financial literacy initiatives for young women and men. In addition to measures preventing and responding to GBV, and providing MHPSS services, it is crucial to identify and seek to support safe and women-only spaces and to verify that partners and interventions are culturally sensitive.

### **Fostering Regional Collaboration**

Collaboration between relevant institutions in South Sudan and Ethiopia to address shared challenges such as displacement, resource management, and cross-border trade, should be fostered, and their link to regional platforms, such as IGAD, strengthened. Furthermore, facilitating engagement among the Somali Isa, Tigray, and Afar communities through the national dialogue platform represents a significant measure toward re-establishing the historically embedded norms of neighborliness, mutual respect, and peaceful coexistence to ensure sustainable peace and meaningful cooperation among these interlinked populations.



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