

A call to action: mobilising local resources in Ethiopia for urban IDPs

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Several lessons can be drawn from the successful multi-level response – by both local government and the local community – to the arrival of large numbers of IDPs in Adama, Ethiopia.

In 2018, about 1,340 registered households as well as many unregistered internally displaced persons (IDPs) fled ethnic conflict in the Somali region of Ethiopia to seek safety in Adama, the capital of the Oromia region, approximately 100km southeast of Addis Ababa. The IDPs, who were mainly ethnic Oromo, arrived in Adama over the course of several months. The sudden and huge influx of IDPs put immense pressure on the city's capacity to provide the necessary support.

While most of the focus on internal displacement in Ethiopia remains on the Somali region (which hosts the majority of the country's approximately three million IDPs), significant lessons can be learned from Adama's response. In the absence of large-scale international assistance, a little-known campaign to address the needs of IDPs led to a multi-level response from federal, regional and – in particular – local urban actors. Ultimately, under the auspices of the city administration, all 28 sectoral government bureaux, hundreds of private sector actors, 18 *kebeles* (neighbourhood districts), 243 *Idirs* (community-based associations) and

many local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and individuals participated in supporting and settling the IDPs. This may be a unique instance of an entirely Ethiopian, collective and largely local effort to operate successfully at this scale and within such a short period of time.

A call to action

Many IDPs initially settled in *kebele* compounds and a privately-owned school compound, as they had nowhere else to go. They were first aided by local passers-by who gave them in-kind support such as food, blankets, mattresses and clothes, as well as cash. Although the *kebele* officials allowed them to stay in the compounds, the IDPs lacked shelter and had limited access to toilets and kitchens.

Quickly, the city administration and regional government called society to action through social media and TV outlets, emphasising the need to build housing and advertising an emergency fund that had been established. Different strategies for spreading the call for support, such

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as through providing a daily report about the IDPs and publicising private investors' support, were used. Media footage was also shared, ranging from showing how people were living in *kebeles* to showing IDPs and local community members celebrating Muslim holidays together. One Ethiopian journalist described how the regional TV station OBN was "the voice of these people".

Local private sector response

The local private sector, from hotels to manufacturing companies, played a significant role in the response and, in particular, contributed significantly to the construction of houses for each of the registered IDP households. Most private sector actors responded to the call for assistance that had been issued through the media, although some were personally approached by the Mayor of Adama. According to interview respondents from different government sectoral bureaus and IDP representatives,¹ these private sector actors needed little convincing to help as they themselves had witnessed the displacement crisis first-hand. These private companies donated cash, basic necessities such as food and blankets, and steel roofs, cement, iron bars and sand for the construction of houses. Some even sponsored the building of multiple houses.

One private car assembly firm, for example, built 64 houses worth about 3.5 million birr (about US\$109,000), and another built 100 houses. Some of these companies complained that their donation was not tax deductible and wanted more transparency from the government about the money collected for the support of IDPs; however, it seems that they benefited from the resulting media coverage, and thus used their donations as a marketing strategy. Ultimately, resulting competition for free media coverage in exchange for donations played a huge role in successfully mobilising funds.

Most private companies did not offer employment opportunities to the IDPs; those who interviewed cited skills and cultural gaps as reasons for not doing so. In one case, a manufacturing company hired 125 IDPs; however, their employment lasted

only one month of their training period because the IDPs mounted illegal strike action in the manufacturing compound twice within a week, leading to considerable financial loss for the company.

Local NGO response

NGOs offered IDPs basic necessities and especially targeted women, mothers and children. Donations included mattresses, nappies, clothing, baby milk and kitchen supplies. Some of these items were purchased based on a list provided by the local government while others were donated as needed to individuals.

Over six months, one local NGO helped 200 households and a further 100 women through a contribution worth about 251,000 birr (about \$7,800). A health-focused NGO provided free health care to IDPs for three to four months during the crisis period, and another took in 12 abandoned children, of whom eight are currently in the adoption process and four in foster care. However, some NGOs we interviewed mentioned the lack of registration and identity documents of some of the IDPs as a challenge, as they did not know who had received access to free health care and if the abandoned children had actually been displaced. As the number of those in need rose, many NGOs decided to help anyone claiming to be an IDP. One NGO, Noble Action, explained their rationale: "The aim of this organisation is to help people. We could not just ignore the crisis. This is what we stand for."

Community response

Local individuals played a huge role in supporting IDPs when they first arrived in the city. Besides donating cash, clothing and other material support, individuals gathered in different *kebele* compounds for several days to cook hot meals for the IDPs. Some existing *Idirs* also stepped in to offer support. These informal institutions are widespread in Ethiopia and offer important social protection, but are generally only established between trusted neighbours, families or friends. One conducted a range of community organising and fundraising and collected clothing

donations from their community and schools. *Idirs* and *Equb* (informal rotating savings and credit associations) formed by IDPs themselves continue to meet regularly and support each other when there are marriages and deaths. One *Idir*, for example, holds a coffee ceremony every Sunday which has created a support system for IDP women to talk about their challenges and meet other IDPs.

Lessons and insights

Successful communication about the appeal for support came from ‘cascading’ a single message through federal, regional and local government. Social media was an important tool in spreading the message to different actors and communicating with potential donors, including in the Ethiopian diaspora. As well as television coverage, posts on Facebook, YouTube and Telegram groups popularised the call for support. This widespread targeting gave many of our informants a feeling of positive obligation; once a critical mass was reached, offering support became a kind of actionable norm, even for those not directly called upon. The focus on both in-kind and cash donations meant that actors could contribute in various ways, involving contributors with and without funds, both groups and individuals, and those motivated by both altruism and self-interest.

Over \$1 million was raised in the span of just a few months, without international assistance. Many IDPs ultimately voluntarily returned with the help of the local government, but the multi-level response led to the construction of 2,000 houses in which 1,340 registered IDP households and about 500 IDP minors have settled. Although the call to action was promoted regionally,

it is clear that it was at the local level in Adama – through action taken by city and neighbourhood government, the private sector, community associations, local NGOs, and individuals – that the response was strongest.

The response also offers some lessons. Firstly, while quick mobilisation can be successful for addressing some long-term needs such as housing, as well as emergency needs like the immediate availability of food, it appears to be more difficult to facilitate other needs such as employment, which require ongoing relationships and the availability of certain skills. It is possible, however, that a communication approach like that used in the Adama response could be used to spread the word about particular skill sets in a displaced population to a local or regional audience. Secondly, formalising individual and business donations, particularly those above a certain amount, by making them tax-deductible may increase some actors’ willingness to donate. Finally, registering all IDPs upon arrival in cities can facilitate the assistance that is offered to them by providing better knowledge of how many IDPs have returned and the demographics and needs of those who remain.

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