

Resilience Amidst Multiple Crises: Lessons from “Saving Little Lives” Project During the COVID-19 Pandemic, Siege and War in Tigray, Northern Ethiopia

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Abstract

Background: The impact of man-made disasters like war on healthcare systems can be profound and multifaceted, affecting infrastructure and human resources. One of the recent bloodiest and deadliest wars is the Tigray war in Northern Ethiopia, which lasted from November 2020 to November 2022. Approximately 90% of health facilities in the Tigray region were partially or completely damaged, highlighting the weaponization of healthcare and its severe effects on infrastructure and human resources.

Objective: Our presentation will describe the lessons learned from implementing a scale-up of the project called “Saving Little Lives” which aimed at reducing the neonatal mortality rate by 35% in the region amid the COVID-19 pandemic and Tigray war.

Methodology: We employed an Integrated Cross-Sectoral Multilevel (ICM) Health System Resilience Framework to assess the impact of war, siege, COVID-19 pandemic and other challenges on the implementation of the project. This framework allowed for analysis across four levels of the health system (Meta/International, Macro/National, Meso/Health facility, and Micro/Individual) and different time events (Pre-war, Trans-war, and Post-war). Our analysis utilized a mix of deductive and inductive approaches to qualitatively examine the data collected throughout the project implementation and identify thematic areas.

Findings: Despite wartime disruptions, including financial blockages and travel restrictions, the project continued at minimal levels. The project’s adaptability and reliance on digital technologies offer valuable lessons for healthcare interventions in conflict zones. Global support played a crucial role in sustaining operations amidst adversity. Understanding the resilience of healthcare initiatives in war-affected regions is critical for effective intervention planning and implementation.

Key Words: Conflict Zones, Resilience, Healthcare attack, Crisis, Scale-up, Digital Innovations, Siege, War

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