

Policy-research partnerships for post-war reconstruction of education in Tigray, Ethiopia: The role of local university-based researchers

**Working
Paper**

#02/2025

**Nigusse Weldemariam
Reda, Mulugeta Tsegai,
Haftu Hindeya Gebremeskel,
Fesseha Abadi
Weldemichael, Rafael
Mitchell**

School of Education
University of Bristol
35 Berkeley Square
Bristol BS8 1JA

bristol.ac.uk/education/research/research-projects/



Policy-research partnerships for post-war reconstruction of education in Tigray, Ethiopia: The role of local university-based researchers

By Nigusse Weldemariam Reda, Mulugeta Tsegai, Haftu Hindeya Gebremeskel, Fesseha Abadi Weldemichael, Rafael Mitchell

Mekelle University, Ethiopia

University of Bristol, UK

December 2025

Corresponding author

Dr Rafael Mitchell

School of Education, University of Bristol

Rafael.Mitchell@bristol.ac.uk

Recommended citation

Reda, N.W., Tsegai, M., Gebremeskel, H.H., Weldemichael, F.A., Mitchell, R. (2025) Policy-research partnerships for post-war reconstruction of education in Tigray, Ethiopia: The role of local university-based researchers. *Bristol Working Papers in Education Series*. https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/ajq2r_v1

This online paper may be cited or briefly quoted in line with the usual academic conventions, and for personal use. However, this paper must not be published elsewhere (such as mailing lists, bulletin boards etc.) without the author's explicit permission, or be used for commercial purposes or gain in any way.



School of Education

Policy-research partnerships for post-war reconstruction of education in Tigray, Ethiopia: The role of local university-based researchers¹

Nigusse Weldemariam Reda (Mekelle University, Ethiopia)

Mulugeta Tsegai (Mekelle University, Ethiopia)

Haftu Hindeya Gebremeskel (Mekelle University, Ethiopia)

Fesseha Abadi Weldemichael (Mekelle University, Ethiopia)

Rafael Mitchell* (University of Bristol, UK)

* Corresponding author (Rafael.Mitchell@bristol.ac.uk)

Abstract: This article draws on the experiences of university-based researchers involved in the post-war reconstruction of education in Tigray, Ethiopia. Based on experiences following the 2020-2022 civil war, we consider the role of local researchers in supporting educational decision-making in line with democratic, human-rights based principles and international commitments (SDG4, CESA 2026). This account is underpinned by conceptual work on the leadership of education provision in crises (the ‘endogenous systems leadership’ framework), and the politics of knowledge production on education in Africa. The empirical focus of this article is the partnership between Mekelle University researchers and the Tigray Region Education Bureau (TREB) around the introduction of an Accelerated Education Programme (AEP) across all schools in the region in 2023. As we show, this initiative demonstrates the key role of university-based researchers in knowledge production and exchange as a condition for the endogenous leadership of education provision during crises.

Keywords: Accelerated Education Programme; education and conflict; middle-tier; policy-research partnerships; post-conflict reconstruction

Introduction

Recent years have seen a rise in violent conflicts around the world, with devastating results for young people and their education: most of the world’s out-of-school children live in conflict-affected settings (Novelli, 2023). The intentional targetting of education provision is known as ‘scholasticide’, or “the systemic obliteration of education through the arrest, detention or killing of teachers, students and staff, and the destruction of educational infrastructure” (OHCR, 2024). This term was coined in the context of Israel’s atrocities in Palestine (Hajir & Qato, 2025; UN News, 2025). However, the term might also be applied in the context of Tigray in Ethiopia, where the school system was devastated during the civil war (2020-2022) and ensuing humanitarian crisis, which continues to this day (Anonymous, 2025; CITG, 2025). The war and blockade led to an estimated 600,000 civilian deaths, making it one of the deadliest conflicts this century (Evennett, 2022). However, it has received limited international attention,

¹ This is the authors’ submitted version of an article for the *Compare* Special Issue – *Reconceptualising Research Partnerships in Education: Power, Positionality and Epistemic Justice* (2026).

partly due to the government-imposed internet blackout and communications blockade, which created a ‘zone of invisibility’ around the war (Weldemichel, 2025).

Before the war, Tigray had near-universal primary school enrolment, but 95% of schools received varying levels of damage during the conflict (TREB, 2023). The teaching workforce has ‘alarmingly high’ levels of ‘depression, anxiety, compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma, and burnout’ (Zerihun et al., 2024, p15). Re-establishing schooling is a key element of post-war recovery in any conflict-affected setting (Gallagher et al., 2018). For Tigray, this will be a long journey. Some schools in the region began to re-open in 2023, and at the time of writing an estimated 54% of young people are currently accessing schooling (TREB, 2025). This article will focus in particular on the role of local researchers in reconstruction efforts in Tigray through their support for educational decision-makers in the Tigray Regional Education Bureau (TREB). We start by introducing a framework for conceptualising the leadership of education provision during crises: the ‘endogenous systems leadership’ framework. Since this approach is reliant on evidence as a basis for decision-making (with a particular focus on the experiences and outcomes of marginalised groups), we then consider research on knowledge production on education in Africa.

Leadership of education provision during crises in LMICs: The endogenous systems leadership framework

Wars can have devastating effects on schooling, from the destruction and long-term closure of schools, to the losses, displacement and traumatisation of teachers and learners. Simultaneously, the conditions for schooling are affected by food, water, health and other systems, which in turn are affected by conflict. The interactions within and between these systems are complex, dynamic, and unpredictable. Educational responses must grapple with this complexity, rather than treating such a crisis as a complicated problem with a technical solution which can be derived from existing knowledge (Faul & Savage, 2023). For educational decision-makers, this requires approaches which are flexible, iterative, and focused on developing coherence across schooling and other areas of social and economic activity; this requires engaging with diverse stakeholder groups to develop tentative solutions, and then learning from these experiments as a basis for improvements (Mitchell et al. 2025). Crises tend to exacerbate social inequalities along the lines of class, gender, race, ethnicity, location, dis/ability, and other contextually-relevant dimensions (Walby 2015). For this reason, educational leadership which is consistent with global and continental commitments to equitable and inclusive provision for all (e.g. SDGs, CESA 2026-2035 [AU, 2025]) requires specific attention to the educational access, experiences and outcomes of the most marginalised groups.

An approach to the leadership of education provision during crises which recognises the complexity and which is consistent with the democratic, human rights-based principles described above is the ‘endogenous systems leadership’ (ESL) framework (Mitchell et al. 2025). The ESL framework was developed for UNESCO’s International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP), an agency which works with Ministries of Education in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). The framework draws on theoretical work on systems

leadership in education (e.g. Glowach, 2025) and coloniality in the context of education and international partnerships (e.g. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Menashy, 2019). It results from a synthesis of IIEP’s own research on the leadership of education provision during crises (Ndabananiye et al., 2021; Gichuhi & Kalista, 2022; Arnot & Seeger, 2021) alongside a wider review of research on education in emergencies (Mitchell et al., 2025). The framework was developed as a heuristic to support research, partnership, and capacity-strengthening activities between Ministries of Education in LMICs and external actors, such as IIEP itself. In such contexts, educational decision-making is characterised by the heavy involvement of international organisations headquartered in the Global North (Shah et al., 2025). International organisations within the education in emergencies sector have committed to ‘Reinforce, [and] not replace, national and local systems’ (UNGA, 2016); however, the last decade has seen continued evidence of Northern agencies bypassing or overriding local authorities and institutions (Shah et al., 2025). Consequently, the ESL framework identifies conditions for leadership which is both ‘endogenous’ – deriving from a particular context and reflecting its local values, knowledges, institutions and agency – and oriented towards international commitments to an inclusive, equitable, good quality education for all.

In Figure 1, below, we present an adapted version of the original ESL framework, which highlights elements that are particularly relevant to the case which features in this article.

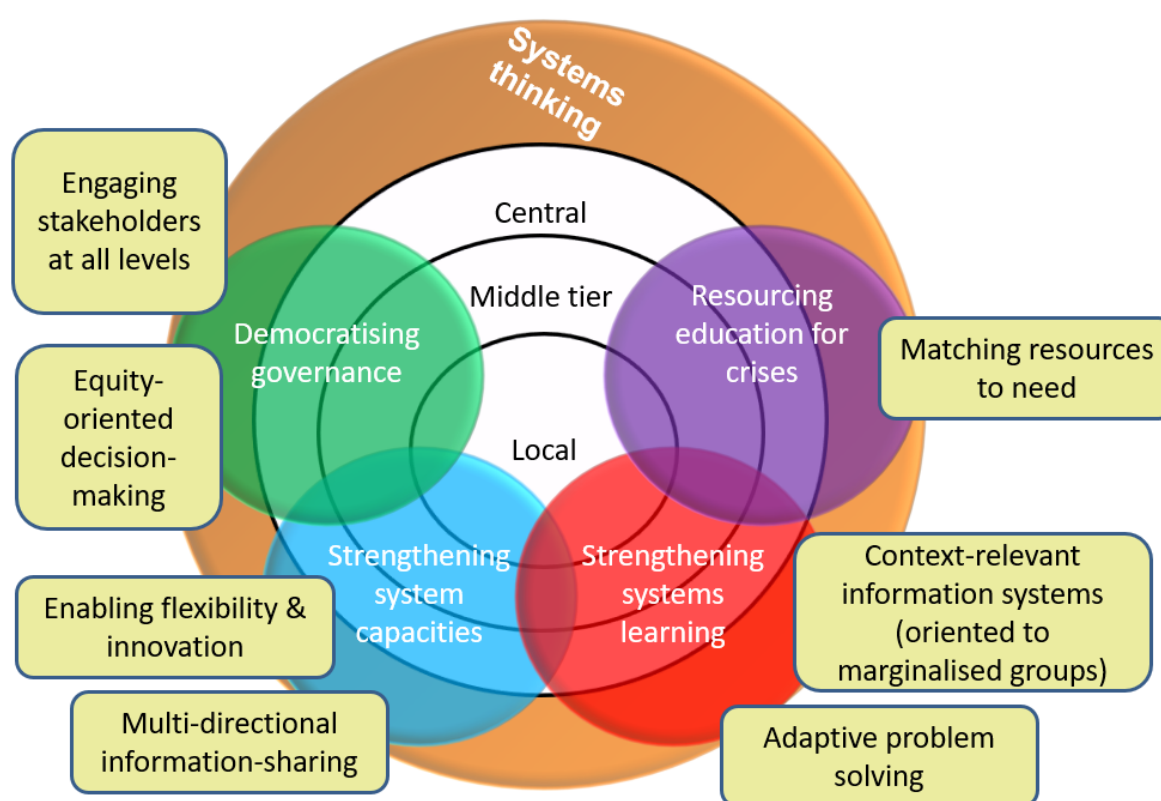


Figure 1 The endogenous systems leadership framework (Adapted from Mitchell et al., 2025)

As depicted in Figure 1, an important characteristic of school systems in LMICs is that they tend to be organised bureaucratically with central, middle and local tiers of authority. This is the case in Ethiopia, which is marked by a high degree of centralisation on paper, and a widespread disconnection between central aspirations and classroom realities (Gemeda &

Tynjälä, 2015; York et al., 2021; Asgedom et al., 2022; Tiruneh et al., 2025). In Ethiopia, the Ministry of Education is the overarching educational authority, however, as we will see in this article, the war in Tigray led to a heightened role for TREB, a middle tier actor tasked with restoring school provision following the conflict. The other salient elements of the ESL framework have been alluded to already: the need for flexibility and innovation to adapt to changing conditions, multi-stakeholder partnerships involving actors at all levels, and equity-oriented evidence and decision-making focused on the experiences and outcomes of the most marginalised groups. As such, the leadership of education provision in crises has distinct knowledge requirements. As we will illustrate in this paper, local researchers have a key role here. It is to the role of education researchers in Africa that we now turn.

The political economy of knowledge production on education in Africa: research and consultancy

African research has been critiqued for its reliance on Northern (particularly Anglo-American) theory, and orientation towards external agendas and audiences (Hountondji, 1997; Aboderin et al., 2023). This is the case, too, in the field of education (Samoff & Carrol, 2004; Samoff, 2025), despite most of this work taking place outside international partnerships, and more than 90% of publications resulting from unfunded research (Mitchell et al., 2020; Asare et al., 2022). The *framing* of education research in Africa is informed by the wider political economy of knowledge production which researchers must navigate. Samoff (2025) has emphasised the influence of a ‘financial-intellectual complex’ which is dominated by the aid industry. This, he argues, has normalised a ‘development’ framing, which is accepted uncritically:

“Foreign aid has become, directly or indirectly, a major source of funding for education research in post-colonial Africa. For many African scholars...research depends heavily on foreign aid...The needs, interests, and preferences of the aid agencies increasingly inform, shape, and regularly constrain research on education in Africa.” (p139-140)

While questioning the agency (and criticality) of African researchers, Samoff (2025) nevertheless asserts the importance of distinguishing between *research* and *consultancy*. The boundaries between these modes of knowledge production are not always clear (Pilon, 2016), but the latter is generally taken to refer to a form of ‘commissioned research’. The literature largely describes researchers’ motivations for undertaking such work as financial, given “the modest salaries earned by scholars and the limited availability of research grants [in the region]” (ibid., p5). Furthermore, where the commissioning agencies are international organisations, the research foci and methods, as well as publications, are often tightly controlled, which can limit the role of African researchers to implementers of studies wholly designed by external actors (Pilon, 2016; Asare et al., 2022).

In many ways the accounts of consultancy which appear in the literature reflect the Mekelle University team’s experience of international organisations. Requests for consultancy work from international organisations – whether INGOs or foreign government agencies – arrive in our inboxes fully formed; our role is to implement protocols and instruments designed elsewhere. Often they seek comparative data across the multiple countries in which they operate which limits the scope for adapting data collection instruments based on local

conditions and research priorities. Frequently INGOs merely want us to translate instruments from English to Tigrigna or Amharic, and then collect data in our schools and communities, under the supervision of external experts. After filing a report, our work is done. We are often unclear what, if any, use is made of this research, and are uncertain of our rights regarding dissemination, since the commissioning agencies retain ownership of the data and analysis (Asare et al. 2022; Samoff 2025). Aside from its extractive nature, a challenge of such consultancy work is that it overlooks the important contributions which local researchers can make. Externally-developed research designs and instruments fail to capitalise on the interpretive or hermeneutical resources of local researchers embedded in a particular socio-cultural and material context (Fricker, 2007).

The policy-research partnership which is focus of this article bears some characteristics of consultancy work reported in the literature, but differs in several important respects. In the case presented below, the commissioning agency is a local educational authority – the Tigray Regional Educational Bureau – rather than international organisation. The researchers are driven by social rather than financial objectives, and the partnership capitalises on their full range of capacities, including the hermeneutical resources needed for understanding local values, priorities and conditions, as well as the technical knowledge involved in designing and implementing policy-relevant research. The distinct contribution of this article is its account of African-led processes of knowledge production and exchange for educational decision-making during crises. It demonstrates the key, overlooked role which local, university-based researchers can play in supporting the endogenous leadership of education provision during crises. Having introduced the key concepts which underpin our analysis, the next section describes the context for the present study.

Study context and design

Tigray is a regional state in the north of Ethiopia . In 2019, before the war, it had an estimated population of around 7 million. There was near-universal enrolment in primary schooling with a gross and net enrolment rates standing at 94.7% (96.9% male, 92.5% female) and 88.6% (89.3% male, 87.9% female), respectively. There were also 2492 schools (2221 primary, 271 secondary) serving an estimated 1.5 million learners (TREB, 2019).

In 2020, schools across Ethiopia were closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic; however, due to the civil war between the Ethiopian federal and Tigrayan regional governments, schools in Tigray were closed for an additional two and a half years. Over this period, it is estimated that about 2.4 million school-age Tigrayans were out of school (Plan International, 2025). In November 2022, a Cessation of Hostilities Agreement was signed (African Union, 2022), and relative peace was restored, despite ongoing insecurity and hardship which persists to this day (CITG, 2025).

The highest educational authority is the Ministry of Education, which establishes the national policy frameworks. Regional education bureaus are responsible for implementing and adapting national guidelines within their jurisdictions. This includes limited decision-making over certain aspects of school provision (including language of instruction, and some curriculum areas), and responsibility for coordinating the education workforce, resource allocation, quality

assurance, and related tasks. Regional bureaus make decisions on new initiatives in schools, and recurrent tasks such as setting the school calendar, either independently or with approval from the regional cabinet.

Following the ceasefire at the end of 2022, TREB began work to restore education provision in the region. In doing so, it recruited support from researchers at Mekelle University. It is this partnership which is the focus of our article. The following section provides an account of the partnership between TREB and Mekelle University with a focus on *researchers' involvement knowledge production and exchange activities for educational decision-making in Tigray*. The case draws on the first-hand experiences of four of the paper's authors (Fesseha, Haftu, Mulugeta, Nigusse) who worked with the TREB over this period². It draws on individual and collective reflections on this partnership, supported with reference to internal and publicly available documents. The article's other author (Rafael) was not involved in the partnership with TREB, but has contributed to the conceptual framing of this study, the analysis, and the writing.

University researchers' involvement in knowledge production and exchange for post-war decision-making in education in Tigray

In this section, we consider Mekelle University researchers' involvement in knowledge production and exchange activities for post-war decision-making in Tigray. We identify two modes of partnership between the regional government and university researchers: the first, serving in an *advisory group*; the second, undertaking *commissioned research*.

The Post-War Education Advisory Group

TREB has a custom of working with 'advisory groups' to draw on expertise and resources outside the bureau. Advisory groups typically include academics and experienced practitioners, and provide TREB with advice in specific areas of concern such as curriculum, assessment, school leadership and teacher education. Advisory groups do not hold formal authority, but serve a consultative function for top-level TREB leadership, such as the bureau head and deputies, and focal officers for curriculum, human resources, gender, and finance. TREB often calls on Mekelle University researchers to serve in advisory groups. There are several reasons for this. It is the oldest higher education institution in the region, and recognised as a national Centre of Excellence in teacher education and school leadership (Hussien, 2021). It is located close to TREB's office in the regional capital, which allows researchers to visit without incurring out-of-town travel expenses. While there are other universities in the region (e.g. in Aksum, Adigrat, Raya), these are younger institutions with less established research capacities, as well as being physically distant from the bureau. There are also established centres of education research elsewhere in the country (for example, in Addis Ababa and Bahir Dar universities), but costs, availability, political and security issues are all considerations, particularly in the post-war context; and local researchers have the advantage of speaking Tigrigna, the language of primary schooling, and an intimate familiarity with the social and

² Life histories of Mekelle University researchers and other civilians living in the city during the civil war and its aftermath are collated in an Open Access book: *Mekelle Stories: Life in Time of War* (Anonymous, 2025).

cultural context. Moreover, relationships of trust have developed between TREB and Mekelle University researchers through working joint activities over many years.

In January 2023, two months after the ceasefire, TREB established an Advisory Group for the post-war reconstruction of education in Tigray). The Advisory Group comprised four Mekelle University researchers, and four retired senior practitioners (former teachers and school principals). All had academic qualifications of Master's or above, all belonged to the Tigrayan community, and all were male (a point we return to below). The work of the Advisory Group was entirely voluntary and unpaid, without any compensation or daily expenses (per diem). It held no formal authority, but was tasked with advising TREB, and given three months to propose plans for re-opening schools in line with national and international commitments.

The Advisory Group met in January 2023 to discuss the potential challenges that TREB might encounter in reopening schools. School closures in Tigray had left students three grades behind their peers elsewhere in the country. Without catch-up mechanisms, Tigrayan students would be three years older than their peers from other regions when sitting the Grade 12 national exams or entering university education. Lifting students to the grades which matched their physical and psychological maturity was seen as important for their motivation and emotional wellbeing. For these reasons, a key concern was: *“How can students cover the missed curriculum in the shortest time possible and reach the grade levels corresponding to their age?”*

Advisory Group members drew on professional experience and desk research as a basis for developing their proposal. Some had firsthand experience of post-conflict education, for example, one had served in a zone education office—an administrative unit, situated below a region and above the *woreda* (district) level, which implemented an Accelerated Education Programme (AEP) following the Ethiopian-Eritrean war (1998-2000). The team also drew lessons from the ‘Speed School’ programme, an NGO-led initiative for out-of-school children which had been operating in Ethiopia since 2011 (Westbrook, 2025; Akyeampong & Higgins, 2025). Speed Schools are an alternative to mainstream provision, which allow formerly out-of-school children aged 9-14 years to complete primary school Grades 1-3 within a 10-month period. The Advisory Group also considered evidence from Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan and other conflict-affected contexts (e.g. Menendez et al. 2016). Resources from the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies Accelerated Education Working Group were a key reference point (e.g. AEWG, 2017). In reviewing evidence from other times and places, the Advisory Group was conscious that proposals for resuming education in Tigray must be compatible with the wider national policy guidelines, a particular concern being the national examinations in Grade 12.

After this exercise, the Advisory Group proposed the following:

- Introduce an AEP across all primary and secondary schools in the region for 2 years (May 2023 to June 2025), during which period, students would cover two grades per year of schooling.

- Divide the school curriculum into ‘taught’ and ‘self-study’ subjects (see Annex 1) – the former to be delivered through conventional face-to-face, classroom based teaching; the latter through assignments and project work.
- Condense the curriculum across all subjects, halving the content and focusing on key points in line with the minimum learning competencies. Teams of school teachers should be established to make these revisions.
- Provide AEP training and materials for all teachers and school principals, and information targeted at parents.

Certain features of this proposal were unusual or distinctive in this context. Whereas AEPs had been implemented previously on a small scale by NGOs in funded projects for specific marginalised groups, this programme would replace (or constitute) mainstream provision for all learners in the region. Moreover, due to the war and economic collapse, it would be implemented without commensurate resourcing in a devastated school system, where large sections of the population were displaced and traumatised (Gebre & Hagos, 2023), and where teachers had gone for 17 months without receiving a salary (Addis Standard, 2024). Nevertheless, if education was to resume then something had to be done, and this was proposed as the least-worst option.

TREB accepted the Advisory Group’s proposal and its senior leaders met with curriculum experts from the Ministry of Education to establish a common understanding of the AEP as a legitimate pathway to address the extended school closures in Tigray. The Ministry approved the proposal and agreed that national examinations could be held twice a year in Tigray over this period. Tigray’s regional cabinet endorsed the proposed AEP in March 2023, and implementation started in May 2023.

Commissioned research: Stakeholder evaluations of the AEP

Another mode of partnership between the regional government bureau and university researchers in the post-war period involved consultancy or commissioned research. In February 2024, nine months into the AEP, the Head of TREB approached researchers from the Advisory Group to request an evaluation of the programme. TREB had been conducting its own monitoring, and was designating schools as ‘effective’ or ‘ineffective’ based on the information available – however, it sought a more robust and independent evaluation of the programme to inform urgent decisions around provision for millions of learners across the region.

In the literature, education consultancy in Africa is typically presented as an opportunity for university researchers to supplement their incomes (Pilon, 2016; Samoff, 2025). However, there was no funding for this commission; TREB offered nothing beyond transportation and subsistence costs³. Rather than profit, the researchers’ motivation for engaging in this work was a sense of social or civic responsibility – a means of contributing to the post-war reconstruction of education in the region. Time was very limited as there was an urgent need for TREB to understand the adequacy of the AEP and decide whether or not to persist with the programme or change tack.

A small team of nine university researchers (again, all male) was assembled to evaluate the extent to which the AEP was meeting learners’ needs. The team had less than two months to design and implement the study and report its findings. It designed a mixed methods study to

³ The per diem was 600 *Birr/day*, equivalent to £3 (September 2025).

explore key stakeholders' perspectives of the AEP – students, teachers, parents, principals, and local and regional level educational leaders and officers (Tsegai et al., 2024a). While evidence from a representative sample of schools and out-of-school children would have been desirable, this was impossible given the constraints on time, budget and all other resources. Nevertheless, the team sought variation within its sample, and so selected 12 schools: 8 urban, 4 rural; 6 which TREB had classified as 'effective', 6 as 'ineffective'. In addition, six of the schools were primary, while the remaining six were secondary. The language of instruction for the primary and secondary levels are Tigrigna and English, respectively. Across these settings, focus groups were conducted with 137 school-level stakeholders – 11 parents, 53 students, 51 teachers, 22 principals; alongside interviews with *woreda* education officials (11) and TREB staff (3). Males constituted 75% of all participants. A separate, quantitative strand of the study assessed student attainment in English, Tigrigna, and maths (n=864).

It should be highlighted that school-level stakeholders had not been consulted on the introduction of the AEP, and so this evaluation was means of gathering feedback to inform future decisions. The stakeholder consultation revealed some positives. For example, some noted that the reopening of schools had “[reignited] hope among students and their parents regarding the value of education despite the hardships caused by the war” (Tsegai et al., 2024a, p13). Staff reported that for some traumatised students, “merely being present in school” had provided relief and helped them to “cope with the psychological impact of the war” (ibid., p12). Regarding the programme itself, the overriding impression amongst staff was of poor communication and inadequate resourcing. Some teachers were apparently “unaware of the condensed curriculum” (p14), while others had been unable to access it because the revised materials were distributed digitally rather than in printed form. One principal explained:

“Each condensed curriculum has more than 40 pages and you may calculate this by the number of teachers and school subjects. It was [too] costly [for our school to print this]! [Instead,] we distributed the soft copy of the condensed curriculum to each department. But...teachers lack [devices] to access the soft copies.” (Primary principal, male, interview 03/06/24, Tsegai et al., 2024b, p2)

The shortage of textbooks and other curriculum materials severely affected pedagogical processes and outcomes.

“Some teachers come on Saturday or Sunday and write the notes in five or six classrooms, and then ask their students to copy the notes from the blackboard to their exercise books. Had there been textbooks, teachers would be engaged in discussing the contents instead of spending too much time writing the notes on the blackboard.” (Primary principal, female, FGD 03/06/24, ibid., p4)

“Imagine the amount of time...students are spending copying the note from the blackboard to their exercise books. It is very difficult to implement the AEP in an environment where resources such as textbooks are absent.” (Secondary principal, male, interview 04/06/24, ibid., p2)

Shortages were most acute in remote, rural areas, which had been hardest for the research team to reach. Students who participated in the study reported feeling positive about the programme, but it should be remembered that out-of-school children were not included in the sample. There were also feelings of ambivalence about the AEP, as one Grade 12 learner explained:

“Without the AEP, I would be in grade ten by now. I am happy that I am able to cover two grade levels in one year, but the AEP has also posed additional assignments on every student to double [their] efforts to understand the contents covered...because content was covered quickly.” (Male student, FGD, 04/06/24, Tsegai et al., 2024b, p21)

As this quote indicates, the AEP placed high demands on learners. While ‘fast learners’ were performing well (p13), others were unable to keep up, leading to widening disparities. The research team found no significant differences between schools classified as ‘effective’ or ‘ineffective’ by TREB.

In drawing lessons from this study, the research team recommended that TREB take a differentiated approach to provision, transitioning back to one-grade-per-school-year in most areas, but maintaining the AEP in areas with the highest concentration of out-of-school children. These recommendations were accepted, with the policy change occurring in November 2024.

Reviewing the policy-research partnership through the lens of the ESL framework

This section considers the policy-research partnership described above through the lens of the endogenous systems leadership (ESL) framework (see Figure 1). This reveals multiple ways in which university-based researchers supported endogenous leadership in education in the aftermath of the war, and areas for strengthening practice.

The devastating impact of the war on education in Tigray necessitated a localised, regional plan (within a centralised system) for restoring education provision in drastically altered conditions. The responsibility for this lay with TREB, a middle tier actor which took on an extended role following the war. Many key elements of the ESL framework are illustrated in this case.

Strengthening system capacities and learning; adaptive problem solving: TREB responded to the challenge of post-war reconstruction by strengthening its capacities: it drew on resources outside the organisation by consulting education researchers and professionals. The development, introduction, evaluation and refinement of Tigray’s AEP with support from university-based researchers is a form of adaptive problem solving. Problem driven iterative adaptation (PDIA) is an approach to innovation which involves: i) addressing a locally identified challenge ii) by creating an enabling environment for local decision-making and experimentation, iii) with rapid learning through tight feedback loops, and iv) active engagement of diverse stakeholder groups to ensure that an initiative is “viable, legitimate, and relevant – that is, are politically supportable and practically implementable” (Andrews et al., 2013, p237). We can see characteristics of PDIA in TREB’s approach: the AEP was addressing a clear local priority. Although an enabling environment for local experimentation was not formally authorised, this was the inevitable and de facto reality, given the contextual variations across the region. Feedback loops were provided through commissioned research to gather different stakeholder groups’ experiences and perspectives across a range of settings. This led to TREB adopting a more flexible, differentiated approach to the AEP based on local conditions, rather than blanket implementation across all schools in the region. Through the above we can see the key role which local researchers played as a condition for the endogenous leadership of education provision in the crisis.

Systems thinking: It is important to recognise that none of the actors referred to above operated in conditions of their own choosing, but were working pragmatically within various constraints.

Firstly, regional decisions around re-opening schools had to be compatible with the wider national policy landscape, which contained non-negotiables such as the national curriculum framework and Grade 12 examinations, which might be moved but not circumvented if Tigrayan students were to receive national certificates and be permitted to enter tertiary education institutions. Secondly, there was limited knowledge of conditions in different parts of the region, given the destruction of infrastructure and the active suppression of information (TREB, 2023; Weldemichel, 2025) – there were known unknowns and unknown unknowns. Thirdly, at a personal level, after the chaos of war, university researchers, civil servants and others across the region were living through ongoing trauma and deprivation which cut across all aspects of experience (Gebremeskel, 2024; Weldemichel & Mezgbo, 2025; Junia, 2025). With regard to high-level educational decision-making, these constraints reflect the need for pragmatism and hope, when what is desirable is not possible, and vice versa.

Two elements of the ESL framework stand out by omission: *resourcing education for crises* (matching resources to need), and the *orientation towards marginalised groups*. In the literature, AEPs are typically framed as a small-scale alternative to mainstream provision, rather than a substitute for this. For example, Boothby et al. (2024) describe AEPs as providing:

“a flexible and age-appropriate alternative to formal school over an accelerated time frame. AEPs are designed specifically for disadvantaged, overaged children and adolescents who have never enrolled in school or whose education was interrupted due to conflict, crisis, or displacement” (p35)

This description could apply to the Speed School initiative which was introduced in Ethiopia in 2011 with sponsorship from a US-based philanthropy (Akyeampong & Higgins, 2025). Speed Schools have been praised for their creative, inclusive pedagogies and “joyful and purposeful learning” (p.200), leading to enhanced academic attainment for disadvantaged learners and successful transitions to government schools at Grade 4. If Speed Schools are a targetted intervention, then the post-war AEP in Tigray was essentially an *unfunded* programme across all primary and secondary schools in the region. This was AEP on a shoestring, bearing little resemblance to the Speed Schools pedagogically.

As a middle tier agency, TREB has authority to implement an AEP, but is subject to central budgeting decisions. The federal government withheld education funding during the civil war, and failed to revise its budget allocation formula for post-war reconstruction of the devastated school system (The Reporter, 2024). UN and other international agencies have increased financial support for education in the region⁴, but this has not been commensurate to the scale of the challenge. While the ESL framework was developed in response to the well-documented overbearance of international agencies in education-in-emergencies in LMICs (e.g. Menashy, 2017; Oddy, 2023; Shah et al., 2025), the present case is an example of endogenous leadership untrammelled by foreign intervention. As we have seen, the design and implementation of the AEP reflects endogenous leadership of education, made possible through the resourcefulness of a local university and a middle tier actor; however, the severe resource limitations precluded this from delivering an inclusive, good quality education for all.

Another series of challenges pertain to inequitable power relations within the region. The ESL framework points to the importance of intentionally seeking out representation from

⁴ TREB (2025) reports that international partners’ contributions to post-war reconstruction in education (e.g. for school construction and repair, psychosocial support, and the provision of materials, equipment and feeding programmes for learners) amounts to 3,638,928,165 Birr (approximately £17.6 million, December 2025).

historically marginalised groups, such as women, ethnic minorities, those affected by poverty, and those living in remote rural areas.

“This not only allows decision-makers to better understand the varying effects of crises on provision for marginalised groups, but to incorporate their perspectives into solutions that will work for them, including through participation in the design and delivery of alternative provision.” (Mitchell et al., 2025, p10)

In designing the evaluation, the university-based researchers explicitly sought to understand how the AEP was affecting disadvantaged groups, for example, including remote rural schools in the sample, as well as settings with known challenges. The team identified growing disparities in schooling, noting that the AEP was most beneficial to ‘fast’ over ‘average and slower learners’ (Tsegai et al. 2024a, p13). Despite these equity-based concerns, the gender disparities in post-war consultation and decision-making are stark. It is notable that all members of the Advisory Group and the research team were men, as were 75% of those interviewed for the evaluation. We know that life in Tigray before, during and after the war is highly gendered. Gender disparities are pervasive and necessarily reproduced through social institutions unless they are explicitly acknowledged and addressed (GWG, 2017). The absence of women’s inputs in the design and evaluation of the AEP is not only an injustice, but a hermeneutical blind spot and a missed opportunity for a holistic understanding of educational purposes and processes (Criado-Perez 2019). Equity-oriented decision-making in education requires women’s involvement throughout processes of planning, consultation, evaluation and research. The present study identifies this as a significant gap in post-war decision-making around the AEP.

Secondly, while the partnership described in this paper does not repeat the familiar local-external power dynamics reported in the literature, it does suggest a metropole-periphery dynamic of inequality, where the periphery reflects rural areas and those distant from the regional capital. In drawing on expertise and information from Mekelle, the partnership may have resulted in an AEP initiative better suited to the metropolitan centre than more remote settings, as the above account suggests. This dynamic has been widely reported in the Ethiopian context (e.g. Yorke et al., 2021; Tiruneh et al., 2025) and may be unsurprising for any education system shattered by conflict; however, it is notable that the partnership between the local researchers and middle tier actors in this case led to a differentiated approach, better suited to local realities.

This study contribution to understanding knowledge production on education in Africa. While much previous work on education consultancy has highlighted its negative aspects, in terms of the dominance of external agendas, financial motivations, and the de-professionalisation of researchers (e.g. Pilon, 2016; Samoff, 2025), this case has presented a different kind of policy-research partnership, where the commissioning agency is a middle tier government agency, and the researchers’ work draws entirely on their own capacities and commitments. This kind of endogenous, policy-focused research partnership may be more prevalent than suggested in the literature – if so, the absence of international actors’ involvement would likely contribute to this neglect. As a final note, it is important to emphasise that the challenge of restoring inclusive, equitable education for all in Tigray has not been achieved; the latest estimates are that only 54% of eligible young people in the region are accessing schooling. However, this piece has demonstrated the role and value of local university-based researchers for regional educational decision-making in the aftermath of the war.

References

- Aboderin, I., Fuh, D., Gebremariam, E. B., & Segalo, P. (2023). Beyond ‘equitable partnerships’: the imperative of transformative research collaborations with Africa. *Global Social Challenges Journal*, 2(2), 212-228.
- Accelerated Education Working Group (AEWG). (2017). Accelerated Education: 10 principles for effective practice. *Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies*. http://inee.org/sites/default/files/resources/336_aewg_accelerated_education_10_principles-screen.pdf
- Addis Standard (2024) News: Court to hear Tigray teachers' lawsuit against regional, federal authorities over 17 months unpaid salaries. <https://addisstandard.com/court-to-hear-tigray-teachers-lawsuit-against-regional-federal-authorities-over-17-months-unpaid-salaries/>
- African Union (2025). Continental Education Strategy for Africa 2026-2035: A Framework for Africa.
- African Union. (2022). Agreement for Lasting Peace Through a Permanent Cessation of Hostilities between the Government of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and The Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF). Pretoria: South Africa.
- Akyeampong, K., & Higgins, S. (2025). *Reconceptualising the Learning Crisis in Africa: Multi-dimensional Pedagogies of Accelerated Learning Programmes*. Taylor & Francis.
- Andrews, M., Pritchett, L., & Woolcock, M. (2013). Escaping capability traps through problem driven iterative adaptation (PDIA). *World Development*, 51, 234-244.
- Anonymous. (2025). *Mekelle Stories: Life in Time of War*. Addis-Ababa: Centre français des études éthiopiennes. <https://doi.org/10.4000/13lms>
- Arnot, T., & Seeger, A. (2021). *The Jordan Ministry of Education’s response to the Syria refugee crisis*. UNESCO-IIEP. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000380459/PDF/380459eng.pdf.multi>
- Asare, S., Mitchell, R., & Rose, P. (2022). How equitable are South-North partnerships in education research? Evidence from sub-Saharan Africa. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 52(4), 654-673.
- Asgedom, A., Carvalho, S., & Rose, P. (2022). Negotiating Equity: Examining Priorities, Ownership, and Politics Shaping Ethiopia’s Large-Scale Education Reforms for Equitable Learning. https://riseprogramme.org/sites/default/files/publications/Negotiating_Equity_Examining_Priorities_Ownership_Politics_Shaping_Ethiopia_Education_Reforms_Equitable_Learning.pdf
- Boothby, N., Mills, A. L., Sharon, Y., & Salvatory, S. (2024). Rethinking Accelerated Education Programmes in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Tanzania. In M. Crossley, L. Tikly, A. M. Barrett, & J. Paulson (Eds.), *Education and Resilience in Crisis: challenges and opportunities in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Bristol University Press. <https://bristoluniversitypressdigital.com/edcollchap/book/9781529234718/ch001.xml>

- Commission of Inquiry on Tigray Genocide (CITG) (2025) *The Plight of Internally Displaced Persons in Tigray: A Special Assessment Report*. <https://citghub.org/the-plight-of-internally-displaced-persons-in-tigray-a-special-assessment-report/>
- Evennett, H. (2022) *Conflict in the Tigray region of Ethiopia*. House of Lords Library. <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/conflict-in-the-tigray-region-of-ethiopia/>
- Faul, M. V., & Savage, L. (2023). Conclusion: beyond silver bullet solutions. In *Systems Thinking in International Education and Development* (pp. 223-235). Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing*. Oxford university press.
- Gallagher, A., Robinson, G., Hughes, J., & Connolly, D. (2019). Education in conflict-affected areas. Education in conflict-affected areas. British Council. https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/global_education_security_and_stability_report_0319.pdf
- Gebremeskel, H.H. (2024) Tales of my shoes: A reminder of the two hellish years of the Tigray war we endured in Ethiopia. *Global Voices*. <https://globalvoices.org/2024/11/02/tales-of-my-shoes-a-reminder-of-the-two-hellish-years-of-the-tigray-war-we-endured-in-ethiopia/>
- Gebre, A.H. and Hagos, B. (2023) 'Education is a humanitarian imperative for children in Tigray, Ethiopia', GPE.
- Gemeda, F. T., & Tynjala, P. (2015). Professional learning of teachers in Ethiopia: Challenges and implications for reform. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 40(5), 1-26.
- Gender Working Group (GWG). (2017). *A Common Framework for Gender Equality & Social Inclusion*. <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2017/04/gesi-framework>
- Gichuhi, L., Kalista, J. (2022). The Kenya Ministry of Education's response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. UNESCO-IIEP.
- Glowach, T. (2025). A systematic review of systems leadership in education: taking a social justice lens. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2025.2481060>
- Guesh, K. (2023). Postwar recovery of the Tigray education system: Challenges and support needed. World Education Blog. <https://world-education-blog.org/2023/09/27/postwar-recovery-of-the-tigray-education-system-challenges-and-support-needed/>
- Hajir, B., & Qato, M. (2025). Scholasticidal Tendencies: Notes on Academia During. *Palestine and the Western Academe: Fighting the Exception, Defending Epistemic Justice*, 112.
- Hountondji, Paulin (Ed.), 1997. *Endogenous Knowledge: Research Trails*. CODESRIA, Dakar.
- Hussien, J. O. (2021). Revamping Centers for Teacher Education and School Leadership Development in Ethiopia: A Pathway to Excellence. *Ethiopian Journal of Behavioral Studies*, 4(1), 26–53.
- Menashy, F. (2019). *International aid to education: Power dynamics in an era of partnership*. Teachers College Press.
- Menendez, A., Ramesh, A., Baxter, P., North L. (2016). Accelerated Education Programs in Crisis and Conflict: Building Evidence and Learning. USAID. <https://inee.org/sites/default/files/resources/AEP%20-%20Brief.pdf>
- Mitchell, R., Agbaire, J., Paulson, J., Tikly, L. (2025) Endogenous systems leadership of education provision during crises in low- and middle-income countries: A conceptual framework. *Prospects* (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-025-09732-0>
- Mitchell, R., Rose, P., & Asare, S. (2020). Education research in sub-Saharan Africa: Quality, visibility, and agendas. *Comparative Education Review*, 64(3), 363-383.

- Ndabananiye, J., Ndiaye, A., Thanh, J., & Tréguier, M. (2021). Éducation en situation d'urgence : engagement et leadership du MENAPLN au Burkina Faso. UNESCO-IIEP. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000380440/PDF/380440fre.pdf.multi>
- Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S. J. (2013). *Coloniality of power in postcolonial Africa*. African Books Collective.
- Novelli, M. (2023). Politics, power & partnerships: the imperial past and present of international education and development (BAICE presidential address 2022). *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 53(6), 915-929.
- Oddy, J. (2023). Retelling education in emergencies through the black radical tradition: On racial capitalism, critical race theory and fugitivity. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 446–460. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2023.2272740>
- OHCHR (2024) *UN experts deeply concerned over 'scholasticide' in Gaza*. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/04/un-experts-deeply-concerned-over-scholasticide-gaza>
- Perez, C. C. (2019). *Invisible women: Data bias in a world designed for men*. Abrams.
- Pilon, M. (2016). Research as a Means of Fulfilling the Need for Knowledge on Education: Looking back on Research Experiences in French-Speaking Africa. <https://resources.norrageducation.org/resource/view/43/219>
- Plan International (2025) Tigray, Ethiopia: helping children stay in school. https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/news-stories/stories/tigray-ethiopia-helping-children-stay-school_en
- Samoff, J. (2025). *Challenging the Research Complex: Education, External Influence, and Disrupting Dependence in Africa*. Taylor & Francis.
- Samoff, J., & Carrol, B. (2004). The promise of partnership and continuities of dependence: External support to higher education in Africa. *African Studies Review*, 67-199.
- Shah, R., Menashy, F., Chinnery, J., Bird, L., Bender, L.C., Ali, A., Zakharia, Z. and Shuayb, M. (2025). Reimagining education in emergencies: a conversation between practitioners and scholars. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 55(1), pp.118-136.
- The Reporter (2024) Tigray admin pleads for Parliamentary intervention in undisbursed wartime budget issue. <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/40859/>
- Tigray Regional State Education Bureau (TREB). (2019). *Tigray Region Education Bureau Annual Abstract for 2018/19 academic year*. Mekelle, Tigray-Ethiopia.
- TREB. (2023). Multi-Sectoral Assessment Report Conducted from 18 Nov–8 December, 2023, Tigray Region – Ethiopia.
- TREB. (2025) *Tigray Education: Rapid Response since 2023 and the Way Forward*. Presentation to the Education Cluster and Government officials. Mekelle, Tigray-Ethiopia.
- Tiruneh, D. T., Chuta, N., Hailu, B. H., & Rose, P. (2025). Assessing the implementation of school-based teacher professional development programmes in primary schools in Ethiopia. *Professional Development in Education*, 1-25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2025.2577207>
- Tsegai, M., Tesfay, A., Abadi, F., Alemayehu, H., Gebremeskel, H., Weldegebriel, H., Reda, N.W., Fikadu, S., Hiluf, S. (2024a) *An Assessment of Accelerated Education Program Implementation in Tigray: A Summary Report*. Unpublished internal document submitted to TREB.
- Tsegai, M., Tesfay, A., Abadi, F., Alemayehu, H., Gebremeskel, H., Weldegebriel, H., Reda, N.W., Fikadu, S., Hiluf, S. (2024b) *Evidence from Focus Group Discussions*. Unpublished internal document submitted to TREB.

- UN News (2025) Israeli attacks on Gaza schools could be crimes against humanity: UN probe. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/06/1164191>
- UNGA (2016) Agenda for Humanity. Annex to the Report of the Secretary-General for the World Humanitarian Summit (A/70/709, 2 February 2016). <https://agendaforhumanity.org/sites/default/files/AgendaforHumanity.pdf>
- Walby, S. (2015). *Crisis*. Cambridge: Bristol: Polity Press.
- Weldemichel, T. G. (2025). Tigray war: Modern geographies of mass violence and the invisibilization of populations. *Political Geography*, 118.
- Weldemichel, T., Mezgbo, B. (2025) *Famine in Tigray: Hunger and Humiliation*. World Peace Foundation. <https://worldpeacefoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Famine-in-Tigray-final.pdf>
- Westbrook, J. (2025). Second Chance classrooms in Ethiopia and Liberia. In J. Westbrook & A. Kotler (Eds), *The Art of Global Peacebuilding and Excellence in Education: Pathways to Hopeful, Transformational Practice* (pp. 112–129). <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781032702728-10/second-chance-classrooms-ethiopia-liberia-jo-westbrook>
- Yorke, L., Rose, P., Tassew Woldehanna and Belay Hagos (2021). Strengthening the education system for equitable learning during Covid-19 in Ethiopia. <https://www.ukfiet.org/2021/strengthening-the-education-system-for-equitable-learning-during-covid-19-in-ethiopia/>
- Zerihun, Z., Mulugeta, A., Kidane, S., & Teklu, A. (2024). Traumatic Stress During Armed Conflict and Associated Siege: Experiences of Healthcare Workers and Teachers in Tigray, Ethiopia. <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-4262944/v1>

Annex 1 List of subjects, taught and self-study

Grades	Taught subjects	Self-study subjects
1-4	Tigrigna, English, mathematics, environmental sciences / Saho, Kunama (based on locale) /	Aesthetics, Amharic
5-6	Tigrigna, English, mathematics, environmental and social sciences, civics / Saho, Kunama /	Amharic, physical education and sport, art and music
7-8	Tigrigna, English, mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, social science, civics, / Saha, Kunama /	Amharic, physical education and sport, art and music
9-10	Tigrigna, English, mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, geography, history, civics	Amharic, physical education and sport, ICT
11-12	<i>Natural Science stream:</i> Tigrigna, English, mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, technical drawing, civics	Amharic, physical education and sport, ICT (could be delivered in class where ICT labs available)
	<i>Social Science Stream:</i> Tigrigna, English, mathematics, geography, history, civics, economics, business	Amharic, physical education and sport, ICT

Source: Tigray Region Education Bureau (2023)