

# Inclusive Support for Displaced Children in Ethiopia



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## Introduction

This booklet was produced as part of the project *Inclusive Education for Displaced Children in South Wollo Zone, Ethiopia*, implemented by *Berhan Lehetsanat* with Disability and Development Partners (DDP) from May 2023 to April 2025, and funded by the Educational Opportunity Foundation.

Our purpose is to share the experience of that project and what the partners have learned, from its successes and challenges alike.

## Context

Our project took place at the Mekane Eyesus IDP centre in Hayk, Tehuledere woreda, in Amhara's South Wollo zone: an under-served settlement of around 1,700 people, most of whom fled conflict – involving political, ethnic and land/resource-based tensions and various armed groups – in Western Ethiopia since 2019<sup>1</sup>. Unfortunately, Amhara was itself affected by conflict between the government and regional militia, for most of the project period.

When the project began in May 2023, children and their families in and around the IDP centre were facing many interrelated problems including food insecurity, psychosocial difficulties, low school attendance, and barriers to access for disabled children.

These problems persist in the region. In its *Monthly Protection Overview* of 30 April 2025, UNCHR said of the area's main IDP camp that “the absence of both education and child protection services is critical concern, significantly hindering children's cognitive, social, and emotional development. This gap in essential services also undermines the psychosocial well-being of parents, with far-reaching, long-term effects on the socio-economic stability of individuals, families, and wider community.”

UNHCR reports a significant deterioration in the condition of IDPs in all camps, and in the provision of food supplies, already irregular and insufficient.

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<sup>1</sup> For background on the conflict, see [https://riftvalley.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/RVI-2023.03.14-Western-Oromia\\_Conflict-Trend-Report.pdf](https://riftvalley.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/RVI-2023.03.14-Western-Oromia_Conflict-Trend-Report.pdf)

## The project

We applied to the Displacement Education Fund of BFSS, now the Educational Opportunity Foundation (EOF) which gave a generous grant of £58,000 to run this two-year project, aiming (a) to improve the wellbeing of displaced children, through psychosocial and educational support; (b) to enable displaced and disabled children, not in formal education, to attend school; and (c) to train teachers and carers in understanding and addressing the psychosocial needs of children and young people.



We believed that psychosocial support would be a precondition for meaningful education, and proposed to work with local schools, local government and community leaders to make education accessible and adapted to displaced children facing geographical, linguistic and physical barriers to attendance.

## Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the staff of *Berhan Lehetsanat* in Addis Ababa, Dessie and Hayk who realized this project, and for the support of EOF. We are particularly grateful to local humanitarian specialist Anwar Mohammed Amin, who carried out a 2024-25 assessment of the project's impacts on psychosocial wellbeing.

*The term 'participants' is used in preference to 'beneficiaries' to reflect the partners' efforts to involve people actively, respect agency and avoid assuming benefits – in advance, or independently of the perceptions of those concerned.*

## Planning

### Problem

For *Berhan Lehetsanat* (BL), with 28 years of expertise in children and disability, this was a first displacement-focused project. By their nature, IDP communities are populations in flux: residents can come and go, follow avenues of perceived security and support, often with the hope of returning home in mind.

### Intervention

In advance, BL consulted local authorities, school staff, community leaders, the IDP coordination office, and local experts on IDP issues, to incorporate their ideas, concerns and recommendations into the planning. We hoped to promote the intervention's longer-term sustainability through coordination with local government, schools and the local community – without raising unrealistic expectations.

BL did a rapid needs assessment: of living conditions, available services, educational and psychosocial needs, barriers to school attendance, demographics, disability and accessibility. We also consulted international organizations specializing in psychosocial assistance to children, but without success. Relevant staff had moved on, or perhaps they lacked time to share details of their approaches beyond their published information.

### Impact

The assessment gave insights into the most pressing needs of children and their families, and factors affecting school attendance. Aspects of the dynamic situation only became clear as we went along. Nutrition support had been considered the domain of other agencies, but BL realized that deliveries were very unreliable, keeping children out of school. We had expected psychosocial wellbeing to be a precondition for education, not the upsurge in malnutrition.

### Reflections

It showed the need to be flexible and responsive, not come with all the answers, but also the value of lead-in preparation time, especially in a new area. A database can help establish the profile of the population and participants, but needs very regular revision in a changing situation. We had to develop transparent criteria for support, in consultation with IDPs' representatives, and would call for a maximum of information-sharing.

## Educational inclusion

### Problem

Displaced families faced barriers to their children's school enrolment, including poverty, food insecurity, the disruption and instability of displacement, conflict-related trauma, and in some cases disability. For their part, the schools were not set up to deal with all these needs on top of their current workload.

### Intervention

BL carried out an campaign to meet and inform parents and carers about the benefits of children's educational continuity. Practical, material assistance was provided at the start of each school year in the form of exercise books, pens and pencils, and staple foodstuffs such as flour, for the families in most need.

Training was organized for teachers, school directors and local education officials on supporting displaced and disabled children. The teachers developed their understanding of the needs, language levels, and trauma of displaced children, how to identify them and adapt their teaching. The schools were provided with inclusive learning materials for learners with disabilities.

### Impact

The support helped foster a sense of stability for almost 500 displaced children, and to mitigate the effects of displacement on their education. For children who had missed out on formal education in recent years, school equipment and food were practical necessities but also had intangible benefits for their motivation, self-esteem and cognitive development, reducing dropout.

A very welcome outcome of the training was that participants launched an after-school tutorial programme to support displaced children, planned by school directors and monitored by the local Education Office and BL.

### Reflections

Educational inclusion is multi-dimensional, and needs to be approached in a holistic way, involving the whole community: children, parents/carers, schools, education authorities and local people. Helping children and young people back into school – and to stay there – involved addressing their material, physical and psychosocial needs and those of their families, and ensuring that the schools were also in a better position to do so.

## Accessibility

### Problem

There are local schools near the IDP settlement, but they were not built with accessibility in mind. We set out to remove barriers to displaced and/or disabled children, so all could be welcomed, and feel they belonged there.

### Intervention

Disability access was improved at two schools by installing ramps, modifying existing toilets (widening doors, installing handrails, and creating wheelchair turning spaces), and widening doorways in key classrooms and corridors. The accessibility works took place in the school holidays to avoid disruption.

Some displaced and local children were also enabled to attend school just through the distribution of assistive devices and mobility aids. BL also worked with the IDP settlement committee to raise awareness of the need for accessible infrastructure, such as latrines near the shelters of disabled people.

### Impact

Feedback at the end of the project indicated general satisfaction with accessibility, though some said there was more to do. And it's good to bear in mind the possibility that positive responses could reflect politeness, perceived expectations, relationship management... as well as honest feedback.

Following discussions between the camp committee and disabled residents facilitated by BL, some were able to relocate closer to the latrine, and new accessible facilities were constructed, improving hygiene and safety.

### Reflections

An inclusive, consultative 'universal design' approach at the start of infrastructure projects will benefit future generations of children, adults and older people, and the diverse needs of host and displaced communities alike.

Our evaluation noted the need for accessible latrines, walkways, water points and ramps in the IDP settlement, and the removal of hazardous materials near schools. The representation of disabled people on the camp committee in future should increase awareness of such issues. Accessibility remains a work in progress. At the end of the project, the participants had begun to discuss the inclusiveness of play areas.

## Psychosocial wellbeing

### Problem

The children involved in this project have experienced huge challenges in their young lives, including the loss of their homes, violence and conflict, bereavement and forced displacement – magnified, for some, through the lens of disability. All this will have had profound emotional and psychological impacts, exacerbated by the ongoing precarity of life in an IDP settlement.

### Intervention



In both years of the project, BL organized sessions for displaced and local parents, with a trainer from the local university's psychology department, on psychosocial support for children. They focused on 'positive parenting', understanding mental health needs, stress management, psychological first aid, building community resilience, facilitating supportive groups, and sharing resources, in order to strengthen the psychosocial fabric of displaced communities.

Meanwhile, the project's social workers had regular meetings with children, teachers and families to assess emotional and psychological wellbeing and to offer support. This support aims to create a more inclusive and supportive community for affected families.

The training was cascaded to the entire displaced population through community conversations/coffee ceremonies, and social and religious gatherings – including those shared with the host community.

## Impact

Feedback from parents involved in training and discussion sessions – covering psychosocial issues, adaptation to the challenges of displacement, group counselling, mutual support and positive parenting skills – suggest that there have been benefits for their energy, outlook, family life and community integration. Many talked about changes in their own behaviour, and a reduction in stress levels thanks to improved coping mechanisms.

Some have acted as informal counsellors for neighbours in difficulty, and have shared the insights they gained during traditional coffee ceremonies. BL encourages the use of this forum to discuss issues and longer-term hopes and plans and share challenges as a conflict-affected community.

The experience provides evidence for the value of psychosocial interventions for children in low-resource humanitarian settings, suggesting that a psychosocial support component can help to address complex needs, promoting resilience and empowerment through parental education, academic and trauma-informed support.

## Reflections

Displaced and disabled children's exclusion is multifaceted, encompassing inaccessible infrastructure, stigma, and a lack of teacher training. Experience suggests that integrating psychosocial support with inclusive education can improve academic outcomes and foster wellbeing and social cohesion.

Trauma-informed pedagogy and peer support reduce stigma and empower children to engage meaningfully with their communities<sup>2</sup>. Families also benefit from holistic approaches, as caregiver involvement enhances children's adaptive capacities and strengthens community networks of support<sup>3</sup>.

Until psychosocial support and inclusive practices are combined, many displaced and disabled children will continue to be at risk of prolonged marginalization. We hope our project for the inclusive education of displaced children has helped to address this gap, and show that integrated approaches can enhance educational access, psychosocial wellbeing and social inclusion.

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<sup>2</sup> Nemiro, A, Hijazi, Z, O'Connell, R, Coetzee, A, & Snider, L (2022). *Mental health and psychosocial wellbeing in education*. Intervention Journal of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Conflict-Affected Areas, 20(1), 36-45.

## Tesfa



Tesfa was born in Wellega, Oromia in 2012, to a farming family. He was in the second grade of school when conflict erupted. Relatives were killed, and Tesfa dropped out of school. As the security situation worsened, his family set off on foot for the Amhara region where their forbears had lived.

On arrival, the family was relocated to the Mekane-Eyesus IDP Camp. Looking back on those days, Tesfa remembers the hunger, and says "I gave up on life."

Through *Berhan Lehetsanat*, Tesfa benefited from psychological counselling, which restored hope and encouraged him to pursue his studies. Food assistance alleviated his family's hunger during desperate times, and play equipment and a safe space in the camp brought a reminder of childhood.

Having reached the fourth grade, Tesfa expressed gratitude for the opportunities he has received. "After many challenges, this support has enabled me to continue my education in a peaceful place." He is dedicated to studying hard and engaging with the sciences.

Over a four-month assessment period, significant positive changes were observed in Tesfa, as the educational and psychosocial support he received allowed him to start thinking about his aspirations for the future.

Recognizing the many challenges faced by people in his community and the critical role that healthcare plays in improving lives, Tesfa believes that – with the right resources and guidance – he can overcome obstacles and achieve his dream of becoming a doctor, in order to make a positive impact on the wellbeing of those around him and contribute positively to society.

Tesfa's name means 'hope'.

<sup>3</sup> Imaniah, I & Fitria, N (2018). *Inclusive education for students with disability*. SHS Web of Conferences (Vol. 42, p. 00039), EDP Sciences.

## Child-friendly spaces

### Problem

At the start of the project there was nowhere in the IDP settlement for children to meet and play.

### Intervention

Berhan Lehetsanat worked with the IDP camp coordination committee to set aside a safe and accessible space for children and their parents – for some time out from the daily grind of surviving in the ongoing limbo of displacement, and just to be children.

Various play equipment was supplied throughout the project, including jigsaw puzzles, alphabet and number games, educational and musical toys, complemented by some outdoor equipment such as swings and slides, which had been partially installed during previous relief programmes. Arts and crafts activities, games and storytelling sessions were organized, to foster social interaction and emotional development.

### Impact

In interviews, children expressed their satisfaction at being able to play with their peers, and parents observed positive changes in their mood and morale. The child-friendly space evolved into more than just a physical play area, becoming a vibrant hub for community engagement where children and families could come together and enhance their psychosocial well-being in a safe and nurturing environment.

### Reflections

It was important for the project that spaces should be inclusive, including for children with disabilities. 87% of caregivers interviewed were confident that access to play areas and opportunities for recreation and socialization were accessible. It is important to bear in mind the need for maintenance of equipment, the sustainability of activities, making them independent of the timebound project and fostering ownership by the participants. Further work may well be needed to ensure that play areas are and remain fully inclusive, accessible and welcoming for all children.

## Food security



### Problem

Early on, we learned that food deliveries were unreliable and irregular, affected by US sanctions and later by the freezing of US aid. Displaced children faced malnutrition, with implications for health, cognitive development and emotional wellbeing; it was the main factor influencing school attendance.

### Intervention

In each year of the project, to fill this gap in nutritional support, we bought and distributed staples – mainly flour – to the families of children most in need. This did not fill all their dietary needs, but it took significant pressure off household budgets and the time needed to find food.

### Impact

Helping families to provide a regular breakfast enabled children to focus on their education, attend school, concentrate, socialize, and improved their morale. It gave a boost to enrolment and attendance at the start of each year.

### Reflections

The unplanned pivot towards food aid showed the importance of being open to learning about the priorities of the people concerned, and of meeting basic needs in the first instance. Addressing ‘food poverty’ had at least as much impact on educational inclusion as the psychosocial activities.

## Coordination with other stakeholders

### Problem

We wanted to avoid duplication, insensitivity, interference or conflict, and any perception of some external agenda being imposed, but to ensure that our project was aligned with the interests of displaced, distressed and disabled children and their families, their schools, communities and representatives, and that the results would be sustained and if possible multiplied.

Conflict between the Federal government and Fano militia brought extra layers of instability, tension and restricted internet access. We were conscious of the risk of outside organizations wading into a difficult situation, lacking coordination, arousing suspicion, over-promising, raising hopes, or not staying. A key local staff member was lost to an international organization.

### Intervention

BL always works with whole communities and alongside stakeholders, elected representative bodies and relevant authorities, to cultivate relationships and synergies that will benefit the children they support. From the outset, BL maintained contact with the IDP camp committee, and joined the relevant coordination cluster of agencies/NGOs working in each humanitarian sector.

BL already had working relationships with local authorities through existing projects, contacts at the local university, and took on project staff with experience of the issues faced by displaced and disabled children.

The project began with a launch workshop to establish common understanding and cooperation with representatives from local Departments of Finance; Education; Women, Children, and Social Affairs; Food Security and Disaster Prevention; the IDP camp committee; and disability organizations.

### Impact

For effective and ethical implementation, it was essential to obtain and maintain the commitment of all these stakeholders, revisited at periodic review meetings. The process raised awareness among duty-bearers of the educational and psychosocial needs of displaced and disabled children, which we hope will inform future planning. Through this project, schools and local education officials set up their own after-school catch-up tutoring programme.

## Community bridge-building and social cohesion

### Problem

We understood that those fleeing violence in western Ethiopia had been welcomed by local people in Tehuledere, though interaction between the displaced and host communities could be limited. Our project aimed to serve the common interests of all in cooperation, solidarity and good-quality, inclusive education for their children, removing existing barriers.

### Intervention



Members of the local community were invited to take part in meetings with displaced parents, representatives from schools, local government, religious leaders, women's associations and others, focused on understanding the needs of conflict-affected children and children with disabilities. In the second year of the project, they also participated together in coffee ceremonies and community conversations, and cultural events such as the *Buhe* bread festival.

### Impact

We believe our project helped local people develop a better understanding of their displaced neighbours' and children's educational and psychosocial needs. Five local children with disabilities whose mobility problems had kept them from school were provided with assistive devices, and are now attending. Two local schools are more accessible for current and future generations of children, thanks to ramps and other adaptations made by BL, which will also serve as a model for other schools and organizations.

### Reflections

Taking a whole-community approach, and bringing people together over mutual understanding and interests, has been to everyone's benefit, avoiding the potential for division between migrant and local communities.

## Hikma



Hikma was born in Oromia, in 2011. She had a complicated childhood, with challenges including speech and learning disabilities.

In 2021 war broke out, and Hikma's parents feared her cries would give them away as they hid from the militia. Hikma still remembers the gunfire and the chaos, but the troubling memories gradually dimmed as she adapted to the new environment of the Mekane-Eyesus IDP, where the family started a new life.

The support Hikma received from BL have helped her navigate the challenges of disability and the trauma of displacement. Through psychosocial counselling, Hikma's family gained valuable insights and guidance, helping Hikma process her experiences, and her parents to support her.

BL's food distributions alleviated some of their immediate needs, improved physical wellbeing, and allowed the family to focus on Hikma's emotional and educational needs without the added stress of hunger.

Toys and games helped Hikma to engage in play, a crucial aspect of childhood that supports cognitive and emotional development, learning and social interaction. They contributed to her overall happiness and wellbeing.

Educational materials were a transformative form of support for Hikma, enabling her to enter the school system as a student with special needs. Resources designed for children with disabilities helped Hikma make remarkable progress in recognizing letters and numbers, demonstrating significant improvements in her cognitive abilities. Hikma's family has been overjoyed to see her flourishing through education.

Hikma faced challenges that prevented her from enrolling in school, she was stressed and traumatized. But the various strands of this project have had profound effects on her life. Now she engages and plays with her peers at the IDP settlement's child-friendly space, goes off to school with friends each day, exudes happiness, and gives her family a sense of hope for a brighter future.

## Recommendations

- Fund organizations like *Berhan Lehetsanat* to maintain and expand support for IDP children, particularly in education and mental health services.
- Develop comprehensive programmes, with mental health and psychosocial support at their heart, to address the multifaceted needs of displaced children.
- Foster collaboration between NGOs, local communities, and government entities to create a supportive environment for IDP families, encouraging community involvement in and responsibility for recovery efforts.
- Develop programmes that empower local communities to support IDP families, fostering a sense of belonging and shared interests.
- Implement robust child protection policies to safeguard against exploitation and abuse within IDP camps, ensuring a safe environment for all children
- Establish peer support groups for children and families affected by displacement: to share experiences, build community ties, and foster healing.
- Introduce literacy, vocational and life skills training and income-generation activities to promote families' economic stability and independence.
- Ensure that displaced children and their families have access to comprehensive healthcare, including mental health services, to address both physical and psychological needs.
- Develop strategies to facilitate the continued education of displaced children, including mobile schools or distance learning options, to minimize disruption due to conflict or displacement.
- Continuing professional development for teachers in inclusive education practices and trauma-informed teaching methods to better support the needs of displaced children.
- Engage with policymakers to develop a supportive framework that addresses the rights and needs of internally displaced persons, particularly children.
- Train IDP camp committee members and carers in psychosocial support (PSS) and psychological first-aid (PFA).