

# The Role of Media in Humanitarian Interventions and Relief Campaigns on the Example of Slovak non-profits Response to the Conflict in Ethiopia

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## Abstract:

Despite promising democratization reforms in 2018 and awards from abroad in 2019, in November 2020, Ethiopia (Africa's second most populous country) once again fell into the abyss of authoritarianism culminating in ethnically-driven violence and subsequent humanitarian disaster the Tigray Region in the north of the country. In this paper, the Slovak intervention by members of *Ambrela – Platform for Development Organizations* with its relief campaign *Together for Ethiopia* (March–April 2021) is analyzed. It also focuses on the role of media coverage in aid intervention and its impact on donors behavior.

## Introduction

The conflict between the Ethiopian federal government and the regional Tigrayan government from November 2020 continues to this day and not only people living in Tigray region pay for it. As a result of the fighting, people in fear for their lives are forced to flee their homes, often without access to food, drinking water, medicine or safe haven that would protect them from further violence. (Zahorik, 2021, Lowcock, 2021) According to UN estimates from the beginning of 2021, 5 million people in the region were in need of assistance (Gerth-Niculescu, 2021), which can be compared the population of the whole of Slovakia. Slovak non-profits, together with the Ambrela platform, through their local partners directly in Tigray, closely monitored the deteriorating situation.

In March 2021, 5 Slovak aid organizations established the ‘Together for Ethiopia’ initiative and launched a fundraising campaign in response to the ongoing humanitarian crisis in the northern Ethiopian region of Tigray. With the support of Slovak donors, they wanted to provide the local population with drinking water, food, shelter, medicine and other necessities in the first phase, and psychosocial and post-traumatic support for the victims of the crisis in the next phase. This paper focuses on a joint communication as well as a fundraising strategy in an analyzed relief campaign.

## Methodology and research participants

The aim of this paper is to identify activities of Slovak organizations alleviating the humanitarian crisis in Tigray region and to analyze an impact of a fundraising campaign *Together for Ethiopia* with its media coverage on their relief activities. Qualitative research methods (content analysis of project documents, non-profits websites, media outputs and following structured interviews with project managers from particular aid nonprofits) have been chosen for validation.

The *Together for Ethiopia* campaign was an initiative of 5 Slovak aid organizations: eRko – Good News (Dobra novina), Mary’s Meals Slovakia, Integra Foundation, SAVIO, Caritas Slovakia with the support of the *Platform for Development Organizations – Ambrela*. All of these or-

ganizations have long been involved in development activities in sub-Saharan Africa. (Together for Ethiopia, 2021) “*We prepared the whole campaign in about 5 weeks, when we had to play together as organizations, to develop and fine-tune joint communication and to make the campaign technically sound (the way of contributing, launching the website). It was a very labor-intensive period, but we were able to tune in to one wave and focus on a common goal. We also cared a lot about the involvement of the MFEA Slovakia,*” said the Team of Good News (Dobra novina) under the leadership of eRko.

As part of the joint challenge, the local partners – the Congregation of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent (Daughters of Charity Tigray Region), which has long been cooperating with eRko and Mary’s Meals; the Charity Tearfund as a project partner of the Integra Foundation directly in Tigray; and the Volontariato Internazionale per lo Sviluppo (VIS) as a direct partner of SAVIO – were to provide specific assistance to people in need directly at the scene of the crisis. Thanks to these local partnerships, the joint initiative was able to provide effective and targeted assistance directly in the conflict area, namely in Mekelle – the capital of the Tigray Region and its wider surroundings.

The Ambrela platform represents the interests of 29 Slovak non-profits working in the field of humanitarian aid, development cooperation or global education. (Ambrela, 2021) It supported the campaign by communication (support on the web and social networks), media production (press releases, journalistic speeches and public discussion’s organization) and also through advocacy and partnership creation (at the level of the MFEA Slovakia and Slovak Agency for International Development Cooperation – SAIDC). Ambrela’s online discussion entitled ‘How Slovakia can help the Ethiopian people during the war in the Tigray Region’ from April 2021 addressed the topic of urgent humanitarian aid to the people affected by the war in the Tigray region. The discussion was viewed by 8,000 people, which is important not only for advocacy, support of donation behavior of the Slovak population, but also for global education, public awareness and motivation for solidarity with the needy in the countries of the Global South.

## Results

In the event of disasters, the media play an important role in both launching and accelerating humanitarian interventions and public collections to support them. Media coverage awakens the general public's interest in the subject, sympathy for the people affected and the need to help. The research team of Brown and Minty (2006) listed 5 phenomena that can promote generosity and increase the level of donor behavior in the population. **1)** the timing, when the crisis takes place during the celebration of important holidays, emphasizing compassion and solidarity associated with donating a financial contribution to a charity or a material gift to the needy. In the case of Together for Ethiopia initiative, it was a Christian holiday of Easter. (Markovic Baluchova, 2022) **2)** geographical proximity, when tourists, international volunteers, or donors from adoption program are familiar with the area in question and publicly share their memories of the area visited and their concerns. **3)** tax incentives, where donors can claim tax reliefs when reporting a contribution to a charity campaign, a public fundraiser. **4)** technological facilitation of donation, where a non-profit visibly places a direct donation button or a quick link to make a financial contribution on a well-known website. **5)** 'buy-in' donation model, coupled with a 'commitment' model influenced by both the media and one's friends, where individuals feel led or even compelled to help because their friends or colleagues have already contributed and have boasted about their donation on social media, for example. Today, this model would be modified or rather enriched by a contribution to the topic or direct support of the donation from national influencers and influencers on social media. The Together for Ethiopia initiative has been supported in this way by male and female artists (a singer Janais, a comedian Fero Joke). (Markovic Baluchova, 2022).

In 2016, non-profit workers participating in the qualitative research (Baluchova, Kozusnikova, 2016) agreed with the assertion that the media coverage of the humanitarian crisis directly influences the behavior of the reading community resulting in a willingness to donate to help the victims of a given disaster. Therefore, charities do not underestimate the work and cooperation with the media (quite the contrary) as

news coverage and media work raise public awareness of the situation and the need of emergency in the disaster-affected country, as well as of the activities of the humanitarian organizations in the field. At the same time, media motivates audiences to take action and donate in an effort to save lives and contribute to the restoration of the country. The media, and consequently the public receiving the media content, then put pressure on their particular governments and organizations to act and provide assistance to the victims in the affected country. (Oosterhof *et al.*, 2009) "*Given the interconnectedness of Slovakia and Ethiopia, we wanted to bring information about the events in Tigray to our media which we did, but to a lesser extent than we would have liked,*" said the team of Good News (Dobra novina). The Integra Foundation team speaks literally of "*the struggle with the interest of the Slovak media in such a serious topic.*"

The implementation team of the initiative and the entire Together for Ethiopia campaign has, also thanks to Ambrela's support and advocacy work, attempted to implement a 'matching gift' or 'matching fund' instrument whereby a donor (e.g. a foundation) makes a donation of a certain amount to a specific organization based on the provision that another donor (e.g. a member of the public) will first donate that amount to that organization as part of a fundraising campaign. (Philanthropy works, 2021). Research on the phenomenon of donation and the example of the online giving portal Big Give from 2015 showed that more people (including 84% of the research respondents) tend to contribute to charity, and actually contribute more if they know that their donation will be valued and equally matched by a financial amount from another foundation or larger donor. The analyzed literature also indicated an increase in total campaign income of between 51% and 120% when matching, i.e. the aforementioned matching fund, was offered. (Philanthropy Impact, 2017)

The MFEA Slovakia provided a financial contribution of EUR 20,000 to the campaign. "*Despite the efforts of non-profits and the pre-communicated idea of joining forces, the matching fund instrument was not applied in its usual form. It was not possible to agree on a key of how the MFEA Slovakia would 'match' the proceeds of the public collection, nor on a greater involve-*

ment on the communication level. The opportunity to create more leverage was thus missed,” says Daniel Kaba, Ambrella’s Executive Secretary. As the full matching of the public contributions collected by the MFEA Slovakia did not happen in a way the campaign team had hoped, the campaign organizations themselves (through their own annual collections tied to the Christmas and Easter period) took finally the care of the increase in the entire amount. On the campaign’s website, it can be found that the joint collection was held at the end of 2021 and Slovakia finally supported the people affected by the war in Tigray with the total amount of EUR 96,448. (Together for Ethiopia, 2021)

All the participating organizations rate the cooperation on the awareness and fundraising campaign Together for Ethiopia positively. “Without this joint initiative, we probably would not have sent a hundred thousand euros to Ethiopia. We evaluate it positively overall, even though it has cost us all a lot of (volunteering) work, effort and time. After a long start of the campaign, the external presentation, PR and public acceptance of the campaign were very favorable. It turned out that people register and sensitively perceive even after the joint collection is over,” said the team of the Integra Foundation. “It was a unique opportunity to cooperate with other Slovak organizations. We enriched each other’s perspectives and proposals for solutions, we complemented each other’s work all the time, and our joint efforts translated into almost a hundred thousand euros for the people affected by the war in Tigray,” the Good News (Dobra novina) team confirms the importance of the cooperation. “In the future, both participating organizations and the Ambrella team plan to push for the incorporation of the ‘matching fund’ instrument into the cooperation with the MFEA Slovakia. This is a suitable incentive and a visible motivator for more stakeholders in the campaign, while multiplying the amount raised will help the targeted vulnerable community many times over,” says Daniel Kaba, Executive Secretary of Ambrella.

## Conclusion

The dialogue requested by the international community is not very realistic in the current situation. Both sides (the Ethiopian Federal Government and the Tigrayan troops) enclose them-

selves in bubbles of propaganda and accuse each other of human rights violations and war crimes. According to reports by non-profits and the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, suffering is inflicted on civilians and civilian women by all parties to the conflict. The fighting has destroyed crops in Tigray, people have nothing to eat and the flow of humanitarian aid is still limited. According to the UN, no humanitarian supplies have arrived in Tigray through the Semera-Abala-Mekelle corridor since mid-December 2021. (UN OCHA, 2021) It could end in the collapse and disintegration of Africa’s second most populous country, which would be a huge crisis for the entire continent. (Kacmar, 2021)

The Slovak organizations and involved Ambrella members will continue to fundraise for humanitarian aid to be delivered by their local partners to vulnerable groups directly in Ethiopia. The target group will include not only people in the blockaded Tigray region, but also internally displaced people in neighboring Ethiopian Regions and refugees in Sudan. The Together for Ethiopia initiative has shown that despite the challenging pandemic situation at home, Slovak donors are able to show solidarity, respond positively to the appeal of the civil sector and help the needy in (under-reported by the media, but worsening day by the day) humanitarian crisis.

One of the recommendations when using the matching fund instrument is to ask the donor for co-financing in the right and timely way – in a comprehensive and innovative way that will also be sufficiently presented to the public, thus raising the visibility of the work and assistance of the donors involved. Once an agreement on matching funding has been reached, the way in which the matching fund is communicated to donors on the campaign website, social media and in the media is then crucial and can really affect the course and outcome of the campaign. (Cody, 2021)

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