USAID and WFP Decision to Suspend Food Aid
Blamed on Ethiopian Government
Social Media Monitoring
July 2023

To support the humanitarian response in Ethiopia, Insecurity Insight is conducting ongoing social media monitoring to understand sentiments towards aid agencies and their programmes and risks for the aid sector resulting from misinformation and disinformation spread via social media. The aim is to contribute to the development of aid agencies’ communication strategies at a time when social media use is growing rapidly in many countries where such agencies operate.

Summary

This research brief discusses the main reactions and sentiments on social media in Ethiopia following USAID’s and WFP’s decision to suspend humanitarian food support after allegations of widespread diversion. Based on an analysis of social data gathered from 1 to 30 June 2023, the findings suggest the following:

- Social media users writing in Amharic, including from the Addis Ababa area, appear to be laying the blame for the aid agencies’ decision to suspend food aid at the feet of the government and prominent institutions, including the army.
- Some social media users – mostly located in Ethiopia’s Somali region – have welcomed the decision to suspend aid, believing that Ethiopia should be independent from humanitarian and foreign support.
- No social media trends reflecting overt hostility towards USAID or the WFP were noted. Moreover, no signs of misinformation and disinformation targeting international humanitarian organisations were detected in the research period.
- The assessment is limited to social media users writing in Amharic or Somali who discussed the issue of food aid suspension and referred directly to the WFP and USAID.

Context

On 3 May 2023, amid suspicions of large-scale aid diversion, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the World Food Programme (WFP) announced the suspension of food aid to the Tigray region in Ethiopia, pending an investigation. In June 2023 the two humanitarian organisations extended the suspension to include the whole country, after indications “that a widespread and coordinated campaign is diverting food assistance from the people of Ethiopia”.

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Local Ethiopian institutions, including the military and federal and regional government actors, were accused of being behind the large-scale diversion of food aid. According to the Humanitarian Resilience Development Donor Group (an organisation of donors briefed by USAID), “The scheme appears to be orchestrated by federal and regional Government of Ethiopia ... entities, with military units across the country benefiting from humanitarian assistance”.

The suspension of food aid by international organisations in Ethiopia is devastating for a country already struggling with severe food insecurity following a two-year conflict. Currently, more than 20 million Ethiopians are reliant on food aid due to a combination of deadly factors, including drought, conflict and inflation.

Methodology

Social data originating from Ethiopia was first collected from Facebook during the period 1-30 June 2023 using Boolean search queries focussing on the WFP and USAID. While the searches used English terms to refer to the “WFP” and “USAID”, the identified posts were written in the Amharic and Somali languages, and all opinions presented in this brief were written in one of these languages. The collected data did not include data from the Tigrayan and Oromian communities in Ethiopia. Insecurity Insight used proprietary technology powered by an artificial intelligence tool to collect the data.

Human analysis filtered the collected data to comb for possible misinformation, disinformation or malinformation and to identify Ethiopian sentiment toward the suspension of food aid. Priority was given to social media posts with the highest engagement actions (i.e. the number of other social media users’ social interactions with the original post). Relevant comments, usually accompanied by reactions (i.e. comments or replies), were manually analysed using an online participant observation approach to research social media users’ sentiments toward the suspension of food aid. An estimated 1,508 relevant Facebook comments were reviewed in preparation for this brief.

In view of the diversity of Ethiopian society, the relevance of the findings presented below is limited to Amharic- and Somali-speaking Ethiopians who are active on social media, who make up a relatively small proportion of the overall population. The social media users whose opinions are reflected in this brief are on average likely to be better educated, and probably form part of a politically engaged segment of Ethiopian society whose opinions have the potential to influence and reinforce sentiments among people of similar backgrounds.

Social media usage in Ethiopia

In January 2023 an estimated 20.86 million Ethiopians were internet users, while an estimated 6.4 million – or around 5.1% of the population – were social media users. Of these, 6 million were Facebook users, making this social media platform by far the most popular platform among Ethiopians. Twitter and Instagram users are estimated to be around 91,800 and 612,300 respectively. Source: Datareportal, 2023
Main findings

• Social media users writing in Amharic blame Ethiopia’s ruling institutions for the suspension of food aid.

Unlike other cases where humanitarian organisations faced a backlash from social media users when taking the difficult decision to withdraw from an area or a country, in this case no evidence of any adverse repercussions for USAID and the WFP was noted on social media in the form of negative or hostile commentary. While the main sentiment expressed in Amharic by Ethiopian social media users was that of dismay at the unfolding events, they did not focus their criticism on the aid agencies in question. Indeed, in a few cases social media users explicitly expressed understanding towards the agencies' decisions. One Ethiopian social media user who called USAID's action “appropriate” in a Facebook comment received 17 likes, which, coupled with the absence of any dissenting views expressed in reaction to the comment, seems to indicate that other social media users are of a similar view. In another comment a woman from Addis Ababa said: “USAID was right”.

Rather, social media users writing in Amharic directed blame for the disastrous decision on the country’s ruling institutions, including the government and the military. A social media user from Addis Ababa, apparently referring to Ethiopian First Lady Zinash Tayachew’s initiative of building a large bread factory in Addis Ababa, commented: “Zinash Tayachew’s bread factory is built with USAID wheat”, a comment echoed in other instances by other social media users. The comment received 49 likes and no dissenting views, implying peer approval. Another comment said, “we have stopped trusting the defence [forces, they are] thieves”. Comments like these appear to reflect the general sentiment expressed on social media that the government and linked institutions are responsible for the agencies’ withdrawal of food aid.

Disinformation targeting USAID and the WFP in October 2022

The findings in this brief covering social media in June 2023 are very different to posts identified in October 2022, when Insecurity Insight had found evidence of widespread disinformation campaigns concerning USAID and the WFP. This disinformation mainly consisted of attempts to tarnish the two aid organisations by associating them with the Tigrayan armed forces, including by claims that the aid agencies are supplying the rebels with aid in the form of weapons, fuel, vehicles and food.

The social media accounts responsible for some of the disinformation detected in October 2022 were reviewed in June 2023 to check whether they were still spreading disinformation. However, some of the accounts that had actively spread disinformation in October 2022 had been suspended or deactivated by June 2023, and those still active did not publish or react to content related to the aid sector.

Source: Twitter. October 2022
Social media users from the Somali region welcome the decision to suspend food aid.

While Amharic-speaking social media users based in Addis Ababa and other Ethiopian regions reacted to the news of the suspension of food aid by criticising the government and other local institutions, in general Somali-speaking users from the Somali region interacting on social media pages that focused on this region were welcoming of the agencies’ decision. Indeed, many argued that the decision will result in less dependency on food aid, because locals will be encouraged to use their fields to feed the local population. Capturing the general sentiment, a social media user writing in Somali commented in reaction to the news of the suspension of food aid: “I am happy because our land is good for production, and we will exploit it if they [international organisations] leave us alone, and our people will be out of poverty during droughts. They [international organisations] used to come at the time when the rains started so that the people didn't plant anything. This way we will be able to, thank God.”

Conclusions

This report focuses on social media users’ sentiments around the suspension of food aid in Ethiopia and represents the views of Facebook users who speak Amharic and Somali and who are concentrated in the Addis Ababa area and the eastern Somali region. There was no indication that the social media users whose views are discussed here are themselves direct recipients of food aid.

The report finds that Amharic-speaking civilians in the Addis Ababa area blamed Ethiopian government institutions and actors for the suspension of food aid. The reasons behind this sentiment could be based on anything from political anti-government resentment to deeply rooted religious or ethnic grievances. In the Somali region, although Facebook users welcomed the decision to suspend aid, this sentiment does not seem to have been spurred by hostility toward international aid organisations. The data examined for this brief did not include data relevant to the Tigrayan and Oromian communities.

It is worth noting that the decision to cut ties with the Ethiopian institutions accused of corruption may have spared international institutions criticism by social media users. Indeed, as other contexts such as Syria have shown, social media users tend to be very critical of aid agencies when they are perceived to be collaborating with or close to governments perceived as corrupt (see our publication on online criticism of aid distribution in Syria and another on negative sentiment towards the United Nations in Syria, which was perceived to be closely linked to the Assad government).

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