

# Political and Economic Exclusion-Induced Conflict and Displacement: Evidences from Metekel Zone, Benishangul Gumuz National Regional State (BGNRS)

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## Abstract

*This study examined factors that drive exclusion-induced conflict and displacement in the Metekel zone. Data was collected from a sample of 435 respondents, i.e., 359 households' surveys, 60 focus group discussants, and 16 key informant interviews. Evidence suggested that exclusion has been deep, and the scale of conflict, violence, and displacement was pervasive. Ethnicity was the main factor in excluding households from exercising rights to access resources. Light skin color ("qey" in Amharic) also served as a marker of otherness (non-indigenous). During times of conflict, the so-called qey were indiscriminately attacked. A case in point was what happened to the Shinasha, whose light skin color had a more devastating effect than their ethnicity. Legal frameworks, administrative and executive institutions were fused with ethnicity as facilitators of exclusion and inclusion. BGNRS's constitution defined some ethnic groups as "indigenous" and the remaining as "others" or "non-indigenous". During exclusion-induced conflict incidents of 2018 to 2021, households from Amhara, Agew, Oromo, and Shinasha were targeted based on their ethnicity and skin color, resulting in discrimination, restricted access to services and rights of mobility. The study concluded that political exclusion engendered by ethnic federalism has induced conflicts with devastating effects on economic, social, and political dimensions causing large-scale displacements, violent attacks, loss of lives and community divisions. In reconciliation engagements, displaced households were not made part of the peace-making process. The study recommends revisiting controversial articles of BGNRS's Constitution that define some ethnic groups as indigenous (owner nationalities) giving them exclusive rights over others.*

**Keywords:** Ethnic based conflict, ethnic federalism, internal displacement, light skin (qey), Metekel zone, Political and economic exclusion

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## **Background**

Administrative institutions, such as ethnic federalism, have been a cause of conflict as they provide the privilege for those groups recognized and deprive others who live in the same territory by recognizing them as titular and non-titular (Seyoum, 2023). Ethnicity has been associated with resource access, competition, and adaptation in changing resource access regimes, often involving exclusive provisions for certain members of ethnic groups (Wolde-Sellasié, 2009). The concept of social inclusion and/or exclusion is central to this study. Social exclusion occurs when institutions that allocate resources operate in ways that systematically deny some groups the resources and recognition needed to fully participate in social life. At a policy level, social inclusion is understood as the process of improving the terms for individuals and groups to take part in society. At a practical level, it is the process of improving the ability, opportunity, and dignity of disadvantaged people based on their identity to take part in society (World Bank, 2013). This study defines political exclusion as the inability of individuals to engage in political, economic, and social activities of the society in which they live. It is the denial of equal access to opportunities, imposed by certain groups of society upon others.

The democratization process that has been considered as a solution for internal and external challenges was manipulated to drive “deepened poverty, structural violence, identity assertiveness and the politicization of ethnic groups, as well as the privatization of power by the ruling elites” (Akinola, 2023). The ethnic political administration has helped to address perceived and real injustice and inequality; however, it has also created tensions and conflict across Ethiopia with a scale and intensity never seen before (Takele, 2021). In different parts of Africa, including Ethiopia, governments used political context to build identity-based systems using political differences leading to varied results, including conflicts (Assefa, 2023).

The FDRE Constitution was introduced in 1995 to address the political causes of the country’s armed struggles and challenges. As an apex of national laws, the constitution in Article 46 (2), underlines that establishing regional states shall be based on “settlement patterns, language, identity and consent of the peoples concerned”. Though it is not explicitly referred to as “ethnic federalism”, the Ethiopian Government adopted the “ethno-linguistic federalism” and “ethnocultural federalism” perspective of redesigning Ethiopian federal structure (Mehari, 2010). The federal system in Ethiopia is territorially and politically mobilized in a deeply divided society, as alliances are dominated by identity (Assefa, 2023). Takele (2021) defined ethnic federalism as “ethnically defined national citizenship, self-determination on an ethno-linguistic basis as enshrined in the constitution, ethnically defined political representation and decision-making at

all administrative levels and related policies.” This definition also serves for the purpose of this study.

Ethnic based federal government structure in Ethiopia aimed to promote decentralization and devolution of power, but real power often concentrated in the hands of political elites who dictate the social, economic and political power sharing. This has resulted in ongoing challenges in power sharing among the different ethnic groups of the country (Alem, 2013). The Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)<sup>3</sup> has tirelessly worked to maintain control over political leadership undermining self-administration, creating tension and eroding the local foundation of power among various constituencies. It prioritized its survival over leveraging the federal mechanisms to manage diversity and cultivate civility (Clapham, 2009). The ethnic federal system aimed at addressing past homogenization has overshadowed citizenship and minority rights. While it offers political representation for indigenous peoples, it denies similar rights to non-indigenous peoples within the same area. This has led to resource competition, ethnic elite power struggles, violent conflicts, and strained intergovernmental relations (Mesfin, 2011). The system has proven to be problematic both in theory and practice, and skewed representation among various ethnic groups (Beza, 2018; Yared, 2017). A review of the federal administrative system reveals that it requires legal and constitutional changes (Gizachew, 2019).

Political elites in different ethnic groups are fundamental to widen divisions, magnify real and perceived exclusions, and mobilize resources to support their respective causes. These movements could lead to a political and economic project based on the response of the federal government. Examples include escalating the situation to large-scale conflict in Tigray (self-administration being among the many causes) and finding a compromise by granting autonomous regional administration in the Southwest and Sidama regions (Assefa, 2023). Siraw (2015), Clapham (2009), Alem (2013), Beza (2018), and Yared (2017) attested that the federal system is a structure not practiced, depriving regional autonomy and channeling top-down policy. Under Ethiopian ethnic federalism, the lust for political power has led to endless conflicts and violations of minority human rights, often politically motivated to garner alliances (Siraw, 2015). The Ethiopian

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<sup>3</sup> The Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) was established in 1989 comprising the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (EPDM), which later changed its name to Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), and the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO). In 1994, the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM) joined the EPRDF. The EPRDF was dissolved in 2019. It has later included allied parties from Afar, Somali, Gambella and Benishangul Gumuz.

federal system has discouraged alliances and cooperation along class, gender, and other factors (Asnake, 2009). Additionally, the centralised decision-making of the ruling party has hindered democratic participation and self-determination (Mesfin, 2011). The federal constitution, as a basis for the ethnic federal administration, has not been able to provide protection to minorities in the respective regions, often leading to conflict and instability (Van der Berken & Beza, 2020). Exploring the polarized positioning of unity and diversity, the federal government has been endowed with attesting the right balance between such contradictions of ideals (Turton, 2006). The ethnic federal structure is found problematic by design recognizing indigenous peoples as owners, which would lead to exclusion of non-indigenous peoples, at times leading to conflict and challenging belongingness to a nation (Osaghae, 2022).

Historically, Ethiopia experienced significant political turmoil, resulting in loss of life, displacement of people, and destruction of property across generations. Federalism induces conflict from inter-regional boundary disputes, minorities in majority ethnic based regional states, and conflict between government and guerrilla groups (Asnake, 2009). In post 1995 (adoption of the FDRE Constitution), notable political unrest occurred after the 2005 national elections and more recently, with the rise of youth-led protests primarily in the Oromia and Amhara regions starting in 2015 (Amare, 2020). The political crisis since 2016 has highlighted significant flaws in the 1995 Constitution, particularly the excessive emphasis on ethnic identity within the country's governance system (Mulugeta & Fesseha, 2021). Further, EPRDF actively suppressed opposing opinions, and civil societies engaged in political advocacy (Endale & Daniel, 2023). Tsega (2006) contributed to the understanding of the history, culture, and inter-ethnic relations between the Gumuz and the Agew, Shinasha, Oromo, and Amhara in Metekel from 1898-1991. Metekel is rich in natural resources, which has drawn interest from various groups within Ethiopia and from Sudan. Although there were attempts to exploit these resources, effective incorporation only occurred in the early twentieth century due to changing political priorities. The study examined the interactions between ethnic groups, their assimilation and integration, as well as the conflicts and traditional conflict resolution mechanisms they employed (Tsega, 2006). Historically, the Amhara, Oromo, Agaw, and Gumuz had lived and coexisted with various other ethnic groups in the Metekel zone. They established their livelihoods on coffee and civet trade, farming, collected tax, hunted elephants for ivory, and traded in coffee and civet (Abdulsamad, 1995). There have been hostility, hatred, and violent encounters between the Amhara, Agaw, and other groups on the one hand and the Gumuz on the other. The latter were mainly engaged in self-defense to escape from slave raids and loss of their land (Abdulsamad, 1995; Desalegn 2019). Because of all these the Gumuz used to

attack non-Gumuz people. The non-Gumuz people on their part were engaged in revenge attacks. Despite these incidents, however, both groups co-existed for generations, because the conflict events were limited in scope and had been mediated by elders (Desalegn, 2019).

Communities in the Benishangul Gumuz National Regional State (BGNRS) have different indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms. These are *Eneshma* (Shinasha), *Mabidhogondi or Ashiyab* (Berta), *Mengechaha* (Gumuz), *Shimgilina* (Amhara & Agew), and *Tolfena Chaffee Chanicho* institution (Oromo's of Debatie). The respective community elders play a vital role in mediating conflicts with diverse causes. Competition over resources, cattle raids, theft, abduction and crop and residential destruction in one way or another have been causing violent incidents (Ahmed, 2022; Missaye, 2022; Yaregal, 2020; Mohammedawol, 2017). Despite the mechanism having been in place for generations, the state-sponsored formal institutions have been working to weaken customary institutions in pastoral and agro-pastoral areas (Esayas et al., 2018). Put differently, these institutions shape and re-shape the vertical and horizontal interactions at different administrative levels and in inter- and intra-community relations.

In the mid-1990s, conflict arose among the Berta and Gumuz and the Oromo, Amhara, and Agew groups. It was caused by political representation, ethnic districts, and the regional presidency. In BGNRS, the Berta and Gumuz groups fiercely competed for leadership and resources due to similar population sizes, and no majority ethnic group was declared. The population of the region was composed of Berta (25.4%), Gumuz (21%), Shinasha (8%), Mao (2%), and Komo (1%). The "other" ethnic groups in the region include Amhara (21.7%), Oromo (13.5%) and Agaw (4.46%) (CSA, 2007).

In Ethiopia, ethnic-based political loyalty has been the source of political power (Lefort, 2012). Leadership roles in local government were based on membership in the Benishangul Gumuz People's Democratic Unity Front. In the Metekel Zone, the Gumuz and Shinasha dominate the political leadership (Labzaé, 2015).

The causes of ethnic-based conflicts in BGNRS are instigated by a myriad of historical, social, political, and economic factors, each of which plays varying degrees of importance in time and space. Although the BGNRS may face region-specific challenges, the national issues reflect the totality of the federation members. The unfair share of productive resources has ignited ethnic-based conflicts (Dagne, 2013). Vaughan and Tronvoll (2003) identified race, ethnicity, wealth, age, and gender and the socialization process as sources of exclusion. In BGNRS, "all evil resides in the ethnic federal system which recognizes people residing in the region as 'owners' and 'others' through its Constitution" (Abera, 2021).

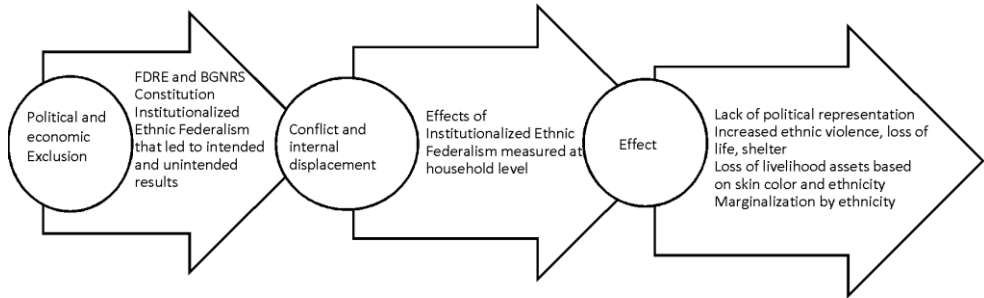
The national government administers access and use of natural resources on behalf of “the People” to their shared benefit as mandated by the FDRE Constitution Article 89 (5). However, the FDRE Constitution Article 52 (2) (d) on Powers and Functions of States delegated the regional states to administer natural resources as per the principles of the FDRE Constitution. Despite such provisions, from the outset, the BGNRS Constitution article 2 identified five ethnic groups, such as the “Mao, Komo, Berta, Gumuz and Shinasha” as “indigenous nation’s and /or nationalities” in the region. This provision of the BGNRS Constitution vests the right to access and use natural resources and land to these groups. This is the prime entry into exclusion and inclusion among the various groups residing in the region, serving as historical context of rivalry for resource access, use, and political power. Drawing from the Constitution, the BGNRS Rural Land Administration and Use Proclamation 85/2010 coded that land registration is for those identified by the BGNRS Constitution and does not benefit those who came to the region illegally in part 2 article 5 (3). The article is referring to Ethiopians from different parts of the country, who are not identified as indigenous in the BGNRS.

The institutional, legal, and policy-based exclusions and inclusions have led to unequal benefit sharing, favoring those recognized by the BGNRS Constitution as “owners” while excluding “others” from taking part in the political, social, administrative, and economic spheres. This exclusion of “others” has resulted in ethnic-based conflict-induced displacement. The conflict was based on ethnic exclusion described above and is facilitated by light (*qey*) and dark (*tikur*) skin among the warring groups. The article is therefore aimed to empirically examine how ethnic federalism has facilitated social exclusion-induced conflict and displacement in the Metekel Zone of the BGNRS.

The Impoverishment Risk and Reconstruction (IRR) model evaluates risks, safeguards, and reconstruction processes in involuntary displacement due to development projects or refugee settings. The IRR has eight dimensions: landlessness, homelessness, joblessness, marginalization, morbidity/mortality, food insecurity, loss of access to common property, and social disarticulation (Guggenheim, 2021, Cernea, 2000). Internally displaced persons (IDPs) face involuntary displacement due to violence, and loss of livelihoods. Teves (2024) used the IRR model to study displaced families in the Philippines, focusing on social disarticulation and joblessness. The model has also been applied to Ethiopia and Nigeria, identifying risks like joblessness, marginalization, social fragmentation, psychological trauma, asset loss, and food insecurity (Gebre, 2001; Gebre, 2003; Ladan & Liman, 2021).

The study indicates that exclusion-induced conflict, entrenched by ethnic based federal and regional administrative institutions, has increasingly fostered discord. It has resulted in including certain groups while systematically excluding

others throughout the government hierarchy. The study further examined the national/regional constitutional flaws that, through institutional mediations, have manifested in varied forms of conflicts, displacements and exclusion of citizens from governance affairs. These flaws create constraints for rural people in accessing resources and development opportunities.



**Figure 1:** A framework for responding and rehabilitating social exclusion-induced conflict displaced people

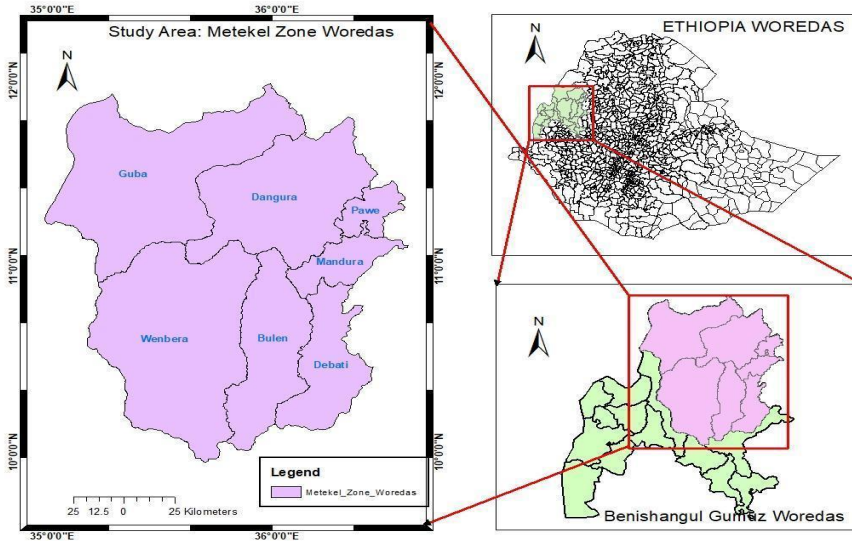
**Source:** Developed based on Structural Violence Theory (Galtung, 1969), and IRR Model (Cernea, 2000).

### Research methods

This section presents a description of the study area, maps, methods, sampling process and data analysis.

### Description of the study area

BGNRS is one of the national regional states of Ethiopia (FDRE, 1995). The region had a population of 784, 345 people (398,655 male & 385,690 female) in 2007 (CSA, 2007). In 2021 the population reached 1,219,000 million people (618,000 male and 601,000 female) according to the 2013 population projection (CSA, 2021). BGNRS has an estimated area of 51,000 square kilometers. It is located in the western and southwestern parts of Ethiopia. It shares borders with Amhara in the north and northeast, Sudan in the west, Oromia in the east, and Gambella in the south. Administratively, the region is divided into three zones and 20 woredas. Metekel is the largest in geographic size (26,272 km<sup>2</sup>), followed by Assosa (14,166 km<sup>2</sup>) and Kamashi (8,850 km<sup>2</sup>).



**Figure 2:** Map of the study, region, zone and woredas

**Source:** Central Statistics Agency and Ministry of Finance updated in October 2020

The region is endowed with reserves of gold, marble, coal, and perennial rivers suitable for irrigation and hydropower. The Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), the largest hydroelectric dam in Ethiopia and Africa, is in the Metekel zone of the region. The region has vast agricultural land, livestock, and other ruminants. The arable land in BGNRS was 6-7% of the national cultivated land (Bureau, 2022).

The selection of the region for the study was based on multiple criteria. These include (i) conflict-induced displacement reached 6% in 2018 and 13% (125,099) of the BGNRS’s population projected to be IDPs for 2022 (MoP 2019; BGNRS ECC 2021; CSA 2013); (ii) the region is home to a diverse set of people which provide rich ground to appreciate diversity and understand the process of social exclusion; and (iii) prior experience of the region on social exclusion and internal displacement.

### Study design

This study adopted mixed methods with a sequential exploratory design. It adopted pragmatism as a philosophical orientation. A sequential exploratory design started with the qualitative data collection augmented with the quantitative data for triangulation and filling data gaps. The qualitative approach adopted Focus Group



Discussion (FGD) and Key Informant Interview (KII). Direct observation was made at the Ranch IDP camp to explore the living conditions and record people's interactions. The study initially administered 400 survey questionnaires in the study area. Out of the 400 survey questionnaires, 359 (89.75%) had been returned with complete responses and were regarded as an actual sample size for the study. The secondary sources reviewed include empirical evidence published in journals, book volumes, statistical reports, and published and unpublished academic works. Video documentaries were accessed at different times during the study. This study explored the nature of conflict, the role of ethnic federal institutions in shaping conflict and conflict outcomes, and displacement in time (2018-2021) and space (BGNRS, Metekel Zone).

### **Study population, sample technique and sample size**

Respondents of this study consist of conflict-displaced people with diverse sociocultural backgrounds. The second segments of respondents are government representatives at different levels drawn from the Amhara (Chagni) and BGNRS (Gilgel Beles) Emergency Coordination Centers (ECC). The third category consists of civil society organizations and other local institutions working at the origin of displacement and Ranch IDP camps. Sampling is not practical if the population is small. Hence, a sampling should strike the right balance to obtain a representative study population. The survey participants were selected using probability sampling (Kothari, 2004).

Kothari's formula is feasible for this study because; (i) the affected population for the study has been more than 10,000 households of the IDP population, (ii) uses simple random sampling for selection of survey participants, and (iii) the formula has been scientifically tested and remains valid. Thus, the total conflict affected IDPs, N is 61,545 in 2018 and reached 125,099 in 2021, where in both cases is more than 5% of the BGNRS population and requires finite population correction. The 125,099 IDP population of March 2021 has been used to draw samples for the study. Daniel (1995) indicated that, when the study population exceeds over 10,000 and the proportion exceeds 5% of the entire population, a more robust approach shall be adopted with a finite population correction.

$$n' = \frac{N Z^2 P (1-P)}{d^2} \quad \dots\dots\dots (i)$$

Whereas,

- n'=sample size with finite population correction.
- N=population size at Ranch IDP camp (4583)
- Z= Z statistic for a level of confidence (95%), t value is 1.96.

- P=expected proportion of the population (at 50% to maximize sample representation, P=0.5)
- d= precision (the precision is set at 5%, then d=0.05)

The study adopted a cluster sampling targeting Ranch IDP camp which hosts 74 tents, sheltering 4,583 households with over 22,279 individuals from six woredas in one location. The number of IDPs at the Ranch camp is well over 17.8% of the total IDP population in Metekel Zone. After the selection of the Ranch IDP camp, the study adopted a simple random sampling to identify survey respondents.

$$= \frac{4,583 * (1.96 * 1.96) * 0.5 * (1-0.5)}{(0.05 * 0.05) (4583-1) + (1.96 * 1.96) * (0.5) (1-0.5)}$$

$$= \frac{4401.513}{12.4154}$$

The sample size is anticipated to be 354.52 households..... (ii) sample size

The final sample size of the study was calculated as follows:

$$\text{Final Sample Size} = \frac{\text{Minimum sample size}}{\text{Response rate}} \dots \text{(iii) final sample size}$$

$$= 354.52 / 93 \dots 358.33 \text{ household. The final sample size is } 359.$$

Survey respondents were selected among non-overlapping 74 shelter tents clustered at Ranch IDP camp (Agew Awi Zone, Guangua Woreda of the Amhara Regional State) hosting 4,583 households organized by the Emergency Coordination Centre (ECC) with a mix of households displaced from different Woredas and villages displaced from Benishangul Gumuz region. A lottery method has been used to select 26 tents. The 4,583 households are 17.8% of the IDP population in Metekel Zone. A simple random sampling was used to select 355 survey participants drawing from each tent's register. This sample was adjusted using a 93% response rate, resulting in a 359 final sample size. Four hundred printed survey questionnaires have been dispatched; 14 were not returned, 12 were non-completed, and 15 were unengaged, resulting in 359 clean data ready for analysis.

The KII and FGD participants were selected using non-probability (purposive) sampling based on their knowledge of the study objective (Bernard, 2006). Ten FGDs were conducted with 60 households (38 men and 22 women),

and 16 KIIs were conducted with ten men and six women. As part of the latter, the study conducted one FGD and three key informant interviews with the Gumuz ethnic group. The coverage of the Gumuz was limited due to similar reasons to accessing the origin, inaccessibility, ongoing active conflict, and violence. Observations have been made at the temporary shelter regarding services, living conditions, transitional food, shelter, clothing support, security, and overall interaction of people. The fieldwork for this study was conducted from February 15- through July 2, 2021.

Ten videos were accessed and viewed at different times of this study. The views and perspectives expressed by Documentaries produced by both national media, (Ethiopia Broadcast Corporation, Fana Broadcast Corporate) and international media outlets (Al Jazeera, BBC, France24) as well as advocacy groups and/or activists were cautiously examined and used to triangulate the sources of data and check results of the survey. The research proved that the results of the survey data converge with their contents.

### **Method of data analysis**

The interview and FGD notes were transcribed, thematically organized, and systematically sorted according to the objective. The quantitative data was entered using CSPro software and exported to STATA 14.1 for cleaning and analysis. STATA was chosen for its flexibility and open source. The study used descriptive analysis as well. The video contents were thematically analyzed to support the study findings. The survey and secondary data were also analyzed using descriptive statistics, such as mean and frequencies and percentages.

### **Research ethics, validity, and reliability of the data**

This study mirrored the ethical considerations including consent highlighted by Sarantakos (2005), cited in Creswell (2009). Addis Ababa University's Center for Rural Development approved the tools and objectives of the study. A paragraph was included in the qualitative and quantitative tools to explain the study's purpose, respondents' privacy, diversity (geography (origin), ethnic background, sex, and age), and the use of the study findings. During data collection care was taken to manage expectations, explain the research purpose, and avoid harm. The authors secured clearance to interact with the displaced people and collect data for academic exercise from the ANRS and BGNRS emergency coordination centers, Ranch Camp coordinators, and tent focal persons. The data for this study were collected from the lived experiences of internally displaced persons (IDPs), which may inherently carry some bias. To verify the data, diverse sources were used, including surveys for quantitative data about IDP demographics and experiences,

key informant interviews for in-depth insights, and focus groups for varied perspectives. Observations provided understanding of living conditions and daily challenges, while an empirical literature review compared findings with existing research. This multi-method approach mitigated biases and ensured a comprehensive, reliable understanding of IDP experiences, capturing both quantitative and qualitative aspects to present a holistic view of their situation.

## Result

### Socioeconomic background of the study participants

The study participants' age ranged from 29-39, comprising 55.2%, with an average age of 36.6 years. Most IDPs are in their productive age. The study covered women and girls (18.7%). Three-fourths of the study respondents knew how to read and write. The FGD maintained diversity in sex (women and girls at 63%), age, tents, woredas, and ethnicities. The average age is 38.42, and the average family size is 4.1. The key informants were taken from Amhara (eight), Agew (three), Shinasha (two), Oromo (three), and Gumuz (three) household heads. The average age of KII respondents was 38.1 years, with 4.1 members.

**Table 1:** Sociodemographic characteristics of survey participants

Demographic Variables	Description	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Woreda</b>	Dangur	203	56.5
	Debatie	47	13.1
	Bullen	65	18.1
	Mandura	19	5.3
	Wombera	18	5.0
	Guba	7	1.9
<b>Household responsibility</b>	Father	291	81.1
	Mother	67	18.7
	Son	1	0.3
<b>Sex of respondents</b>	Male	292	81.3
	Female	67	18.7
<b>Type of household (HH)</b>	Male headed	299	83.3
	Female headed	60	16.7
<b>Age of HH head (in years) by Group</b>	18-28	59	16.4
	29-39	198	55.2
	40-50	73	20.3
	51-61	16	4.5
	62-72	13	3.6
<b>Educational background</b>	Read and Write	303	84.4
	Adult Education	27	7.5
	Highest level of	29	8.1

		schooling completed	
<b>Marital status</b>	Married	346	96.4
	Single	10	2.8
	Widowed	3	0.8
<b>Total</b>		359	

**Source:** Survey data

### **Conflict actors in BGNRS**

Internal and external actors exploited the ethnic federal system loopholes, exacerbating the conflict in BGNRS, Metekel Zone to control social, economic, and political resources. The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), Benishangul Gumuz People's Liberation Movement (BGPLM), and Gumuz People's Democratic Party (GPDP) have been identified as the internal spoilers of peace in Metekel Zone. Besides, power brokering elites within the ruling Prosperity Party (PP), which succeeded EPRDF in BGNRS, have their share for the misery of people in Metekel. Egypt, Eritrea, and Sudan have been financing, training, and equipping Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), BGPLM, and GPDP, who nurtured the divisive elements of the ethnic federal institutions to destabilize the region and Metekel zone.

The study participants revealed that the Benishangul Gumuz People's Democratic Unity Front (BGPDUF), the ruling party in the Benishangul Gumuz region, was manipulated by the TPLF in various ways. TPLF used the BGPDUF to discredit the PP and portray it as a monopolist. This was done to destabilize the region and promote the relevance of TPLF as the guarantor of devolved power before 2018. The BGNRS government also used this political game to balance its bargain with the federal and regional governments of Amhara and Oromia. GPDP and BGPLM have used ethnicity and light skin to target the non-Gumuz in the Metekel Zone.

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External stakeholders such as Eritrea, Egypt, Sudan, and South Sudan have been involved in the conflict in Ethiopia. Egypt has historically aimed to destabilize Ethiopia to prevent it from investing in the Nile waters (Francis, 2022).

Belete (2014) stated President Sadat’s support to Eritrean secessionism and Somali irredentism, worsened animosity. Sudan has collaborated with Egypt to support these efforts. Egypt has discouraged hydropower development in Ethiopia, supported Ethiopian rebel groups and tried to halt GERD construction or forced Ethiopia to accept terms favorable to its national interest (Nigusu, 2022). Egypt has also disrupted funding for water projects by employing its diplomatic influence and considers Ethiopia its diplomatic rival in the Horn of Africa. Furthermore, Egypt and Eritrea have supported Ethiopian rebel groups operating in the neighbouring countries (Mehari, 2017).

Sudan has provided bases for training and logistics to armed groups, like the BGPLM and GPDF, which infiltrate Ethiopia's Benishangul Gumuz and Amhara regions. Eritrea has provided training to the TPLF before 1991 (Aregawi, 2001), influencing the post 1991 Ethiopian politics (Záhořík, 2017). It also supported the BGPLM after its war with Ethiopia in 1998.

Analysis of interviews, focus group discussions and the survey conducted for this study corroborated presence and role of internal and external actors in BGNRS conflict. Their role varies in terms of interest, scope and time. Coupled with the changing socio-political context, these actors triggered conflict that resulted in violence, displacement, and loss of lives and livelihoods for people in the Metekel zone.

### **Ethnic federalism: its roles in social inclusion and exclusion**

This study argues that ethnic-based federalism, institutionalized through the federal and BGNRS constitutions have been instruments of inclusion and exclusion in BGNRS and Metekel Zone. Among the survey participants, ethnicity was picked by 335 households (93%) as the main cause of exclusion for accessing livelihood opportunities and resources in the region, followed by skin color by about 216 households (60.1%). The survey questionnaire allowed respondents to provide multiple responses. As a result, the number of total respondents in table-2 and table-3 below exceeds the total sample size of 359.

**Table 1:** the main identifiers of social exclusion at IDPs origin

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Which identity differences have been causing conflict at IDPs origin? n=793

	Responses		Percent of Cases
	N	Percent	
T4. 410. Religion	71	9.0%	19.8%

T4. 410. Ethnicity	325	41.0%	90.8%
T4. 410. Skin Color ( <i>qey</i> vs <i>Tikur</i> )	184	23.2%	51.4%
T4. 410. Geography/location	31	3.9%	8.7%
T4. 410. Language	160	20.2%	44.7%
T4. 410. Ritual/practice	9	1.1%	2.5%
T4.410. Unique food and lifestyle	13	1.6%	3.6%
Total	793	100.0%	221.5%

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**Source:** Survey data

Survey respondents, key informants, and focus group participants recognize the situation involving mental, physical, and economic tools (dispossession of land and loss of livelihoods) in a coordinated manner identifying by ethnicity and skin color. However, it is difficult to prove due to the inaccessibility of the assailant group at origin and the intent to such levels of violence and damages. Kassaye Mohamed, a key informant, age 62, female from Debatie *Woreda* has the following recollection of the scale and form of violence experienced at the origin.

*There was economic dispossession through the looting of livestock, grains, household assets, agricultural tools, burning crops, and housing. It induced psychological trauma with inhumane killing, mass burial, slitting of human beings from the back, and disposal of human body parts. It caused physical assault by cutting off hands, feet, tongue, and genitals and removing an eye. I believe no other tool is left to instill fear and demonstrate brutality.*

Survey participants ranked ethnicity, skin color, language, and religion as sources of exclusion. The Gumuz people target individuals for violence based on skin color, referring to all non-Gumuz as *Shuwa*, which comprises the Shinasha, Amhara, Oromo, Agew, and Tigre living in the same area. A synonym for Shuwa used by the Gumuz is “highlander/ resettlers” (Bustorf 2007). Ethnicity-based political organization had resulted in a classification of owners and others and privileged certain groups' access to economic, social, and political resources. The institutions of ethnic federalism in administration have translated these theories into practice, often leading to conflict and violence.

**Ethnic federalism: legislative and policy issues**

Ethnic-based federalism was identified as a problematic administrative institution as conferred by 261 (73.1%) respondents. 201 (56.3%) and 73 (20.4%) participants identified the BGNRS Constitution and the FDRE Constitution as challenging legislative pieces respectively. The BGNRS Rural Land Administration and Use Proclamation 85/2002 have been identified as a source of exclusion by 52 (14.6%) households in ascertaining land holding rights. A 37-year-old male key informant, from Bulen Woreda, stated that the general principles in the FDRE Constitution are acceptable regarding its reference to the nations, nationalities, and people. However, the explicit reference to Berta, Komo, Shinasha, Gumuz, and Mao ethnic groups as “nations, nationalities, and people” and “others” in the BGNRS Constitution (article 2) contradicts the FDRE Constitution, which does not contain similar provisions in Article 39, sub-article (5). This provision also contradicts the FDRE constitution article 25 on equality rights and its provision not to discriminate based on identity, including ethnicity, skin color, and religion.

**Table 3:** legal and administrative frameworks identified as sources of conflict

What are the legal and administrative frameworks that cause conflict? n=661			
	Responses		Percent of Cases
	N	Percent	
T4. 411. FDRE Constitution	73	11.0%	20.4%
T4. 411. Regional constitution	201	30.4%	56.3%
T4. 411. Ethnic based federalism	261	39.5%	73.1%
T4. 411. Land laws	52	7.9%	14.6%
T4. 411. Unratified regulations, guidelines	40	6.1%	11.2%
T4. 411. Unwritten laws, regulations, and guidelines	34	5.1%	9.5%
Total	661	100.0%	185.2%

**Source:** Survey data



The practice of institution-based social exclusion on consideration of ethnicity and skin color significantly affects access to livelihood resources. A five-point Likert scale assessment revealed that n=322 (89.7%) strongly agreed and 37 (10.3%) agreed, indicating its widespread occurrence. The study argued that identifying people using Shuwa, highlander, resettler, qey and tikur dates before the FDRE and BGNRS Constitution. The Gumuz claim primacy to the land in Metekel Zone, draw from historical pull and push factors and developed the sentiment to alienate the others claiming ownership of the region, and its natural resources.

Despite the BGNRS Constitution's recognition of the Shinasha as owners, they suffered from double swords due to their qey (light skin) color. The 37 years old Asegu Tango, woman key informant from Debatie Woreda, stated:

*The Gumuz practice of violence targeted the Shinasha due to their light skin color, not ethnicity. The Gumuz indiscriminately burned villages, violently attacked and killed people, and looted livestock and other assets. The scale of brutality and displacement was not seen before. Irrespective of ethnicity, these are our people, and we regret losing them and do not appreciate their impoverishment.*

The voice of Asegu vividly depicts the challenges faced by the Shinasha people despite their recognition as owners of the region. The Shinasha, due to their qey skin color were targeted along with the highlander/re-settlers during violent confrontations with the Gumuz. This highlights that Constitutional recognition of owners and others has not been sufficient to protect the Shinasha. In conflict, no one is safe and could enjoy privileged protection. Fekadu Worku, a 44 year old man who was displaced from Bullen Woreda, also stated the scene consistent to above as,

*The BGNR's Constitution recognition of the Gumuz did not protect them from violence. The scale of violence varies across the Metekel Zone, making it difficult to provide definitive casualty numbers. The Gumuz are also targeted based on their qey (light skin). They avoid markets, schools, and health facilities due to destruction, displacement of health workers, or distrust of the non-Gumuz. The Gumuz cannot move freely, visit family and friends, or engage in agricultural activity, leading to starvation. They survive through hunting and gathering.*

**Effects of exclusion induced conflict, and displacement in Metekel zone**

In BGNRS, institutionalized exclusion has led to conflict driven by identity markers. Informal institutions have reinforced formal practice through mediating land transactions and approving deals, which often become costly and sometimes invalidated by formal institutions.

A 62-year-old male key informant with a teaching diploma who has lived in Metekel since 1973 elaborated on the gradual erosion of trust in government institutions to provide security, services, and resources. He emphasized that administrative service be guided by principles, values, and norms to build confidence in the system. The current administrative and institutional system is corrupted by ethnicity, inaccessibility, and lack of transparency and fairness.

IDPs lost trust in the executive branch of government, such as the administrative and security entities at the Woreda and Kebele levels. The experience of FGD participants corroborates how the government institutions systematically institutionalized the exclusion of the others while empowering nations, nationalities and peoples. A key informant who wishes to remain anonymous, age 37 from Dangur stated that,

*Institutional support for the Gumuz has disadvantaged the other people by shifting the political, economic, and social power. The support has included systematic actions such as disarming non-Gumuz individuals, which weakened their self-defense capabilities. Despite the presence of regional and federal security forces in Metekel Zone during violent attacks, these forces awaited instruction from the executive organs of government, effectively providing institutional backing to the Gumuz. This has led to increased violence against non-Gumuz, further marginalizing them and altering the balance of power in the region.*

The systematic exclusion in government institutions and disempowerment of people across the economy, social, and political spheres has led to conflict and displacement, affecting their lives and livelihoods. The ethnic-based institutionalized exclusion sustained the loss of over 1,000 lives. Fatalities were reported across the Metekel zone between January 2020-2021 comprising Bullen (522), Debatie (298), Wombera (61), Dangur (49), and Mandura (49) (Abera 2021). It was impossible to include the number of Gumuz households who died from the various conflicts during the same period due to their inaccessibility and lack of data. However, reports by Al Jazeera (2020a; 2020b) and Addis Standard (2021) refer to “several dozens” killed. The conflict led to the loss of over 15,032 housing units in BGNRS and 11,822 in the Metekel zone. In Dangur Woreda, due

to conflict-induced displacement, crops were lost on 13,897.91 hectare of land with an estimated produce of 246,906.65 quintals with Ethiopian Birr value of 477,437,354.25 (BGNRS ECC, 2021). These lost resources would have provided the needed essential health, education, water, and agricultural extension services. It would also strengthen institutions to support a cohesive society in the region.

## **Discussion**

### **Ethnic institutions**

This study appreciates the polarized debates on the merits and criticism of ethnic federalism as an institution of government in Ethiopia. Diversity is not necessarily a problem and may not result in violent conflict (Dagne, 2013). It is considered as a tool to ensure the representation and mobilization of communities in political power (De Waal, 2018). Mehari (2019) argues that with its limitations, it has empowered ethno-cultural communities. However, Siraw (2015) argues that it is used to instill division, weaken cooperation, and cultivate conflict. Zerihun and Samuel (2018) argue that ethnic federalism has encouraged and increased conflicts.

This study argues that in BGNRS, Metekel zone, ethnic federalism has exacerbated the political, economic, and social exclusion of others while recognizing and pouring benefits to owners, which led to violent conflict. This study contends that the negative aspects of the ethnic federal institutions in BGNRS, Metekel zone outweigh its benefits. The benefits recognized by scholars did not materialize in practice within the study area. This violent conflict and displacement have been devastating, including for those claiming primeval. Unfortunately, lives were lost, and the violent actions printed trauma, infringed fear, and eroded the social fabrics that were grounded over time.

The study participants, both in the survey, key informant, and focus group, attested that the formal institutions were used to institutionalize social exclusion at regional, zonal, Woreda, and Kebele levels of administrative structures. Further, the identification of owners and others in formal institutions, including the BGNRS Constitution, became the primary reference for administrative institutions and people regarding ownership and use of resources. Political elites in the administration and rebel groups like GPDF and BGPLM manipulated this provision to their power and economic and social advantage.

There is empirical evidence that the Regional Land Proclamation 85/2010 article 5 (3) describes “illegal occupants” and does not register their land rights (Habtamu, 2020). Notwithstanding the provision under sub-article 2, the law states that “any peasant who occupied prior to this proclamation and will occupy land illegally shall have no holding right.” The lack of regulations and standard working

guidelines led to differences in the interpretation of the law, including the provision of land use registration only to indigenous people of the region excluding those that are defined as others (Habtamu, 2020). Regional Land Proclamation 85/2010 cross refers to the provisions of the BGNRS Constitution, which identified ethnic groups as owners and others. Households consulted for this study experienced this exclusion in the registration process despite presenting evidence and rarely made it to the end of the registration. Due to these limits, people resort to informal land deals by buying physical infrastructure to formalize the specific land registration. In this regard, informal institutions were used to support formalizations of land registration, including transfers, inheritance, and purchase of property on land. For these transactions, the non-Gumuz people at the local level enter agreements with Gumuz in the presence of elders who provide evidence for land registration authorities at the Kebele and Woreda levels.

### **Metekel zone peace process: continued exclusion**

Following the precarious security and political situations through the 2020-2023, multiple peace dialogues and engagements were held with armed groups, including Gumuz People's Democratic Movement (GPDM), Benishangul People's Liberation Movement (BGPLM), and political elites from the governing party. These groups have a role in the conflict, displacement, and violent actions that led to the displacement of about 125,099 households and the death of over 1,000 people from six Woredas of Metekel zone in February 2021 (EBC, 2020). The BGNRS, Federal government representatives, and the Metekel Zone command post were engaged in these dialogues intending to bring about lasting peace. These discussions were held in Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Sudan. On October 19, 2022, the GPDM, an armed group, signed a peace agreement and decided to surrender in response to the peace call by the national and regional governments. Subsequently, the BGNRS government signed a peace agreement with the BPLM, an armed group, in Khartoum, Sudan, on December 10, 2022 (Addis Standard, 2022). The peace agreement resulted in shared political and administrative authority across all levels of government, allocated urban and rural land, and improved access to finance for reintegrating ex-combatants and supporting livelihoods.

Participants expressed concerns that their representatives were excluded from the peace process, missing crucial discussions on transitional justice, compensation for economic losses, and their future. Despite these concerns, displaced individuals remain hopeful that the peace deal will restore stability and allow them to return to their homes or be resettled elsewhere. However, they are uncertain about their options regarding their fate. To restore trust between communities and institutions, establishing a public forum was considered essential. This forum can address peace agreement issues, transitional justice, and support

displaced individuals' livelihoods, thereby fostering social cohesion and strengthening institutions. The study highlights that administrative and legal systems institutionalize exclusion by deciding who can engage in social, economic, and political activities. This exclusion significantly affects individuals, particularly those in rural areas dependent on subsistence livelihoods. The participants in the study had lost over 1,000 family members in the Metekel zone by February 2021. They lost over 11,000 residential housing units. Their properties, crops and food stores were destroyed.

The displaced people experienced landlessness as they left their agricultural land, lost the produce, became food insecure, and suffered economic losses due to the loss of income from rented lands and employment. They also lost their attachments to the geography in which they were born and raised and became homeless due to damage to their homes. They faced marginalization as they confined themselves to makeshift camps and tents, social disarticulation as they lost social networks and mutual support groups at their origin lives were also lost during the violent conflict and vulnerability to disease and mortality. These consequences are consistent with the discourses made by Cernea (2000), Gebre (2001), and Gebre (2003).

Participants of this study did not have trust in the executive and judiciary institutions due to the systemic exclusion at the Kebele and Woreda levels. This was further affected by the social disarticulation of the displaced households who abandoned their social and cultural ties to their origin and struggled to develop attachments with those displaced from six Woredas of Metekel zone, with whom they did not know before. The lack of trust and use of formal institutions as social exclusion tools has led to the fragmentation of societal-level informal institutions, consistent with Cernea's (2000) argument on social disarticulation.

Employment opportunities at the Woreda and Kebele levels for the police, militia, judge, prosecutor, and various executive sector offices were driven by ethnicity and political loyalty. The study participants stated they were considered a last choice despite their merit and qualifications for the advertised positions. These stories from the study align with the empirical literature by Labzaé, (2015) and Lefort (2012), who asserted that executive positions were assigned based on political affiliation. The study model highlighted joblessness at the displacement camps, and until they return to their origin or a third location, it could exacerbate the precarious livelihood situations of IDPs.

### **Effects on human lives: Implications**

The data in this study confirmed that conflict has targeted, humiliated, and deliberately dehumanized individuals and households that belong to Amhara, Agew, and Shinasha who were living in Metekel Zone. Despite the claims by the

study participants and available evidence, it was difficult and problematic to prove intent to destroy a group “in whole or in part”. The limitation of the study is the inability to include the voices of the Gumuz satisfactorily, including their armed groups. This omission prevents a comprehensive understanding of their perspective, which could either support or challenge the claim .

The contemporary challenge in the area determines the scale of resentment and violence (Desalegn, 2019). These study's findings are consistent with the empirical literature by Dagne (2013) on identification of ethnicity, Desalegn (2019) on skin color and ethnicity, Abbink (2011) on ethnicity, Clapham (2009), and Vaughan and Tronvoll (2003) on ethnicity and clan. The ethnic and skin color identification of people and geographies for administration and institutionalization of the same has been strategically futile in the BGNRS, Metekel zone. Due to the current situation, the effects of ethnic federalism, including the impact of ethnic federalism-induced conflict on security of life and access to essential services like education, health, and markets, could not be thoroughly studied. Further studies could explore the impact of ethnic federalism-induced conflict on Gumuz's security of life, access to essential services, economic, political, and social resources, and markets. It would also be necessary to examine Gumuz's mindset regarding their instigation of conflict.

## **Conclusion**

This study concludes that, ethnic based federal institutions and the use of ethnicity as a marker of identity have led to social, economic, and political exclusion resulting in conflicts, eroded trust, and targeted violence. Despite the intent of the FDRE constitution, ethnic federalism has been used as a tool to create division, control power and resources, and widen ethnic and regional disparities, primarily benefiting political elites. In the context of the Metekel zone, ethnically organized government institutions have excluded ‘others’ or non-indigenous people from social, economic resources, and political participation as indicated in the BGNRS Constitution. The FDRE Constitution Article 40 has failed to protect property rights and prevent evictions with many households in Ethiopia, particularly in BGNRS, limitations on livelihood and residence choices, protected under Articles 41(1) and 32, respectively, have been imposed. The right to life, as stated in Article 14, is not always translated into practice, and people have been facing targeted violence, physical attacks, and loss of life. Certain ethnic groups, such as the Berta, Gumuz, Shinasha, Mao, and Komo, are favored over the Amhara, Oromo, and Agew. Despite being recognized as nations, nationalities, and peoples by the BGNRS Constitution, the Shinasha have suffered from conflict, displacement, loss of property, and lives due to inadequate law enforcement and targeting due to their light skin color. To address these issues, it is recommended

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that government institutions at all levels be free from ethnic bias and that ethnicity should not be a marker of citizenship and institutional administration. Consistent application of the FDRE and BGNRS Constitutional provisions is essential to ensure fairness and justice for all and fulfill the promises enshrined in these documents. This recommendation requires a policy and legislative instrument to address the identified cleavages in this study including the FDRE and BGNRS constitutions. Additionally, future research shall explore the voices of the Gumuz people, including the representatives of the GPDF and BGPLM groups to understand their experience and perspectives of ethnic federal system in achieving social, economic, and political rights.

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