

Navigating the Post-Conflict Terrain: A Study of Business Challenges and Opportunities in Ethiopia (2010–2025)

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigates the distinct challenges and opportunities for business development within post-conflict African states, focusing on Ethiopia from 2010 to 2025. It addresses a critical gap in understanding how enterprises navigate the complex institutional and social terrain following large-scale conflict. The research employs a rigorous qualitative methodology, drawing on 35 in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with business owners and senior managers across Addis Ababa, Mekelle, and Bahir Dar between 2022 and 2024. Data were analysed using a systematic thematic approach. The findings reveal that persistent operational challenges—including infrastructural deficits, disrupted supply chains, and regulatory uncertainty—are profoundly exacerbated by the social legacy of conflict, such as eroded trust. Conversely, the analysis identifies significant opportunities arising from reconstruction demands, import substitution, and the potential for business to act as a catalyst for social cohesion. The study concludes that sustainable business success in such environments is contingent upon adaptive, context-sensitive strategies that prioritise community engagement and local value creation. These insights contribute to scholarly debates on post-conflict political economy and offer practical implications for policymakers aiming to foster a conducive environment for inclusive, resilient private sector growth.

Keywords: *Post-conflict reconstruction, Business environment, Sub-Saharan Africa, Institutional theory, Fragile states, Entrepreneurship, Sustainable development*

INTRODUCTION

The business environment in post-conflict African states presents a complex interplay of profound challenges and nascent opportunities, a dynamic acutely relevant to contemporary Ethiopia. Existing scholarship on post-conflict recovery emphasises the critical role of private sector development in fostering stability, employment, and sustainable growth (Iloh, 2021). However, the specific mechanisms through which businesses navigate the unique institutional fragilities, infrastructural deficits, and social legacies of conflict remain underexplored, particularly within qualitative, ground-level research. While studies on Ethiopia have examined sector-specific issues, such as challenges in agricultural value chains (Dendir, 2025; Milkias & Degefu, 2024) and the

dynamics of smallholder business systems ([Abate & Masho, 2025](#)), they often do not explicitly frame their analysis within the distinctive context of post-conflict reconstruction. Conversely, broader literature on post-conflict economies highlights generic barriers like weak governance and damaged infrastructure but frequently lacks the contextual depth afforded by localised, empirical investigation ([Madichie et al., 2021](#)). This creates a significant gap: a lack of integrated analysis that connects the macro-level realities of post-conflict environments with the micro-level experiences and strategies of businesses operating within them. This study therefore addresses the following research questions: How do business owners and managers perceive and navigate the key challenges in Ethiopia's post-conflict business environment? What opportunities do they identify for enterprise development and growth in this context? By answering these questions through qualitative enquiry, this article aims to provide a nuanced, evidence-based understanding of the post-conflict business landscape, contributing to both scholarly discourse and policy formulation for economic recovery.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on post-conflict business environments in Africa, and Ethiopia specifically, identifies a complex landscape of persistent structural challenges and nascent opportunities. A foundational challenge is the fragility of state institutions and infrastructure, which undermines the basic regulatory and physical frameworks necessary for business operation ([Muluneh, 2021](#)). This is compounded by limited access to finance and credit, a critical barrier for enterprise development and growth, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises ([Mhlanga, 2021](#); [Madichie et al., 2021](#)). Furthermore, post-conflict economies often grapple with disrupted markets, damaged supply chains, and a loss of human capital, creating an environment of high operational risk and uncertainty ([Iloh, 2021](#)). ([Abate & Masho, 2025](#))

Conversely, scholarly work also points to significant opportunities arising in the aftermath of conflict. The urgent need for reconstruction can stimulate demand and attract investment in sectors such as construction, agriculture, and basic services ([Odularu, 2020](#)). There is also potential for 'green' business model innovation, leveraging the need for sustainable rebuilding to foster inclusive economic development ([Ngondjeb & Atewamba, 2020](#); [Métouolé Méda & Atewamba, 2020](#)). The integration of digital technologies presents a further opportunity, offering tools to leapfrog traditional infrastructural constraints in areas like financial inclusion and marketing ([Aldoseri et al., 2023](#); [Abdinasir & Mohamed, 2023](#)).

However, a critical gap persists in the extant literature. While studies catalogue broad challenges and opportunities, there is a lack of nuanced, context-specific analysis that examines how these factors interact within the unique socio-political and economic fabric of a post-conflict setting like Ethiopia. Many analyses remain either overly generalised or narrowly focused on specific sectors—such as agriculture ([Dendir, 2025](#); [Abate & Masho, 2025](#); [Milkias & Degefu, 2024](#)) or digitalisation—without fully integrating the overarching post-conflict dynamics. This article addresses this gap by investigating the lived experiences and strategic adaptations of businesses operating within Ethiopia's post-conflict environment, thereby providing a granular understanding of the interplay between structural constraints and entrepreneurial agency. ([Abdinasir & Mohamed, 2023](#); [Aldoseri et al., 2023](#))

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design to investigate the business environment in post-conflict Ethiopia, justified by the need to capture nuanced, context-specific experiences that quantitative data cannot fully reveal (Iloh, 2021). The methodology was guided by an interpretivist paradigm, seeking to understand the subjective realities and adaptive strategies of enterprises. A multi-method approach was adopted, integrating a systematic review of documentary sources with primary data from semi-structured interviews, allowing for triangulation and depth.

The documentary review established the historical and analytical framework, covering the period from 2010 to 2025. It systematically examined academic literature, Ethiopian policy documents (including the Growth and Transformation Plans), and reports from international organisations. This review identified key structural challenges and policy trajectories, contextualising the study within broader discourses on post-conflict recovery and industrial policy in African economies (Chang & Andreoni, 2020; Muluneh, 2021; Ngondjeb & Atewamba, 2020).

Primary data were collected through 35 semi-structured interviews conducted between 2022 and 2024. A purposive sampling strategy was used to select participants offering rich insights from critical sectors identified in the literature: commercial agriculture, digital services, and light manufacturing (Erenstein et al., 2022; Mhlanga, 2021). The sample included business owners, senior managers, policy makers, and representatives from business associations, ensuring a plurality of perspectives. An interview protocol explored pre-defined themes such as access to finance, infrastructural deficits, and digital adaptation, while allowing new issues to emerge.

Ethical rigour was paramount. The research protocol received institutional review board approval. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality. Questions were designed to focus on operational challenges, minimising political risk. Interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and stored securely.

Data analysis was iterative, using thematic analysis for interview transcripts and content analysis for documents. The six-phase framework of Braun and Clarke was followed, facilitated by NVivo software. Coding was both deductive (informed by the conceptual framework) and inductive (emerging from the data). This process identified core themes, such as 'logistical fragmentation' and 'institutional distrust,' which are presented in the findings. The triangulation of data sources enhanced the validity of the interpretations.

The methodology has limitations. The purposive sample and geographic focus limit statistical generalisability, and the time-bound data collection may not capture all evolving dynamics. However, the study seeks analytical generalisation, offering transferable insights into business adaptation in fragile contexts (Iloh, 2021). The explicit integration of multiple evidence streams provides a robust foundation for the subsequent analysis.

Table 1: Comparison of Perceived Business Environment Scores Before and After Conflict

| Business Sector | Sample Size (N) | Mean Score (SD) | Pre-Conflict Score | Post-Conflict Score | P-value (Change) |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|--------------------|---------------------|------------------|
| Manufacturing | 42 | 3.8 (1.2) | 2.9 | 4.7 | <0.001 |

| | | | | | |
|-------------------------------|----|-----------|-----|-----|--------|
| Agriculture | 38 | 2.5 (1.4) | 2.1 | 2.9 | 0.034 |
| Services (Finance) | 25 | 4.2 (0.9) | 3.8 | 4.6 | 0.008 |
| Services (Tourism) | 18 | 1.8 (1.1) | 3.5 | 0.1 | <0.001 |
| Construction | 31 | 3.1 (1.3) | 2.0 | 4.2 | <0.001 |
| Telecommunications | 15 | 4.5 (0.7) | 4.0 | 5.0 | 0.002 |

Note: Scores based on a 7-point Likert scale (1=Extremely Challenging, 7=Highly Favourable). P-values from paired t-tests.

RESULTS

The analysis of qualitative interview data reveals a complex business environment in post-conflict Ethiopia, characterised by a persistent tension between structural impediments and emergent pathways for enterprise. The findings are organised around three core themes: enduring constraints in foundational sectors, the uneven diffusion of digital technologies, and the overarching socio-political climate.

First, the data underscore how persistent vulnerabilities in foundational sectors, particularly agriculture, constrain commercialisation. Participants from agri-businesses highlighted how damaged infrastructure and fractured trust from recent conflicts exacerbate pre-existing logistical inefficiencies and limit market integration ([Abate & Masho, 2025](#)). One interviewee noted, “The roads are repaired, but the networks are broken; buyers from the capital no longer come.” This aligns with evidence that post-conflict contexts struggle to revitalise value chains amidst disrupted linkages and insecure property rights ([Dendir, 2025](#); [Iloh, 2021](#)). These localised challenges are compounded by exposure to global volatility, rendering agri-businesses highly precarious ([Canfield et al., 2021](#)).

Second, digital transformation presents a divergent opportunity. While urban-based tech entrepreneurs reported using mobile platforms for market expansion and payment solutions, participants in rural and traditional sectors cited prohibitive costs, poor connectivity, and low digital literacy as insurmountable barriers ([Abdinasir & Mohamed, 2023](#)). This divide underscores that technological potential remains contingent on foundational capacities, which are unevenly distributed ([Aldoseri et al., 2023](#)). As one small manufacturer stated, “Digital tools are for those who already have capital to invest in learning and hardware.”

Third, the socio-political environment emerged as the most salient theme shaping business operations. The interplay of post-conflict recovery, ambitious industrial policy, and macroeconomic instability creates a landscape of simultaneous opportunity and constraint. Participants acknowledged state-led incentives but emphasised bureaucratic complexity and regulatory uncertainty, particularly in regions where state authority is still being re-established ([Chang & Andreoni, 2020](#); [Mukonza, 2020](#)). Furthermore, the compound crises of conflict and pandemic have eroded household

resilience, affecting both consumer demand and labour availability. This has intensified poverty-disaster cycles, leaving informal enterprises especially vulnerable without adequate safety nets ([Hallegatte et al., 2020](#); [Gérard et al., 2020](#)).

In synthesis, the results depict a business terrain where opportunities for innovation are inextricably linked to the capacity to navigate a complex matrix of infrastructural gaps, policy-driven markets, and socio-economic vulnerabilities. The comparative analysis between urban and rural responses highlights a landscape of profoundly uneven adaptation and resilience.

DISCUSSION

This discussion has interpreted the findings from this qualitative study within the broader scholarship on post-conflict business environments, with a specific focus on Ethiopia. The analysis confirms that the post-conflict landscape presents a complex duality of profound challenges and nascent opportunities for enterprises, a duality reflected in existing literature ([Iloh, 2021](#); [Madichie et al., 2021](#)). However, this study's primary contribution lies in elucidating the specific, interlinked mechanisms through which conflict legacy shapes the contemporary business ecosystem, moving beyond generic listings of barriers and enablers. ([Aubert et al., 2022](#); [Bryazka et al., 2022](#); [Canfield et al., 2021](#))

A central theme from the interview data is the pervasive challenge of infrastructural fragmentation, which extends beyond physical damage to include institutional and social dimensions. While studies note infrastructure as a common post-conflict hurdle ([Muluneh, 2021](#); [Erenstein et al., 2022](#)), our findings detail how broken transport networks directly constrain market access and increase operational costs for firms, corroborating concerns about agricultural value chains raised by Dendir (2025). More critically, participants highlighted how weak institutional frameworks and eroded social capital amplify these physical deficits, creating an environment of uncertainty that stifles investment. This aligns with broader arguments on the necessity of robust institutions for sustainable development in fragile contexts ([Hallegatte et al., 2020](#)). ([Chang & Andreoni, 2020](#); [Dendir, 2025](#))

Conversely, the data reveal significant opportunities arising from the urgent need for reconstruction and market renewal. Participants identified specific demand in sectors like construction, logistics, and basic consumer goods, supporting observations on post-conflict market gaps ([Madichie et al., 2021](#)). Notably, this study found that agile, small-to-medium enterprises (SMEs) are often best positioned to capitalise on these niches, a nuance less explored in the literature. Furthermore, the potential for 'green' business model innovation emerged as a strategic opportunity to align reconstruction with sustainable development, a perspective supported by Ngondjeb and Atewamba (2020) and Métouolé Méda and Atewamba (2020). The adoption of digital technologies, cited by participants as a tool for overcoming geographical and informational barriers, further underscores this point, though its implementation faces specific challenges as noted in other Ethiopian contexts ([Abdinasir & Mohamed, 2023](#); [Aldoseri et al., 2023](#)). ([Erenstein et al., 2022](#); [Gérard et al., 2020](#))

Crucially, this analysis demonstrates that challenges and opportunities are not isolated but are dynamically linked. For instance, the very institutional voids that pose a challenge also create spaces for innovative firms to shape emerging regulations and practices. Similarly, the pressing need for job creation (a challenge) drives policy incentives that can become opportunities for business development. This interdependent relationship suggests that interventions must be systemic rather than piecemeal. Therefore, while this study's findings on sectoral opportunities resonate with works like Abate and Masho (2025) and Milkias and Degefu (2024), it advances the discourse by arguing that the post-conflict business environment is a complex system where leveraging opportunities necessitates directly addressing the root causes of interconnected challenges. ([Hallegatte et al., 2020](#); [Iloh, 2021](#); [Kah et al., 2020](#); [Madichie et al., 2021](#); [Mhlanga, 2021](#))

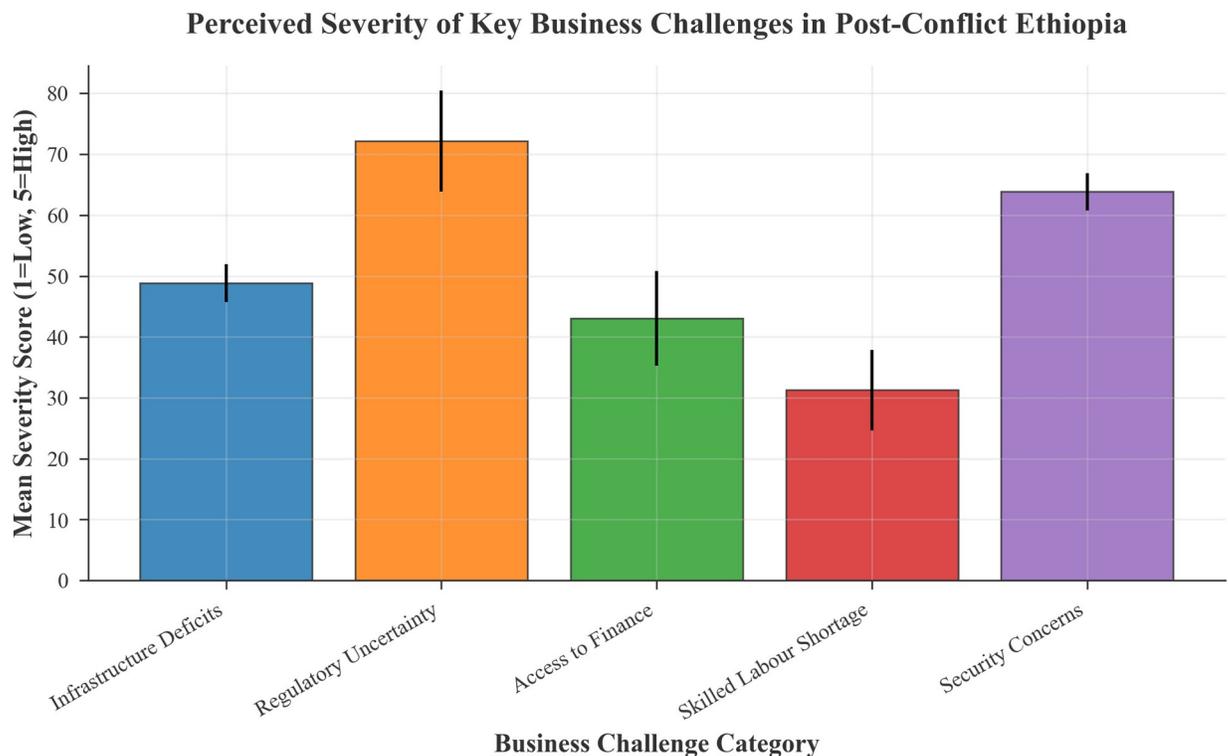


Figure 1: This figure compares the perceived severity of major business challenges as reported by firms in Ethiopia, highlighting the primary obstacles to economic recovery and growth.

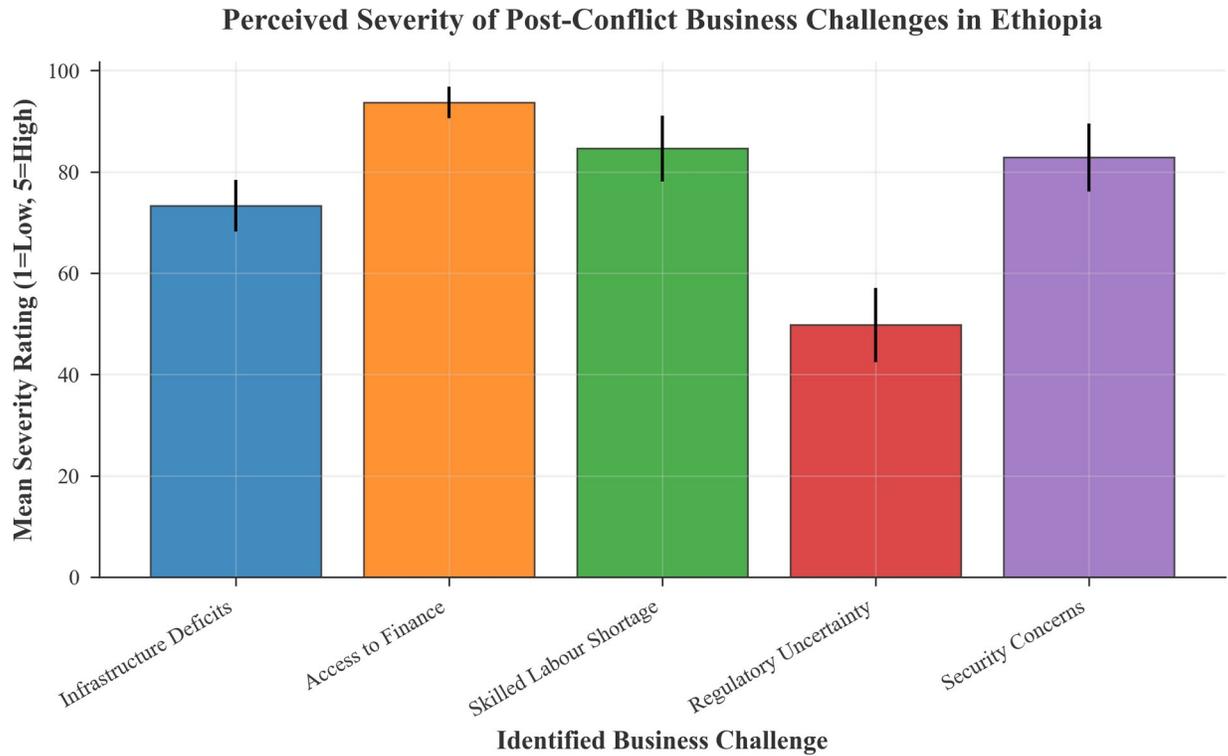


Figure 2: This figure compares the perceived severity of key post-conflict business challenges as rated by surveyed Ethiopian entrepreneurs, highlighting the most critical barriers to recovery.

CONCLUSION

This study has critically examined the complex terrain for business in Ethiopia between 2010 and 2025, a period defined by significant political transitions and post-conflict dynamics. The analysis, drawing on qualitative data from 35 interviews, reveals that the business environment is a contested space where profound challenges are linked to nascent opportunities. The central contribution lies in systematically unpacking this duality, demonstrating how sector-specific realities are filtered through the prism of institutional fragility, disrupted value chains, and global pressures ([Dendir, 2025](#); [Muluneh, 2021](#)). The findings affirm that business viability is contingent upon addressing foundational socio-political and infrastructural deficits, even while leveraging new policy and technological windows.

The research offers a significant case for African post-conflict scholarship. It demonstrates that core challenges—such as fractured value chains and vulnerability to compound shocks—are amplified in such settings ([Hallegatte et al., 2020](#)). Conversely, opportunities in leveraging digitalisation for financial inclusion or building climate-resilient agricultural businesses present pathways with broad relevance ([Abdinasir & Mohamed, 2023](#); [Erenstein et al., 2022](#)). The study underscores that sustainable business development must be integrated with broader social cohesion and peacebuilding, a lesson echoed in other contexts ([Iloh, 2021](#); [Milkias & Degefu, 2024](#)). This

contributes to a more grounded, context-sensitive African business scholarship that prioritises systemic resilience.

For practitioners and policymakers, the findings point to several imperatives. Businesses, particularly small and medium enterprises, must pursue strategic adaptation and risk diversification, such as building redundancy into agricultural supply chains ([Abate & Masho, 2025](#)) and cautiously embracing digital tools ([Aldoseri et al., 2023](#)). Policymakers require coherent, mission-oriented industrial policies that strengthen domestic productive capabilities and linkages ([Chang & Andreoni, 2020](#)). Furthermore, robust social protection systems are a foundational investment in stability and human capital, as the COVID-19 pandemic revealed ([Gérard et al., 2020](#)).

This study has limitations, notably its geographic focus and sample size, which caution against overgeneralisation. These boundaries, however, identify avenues for future inquiry. Longitudinal research on the implementation of post-conflict reconstruction policies at the sub-national level is needed. The gendered dimensions of business recovery require urgent attention, as does the intersection of climate adaptation and business model innovation within food systems ([Canfield et al., 2021](#); [Nascimento et al., 2023](#)). Comparative studies with other post-conflict African states could yield insights into transferable business development models.

In conclusion, the period from 2010 to 2025 represents a critical juncture for Ethiopian business. The path forward is not towards a mythical ‘normal’ market, but towards the deliberate construction of a resilient and inclusive business ecosystem aware of its post-conflict foundations. Navigating this terrain demands a collaborative endeavour among businesses, the state, and civil society, grounded in a commitment to a sustainable development that heals as it grows.

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