Chapter 7. Discussion and conclusions

This thesis was set up with the purpose of understanding which institutional forces hinder, and which ones encourage, establishing linkages between humanitarian relief and development cooperation in Ethiopia. In this final chapter, I will discuss the evidence presented in the previous chapters, and most notably in chapter 5, and present the key contributions of this study, as well as its limitations and issues that remain open for further research.

7.1 The research question unwrapped

In setting out the study of LRD in Ethiopia, I had taken as working hypothesis that there are institutional forces pushing for maintaining the separation of humanitarian and development action, while at the same time recognising that other forces might be pushing in the opposite direction (see section 2.4 above). Following the operationalisation of this research, I will be discussing the findings in each of the three institutional pillars: regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive.

7.1.1 Regulative Pillar

From the evidence presented in this study, it appears that some regulative frameworks, and most notably those set by donors for the management of grants, can constitute powerful forces that work against the integration of humanitarian relief and development action. By setting different rules that implementers have to follow in their humanitarian and development projects – for instance related to the timeframe of the implementation or the eligibility of beneficiaries – these rules contribute to the institutionalisation of two separate modes of action. It is crucial to note here that the two modes may or may not reflect substantial differences in the situation on the ground. Particularly in case of slow-onset disasters as the one experienced in Ethiopia in 2011-12, it is difficult to draw a line between deteriorating conditions of chronic poverty, and a situation of humanitarian concern. Indeed, if sometimes humanitarian activities are carried out in the same communities were development projects are on-
going, it is clear that, at least to some extent, boundaries are defined by the aid community and for the aid community.

It would nevertheless be misguided to dismiss the humanitarian-development distinction as something created by donors and necessarily determined by empirically observable differences on the ground. Following a critical realist approach, in fact, whatever is capable of transforming structures and events, and to reproduce them, is real (Clegg 2010:10). And indeed, the application of different rules has consequences at many levels. The type of activities that can be undertaken within the framework of a humanitarian project are usually different from the ones that are admissible in a development project; and this applies even more for their duration. The impact of donor rules is such, that some aid agencies reported planning their interventions in order to fit into donors’ schemes.

Following Ohanyan (2009, 2012) it can be argued that organisations not relying on a single donor (or a limited number of donors, for that matter) can enjoy greater independence, and thus more easily escape the humanitarian-development divide if they feel it is not beneficial to a given situation on the ground. This is confirmed by evidence that NGOs considered expanding their funding base as a key element for maintaining their presence in the country, which is a key example of their agency. Furthermore, a few organisations that were reportedly receiving a substantial part of their funding from private sources were more confident in planning activities over a longer period of time, or piloting approaches that may or may not be readily accepted by donors. At the same time, the emergence of some flexible funding schemes – of which the USAID crisis modifier and the joint ECHO-EuropeAid SHARE initiative were two key examples – signalled that donors might be increasingly open to change some of the rules, allowing for easier integration of humanitarian and development efforts.

As far as the Ethiopian rules and regulations are concerned, some, such as the need of having every project approved by different entities, certainly contributed to an additional layer of complexity for the management of aid projects. However, Ethiopian rules did not foster the institutionalisation and perpetuation of the humanitarian-development gap and, if anything, they contribute to establishing a common platform. In fact, the same rules apply to all non-profit organisations, regardless of the type of intervention, which contributes to reducing the distinctions between development and humanitarian activities. This is particularly relevant when, as some aid workers pointed out, the complex bureaucratic procedures result in delaying the start of
humanitarian activities, inadvertently further dismantling the juxtaposition of rapid (and short-term) humanitarian relief versus more carefully planned, longer-term development. At the same time, some rules could affect the viability of some development actions, considering that foreign-funded organisations are not allowed to work on human rights and other politically sensitive issues that would otherwise be part of the domain of development action. Similarly, some capacity-building activities – itself a mode of action that is particularly suited to development – might be barred on the grounds that their costs are entirely “administrative” and thus violate the 70-30 rule on budgets. Whether Ethiopian authorities were actually willing to enforce all their rules to the point of discouraging the implementation of aid initiatives is beyond the scope of this work. From a critical realist standpoint, what matters, as noted also with reference to donor rules, is whether the existence of such rules might induce aid organisations to change their plans. For instance, even if one of the interviewees reported that it is sometimes possible to start activities without waiting for formal approval, other informants would not do so for fear of breaking the rules and being revoked the permission to operate in the country. In this sense, the mere existence of the rule was having an impact on aid practices, delaying the start of emergency response. However, Ethiopian laws do not seem to actually contribute to the institutionalisation of the humanitarian-development divide. All things considered, I conclude that Ethiopian rules are compatible with “bridging the gap” approaches.

7.1.2 Normative Pillar

In the normative pillar, the focus has been on the non-binding norms and values that can reinforce the institutionalisation of the two-pronged system, or instead promote LRD. In particular, the hegemonic discourse of emergency humanitarianism, despite having long represented a minority of the actors that identify as humanitarian, appears to be one of the main obstacles to “bridging the gap”, as it could be difficult to conciliate respect for the humanitarian principles when carrying out more developmental tasks. And indeed, the strongest opposition to the very idea of LRD has come from emergency humanitarians asking for a return to “basics”, i.e. principled emergency response. On the other hand, the various discourses of “bridging the gap” could be employed to promote and justify integrated approaches.

By analysing policies and official narratives of Ethiopian authorities, donors, and implementing organisations, I have found strong indications of the relevance of the mandate only among donors. This finding was possibly influenced by the fact that most of the informants were receiving funds from the European Commission, and that the
only donor representatives interviewed were also from that organisation. In fact, and despite having been the creator of the “LRRD” approach, the European Commission is also one of the organisations where the divide is the most pronounced. Specificities of the EC aside, those who openly discussed the different narratives of humanitarian and development action tended to ascribe them to something that exist “at donor level”, without referring to anyone in particular. Other than people from within the EC, only one UN officer and one NGO representative ever openly adopted narratives of humanitarian mandate, or identity. Otherwise, adopting a “humanitarian” language rather than a “development” one was merely a tool instrumentally adopted to further one organisation’s chances of getting funded.

As far as the Ethiopian authorities were concerned, while I could not find any explicit reference to bridging the gap as such, their policies and official narratives all went in the direction of preventing famine rather than addressing its symptoms. This has led to the development of policies and narrative that, while sometimes poorly connected with each other, all contribute to foster a culture of prevention, risk reduction, and development – all elements that are key to LRD approaches.

### 7.1.3 Cultural-cognitive Pillar

In the cultural-cognitive pillar, the dichotomy between humanitarian and development action is less pronounced than in the normative one. There was relatively little convergence between normative discourses and frames of reference of aid organisations on the ground. Discourses might have been instrumentally used to pursue practical objectives, such as getting funded, but were not necessarily shared by – or sometimes, not even known to – aid workers on the field.

In most of the cases, the humanitarian-development divide was not referred to as a problem of different mandates, but either dismissed as a donor concern – with the contrasting narratives used as tools to please different donors – or framed as an issue of different contexts, not particularly relevant to the situation on the ground. In other words, they did not share the same frames of reference and meanings that are produced by polarised discourses of humanitarianism and development. In some cases, aid workers explicitly admitted to have instrumentally used development discourse to appeal to development donors, and humanitarian discourse to humanitarians. Overall, the aid workers’ notions of what is appropriate and legitimate rarely referred to “values” of any kind, and were instead more pragmatically and flexible than the broader narratives.
A significant finding related to the cultural-cognitive elements is actually that their humanitarian (or development) identity is of relatively little relevance for aid workers focused on (and perhaps obsessed by) the practical details and challenges of day-to-day project implementation. These aid workers rarely question the broader logic of their intervention. Indeed, the very ideas of humanitarianism and of principled action appeared to be foreign to some interviewees, and they almost never referred to them. It emerged instead a conflation of the idea of humanitarianism with that of emergency response, where the defining element of humanitarianism was not the way it is carried out (the principles), but the context (the emergency). In other words, rather than “being” humanitarian, some organisations “do” emergency response, alongside development action. Yet, not all emergency response is necessarily humanitarian, whereas it is possible to act according to humanitarian principles in situations that do not constitute an acute crisis. Furthermore, it was somehow surprising to almost never hear any reference to humanitarian principles when discussing with staff members of organisations signatories of the 1994 Code of Conduct. Perhaps neglect constitutes a greater threat to the integrity of the principles than their voluntary abandonment. The paradox is that confining humanitarianism to emergency response has not necessarily translated in a systematic application of humanitarian principles in the framework of humanitarian projects.

Similarly, references to concepts of “bridging the gap”, such as LRRD or Early Recovery, were rare, particularly among people occupying non-managerial roles. These concepts did not have much influence in shaping aid workers’ views, as only few were aware of their meaning, and even less referred to them spontaneously. Conversely, I brought evidence of an increasingly frequent use of the concept of “resilience”, signalling that they were exposed to discourses of resilience, at the very least in interactions with donors and other elements of the international community, if not also in their programmes. Overall, and despite their choice of words, interviewees were supportive of the idea of integrating humanitarian and development action. The desirability of bridging the gap would usually be linked to the difficulty of drawing a line between the two when working at the community level in the field.

Overall, I gathered the impression that the word resilience was merely a catch-all term with little meaning – that is, one of the definitions of buzzwords according to Cornwall and Brock (2005) – or, at best, a rebranding of existing ideas. However, for some aid workers it was perhaps the first concept for them to refer comprehensively to every action that did not fit neatly in either the “emergency response” box nor in the “development one”. Resilience, in a way, could bring together a range of different ideas
about holistic programming that had remained confined to their own domains. It might, for instance, help different sectors develop their own versions of what is known as “livelihoods programming” in the realm of food assistance, or “building back better” for shelter (particularly in natural disasters settings).

Through this research, I brought evidence of how the integration between humanitarian and development assistance in Ethiopia is most strongly hindered by institutional forces that operate in the regulative and, to a certain extent, the normative pillar. As far as the cultural-cognitive pillar is concerned, there seem to be little trickle-down of the very idea of humanitarian pillar as principled action, which has always been the main argument against LRD.

### 7.2 Originality and relevance

The main element of originality of this research lies in the approach taken in examining the issue of linking relief and development, which differs from previous scholarship. Rather than taking a normative stance as to whether the humanitarian-development divide should (or should not) be overcome, I have sought to examine the institutional factors that contribute to the perpetuation of the gap, as well as those that promote its reduction, by using original empirical material from my case study in Ethiopia. To the best of my knowledge, this is a unique attempt that could potentially contribute to scholarly reflections on the boundaries between humanitarian and development action in 2015. We are in fact at a critical juncture, when negotiation of both the Sustainable Development Goals – the objectives that will replace the Millennium Development Goals after 2015 – and of a new humanitarian agenda to be adopted at the World Humanitarian Summit are taking place almost in parallel. Considering that a number of actors, such as dual-mandate organisations and several recipient countries, are stakeholders in both processes, the theme of bridging the gap could potentially be relevant.

In addition, this study contributes to shedding a light on practices of aid to Ethiopia, emphasising the constraints and incentives that shape the day-to-day implementation of humanitarian work at the meso level of aid organisations based in-country. These concerns, in fact, are usually absent from both academic research and project documentation, both mostly focused on assessing the results (or lack thereof) rather than the processes with which the former are attained. A notable exception is the work of Lautze et al. (2009) on humanitarian governance, which coincidentally has also taken Ethiopia as a case study. Their work, however, focused more on the regulative
and normative aspects set by the government, whereas my research has taken aid organisations as the main point of reference. With Ethiopia being a prominent stage for humanitarian and development action, I feel that research on how these are – and can be – carried out fills a critical gap in literature.

Furthermore, the findings of this study are also expected to be of interest to policymakers and aid organisations seeking to promote better integration of humanitarian and development efforts. Finally, by bringing to the surface the widespread lack of awareness about humanitarian principles, particularly among field-level aid officers, this study could also be employed by both emergency and alchemical humanitarians to justify the need for improving their dissemination efforts.

7.3 Generalisability, limitations, and issues for further research

The issue of generalisability of the findings of a single case study has been satisfactorily addressed by Flyvbjerg (2006, 2011), who, despite arguing that generalisability should not be the primary aim of scientific research, nevertheless demonstrates that some case studies can satisfactorily produce results that are relevant to different contexts. This is true in particular of critical case studies, where the case examined presents some prominent features. In this dissertation, I have argued that Ethiopia is a critical case for LRD, because it is characterised by an exacerbated vulnerability to food crises, by the simultaneous and longstanding presence of both humanitarian and development actors. In addition, it has been demonstrated that the government is not hostile towards bridging the gap, but it is rather in favour of a more developmental approach to crisis response, provided that it fits into its own policies. As a result of these factors, Ethiopia appears to be unusually suited for LRD; and any difficulties experienced here are likely to be even more pronounced elsewhere. While it will be impossible to extrapolate from this case study detailed predictions on the feasibility of LRD approaches elsewhere, some elements can be nevertheless relevant, particularly if one considers the transnational dimension of the humanitarian and development “industries”.

The empirical findings of this study have shown that LRD approaches are possible in Ethiopia, and they have indeed been implemented during the recent food crises – even though often they were not necessarily labelled as such. Donors appear to be the key
obstacle, for they hinder integration by imposing different regulations to their humanitarian and development grants respectively, as well as by having different policies for each type of action, and different accountability lines. Considering that donors, with their rules and policies, are more or less the same for all the developing world, this specific finding is of the utmost importance for any discussion about LRD, regardless of the country of implementation. Conversely, implementing organisations rarely posed issues of “identity” as humanitarians, and were instead interested in keeping a presence in the country, to both try to reduce vulnerability and prevent, to the extent possible, the worst effects of crises, as well as to be present and ready to scale up their activities to respond to the next emergency. In order to do so, they were open to pragmatically exploit the features of the current donor system. Given the fact that aid organisations have also a transnational presence, and that most of the decision-makers at local level are expatriate staff members who would usually rotate among different duty stations, it would not be surprising if similar considerations could apply elsewhere.

Indeed, my own professional experience in humanitarian and development actions in countries other than Ethiopia is consistent with the findings of this study. Only during my time at ECHO I found strong insistence on humanitarian identity; this was not true of any the other organisations I worked with. At the Italian Cooperation I was personally only involved in development assistance, but emergency relief was also part of the office’s portfolio, although managed by a different team and with different procedures. There was no juxtaposition of the two identities, and some staff moved from humanitarian projects to development ones with ease. The NGO COPE was only doing development, and had a stronger development identity, yet it was not prejudicially against humanitarian assistance – it was just something outside their expertise and, possibly, capacities. The WFP, which has a strong humanitarian identity, has also always carried out development projects. Indeed, while most donors recognise and praise the humanitarian competence of WFP – particular in terms of logistical capacities, rapid deployment, and scale – one of the challenges in terms of donor relations is for the organisation to be seen as a valuable player in the development domain, particularly during times of spending cuts and added emphasis on concepts such as value for money.

Importantly, Ethiopia constitutes a very peculiar case in terms of the degree of control exercised by local authorities over international aid, as well as for their overall preference for approaches aimed at crisis prevention and at tackling chronic hunger. Furthermore, the local leadership of the government in both the humanitarian and
development realm is virtually uncontested, despite timid criticism from some NGOs. In the absence of an interventionist government, or in presence of rules that exacerbate rather than dilute the differences between emergency response and development action, bridging the gap could prove more challenging than it is in Ethiopia. The limited awareness of the specificities of humanitarian action (as opposed to development) can also be linked to a situation in which natural triggers of disasters are emphasised over the political dimension. The same would probably not be true in situations of clearly “man-made disasters” such as conflicts, where humanitarians are more likely to adhere to principles that were indeed developed for wartime assistance. All in all, issues at stake when trying to bridge relief and development in situations of conflict, weak state institutions, or following sudden natural disasters, will likely raise different concerns than the ones examined here.

Therefore, a first major limitation of this study is that, while some of its findings can be generalised, others are only relevant to Ethiopia. Furthermore, by design this study has focused on implementing organisations and, to a limited extent, to donors present in country. All other actors along the aid chain – donor headquarters, aid organisations headquarters, local authorities, and obviously beneficiaries – have been looked at from the standpoint of the implementing organisation. While maintaining the relevance of my approach, which has showed some significant results, despite being carried out as an individual research project with only limited availability of time and funds, I recognise that it is also useful to listen to other voices along (and outside) the aid chain. Finally, as anticipated in the introduction, another limitation is that I have taken an agnostic stance as to whether a systematic adoption of LRD would actually be better than a two-pronged system.

Recognising these limitations, I believe that further research could be beneficial in all three areas. Two of them would constitute expansions of the present research, either by replicating this study in one or more contexts other than Ethiopia and then compare the findings, or by adding more “layers” of interviews to actors holding different positions in the aid chain. The third issue that could deserve additional research, establishing whether LRD is a more desirable approach, would require a completely different research design, focused on monitoring and evaluation, as well as active collaboration of aid organisations, who should be open to share their internal documents and allow for field visits. Furthermore, the involvement of a larger team of researchers would be necessary, even more so in case of a comparative study undertaken in different countries.
7.4 Final remarks and recommendations

The key finding of this research is that, in the case of Ethiopia and possibly in others, there is an interplay of factors, some favouring the perpetuation of the gap, while others working in the opposite direction. The factors hindering LRD are most significant in the regulative pillars, where donor regulations remain critical to the institutionalisation of a humanitarian-development divide. Additionally, regulative frameworks at the country level may further deepen the divide, but this effect was not significant in the Ethiopian case study. Discourses of humanitarianism as separate from development, while much emphasised in literature and policy documents, had limited influence at the operational level, where pragmatic and instrumental approaches were common, and willingness to link relief and development widespread. However, this might be related to the common perception of Ethiopian food crises as natural disasters, compounded with the high involvement of the government in both humanitarian and development action. In other contexts, the normative and cultural-cognitive pillars might play a more substantive role in maintaining the gap. Nevertheless, this study has demonstrated that LRD is, at least under certain conditions, possible, yet still subject to a number of challenges. If aid organisations are indeed willing to bridge the gap whenever possible, there are a number of recommendations that could make this effort easier.

First of all, from a regulative point of view, implementing organisations should seek to enlarge their donor base, including private funders. The availability of different types of funding would likely increase their capability of carrying out different types of activities across the humanitarian-development divide and, more broadly, it would enhance their capability of exercise agency and pursue their own strategies rather than becoming mere executers of donors’ priorities. Donors, on their side, should take steps to allow for more flexibility in funding, such as allowing for rapidly switching from development-mode to humanitarian-mode, considering extending the maximum duration of their humanitarian projects, or creating specific budget lines as “bridges” between different projects. Additionally, options for non-earmarked contributions to trusted implementing partners could be explored.

Secondly, from a normative perspective, considering that many implementing organisations are already pursuing a dual mandate, it could be time to consider whether humanitarian principles can be maintained also in when undertaking activities that are not strictly-speaking humanitarian, and whether they could benefit from being complemented with aid effectiveness principles. This is in part already
happening, for instance with the recent launch of the new Core Humanitarian Standard, which integrates previous humanitarian standards, and which is open to use also in the context of development operations, or with the recent interest in the concepts of resilience and disaster risk reduction. The discussion would benefit from pragmatical insights on the extent to which humanitarian principles are actually applied in current humanitarian operations. Finally, given the rather limited uptake of normative discourses at field level, aid organisations, regardless of their views on the specific issue of bridging the gap, might want to invest in dissemination of principles and standards for accountability among their staff members.