

Education in Ethiopia: Time for a Holistic Approach

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Ethiopia is a fascinating country in Sub-Saharan Africa undergoing major social and generational changes. In 2019, 40% of the population was 14 years old or younger, uniquely intertwining the lives of the grandparents and grandchildren. Grandparents have often depended upon the support of their adult children and regularly live with them, providing direct help for working young adults. With annual deaths due to the HIV/AIDS epidemic peaking at 70 000 in 2002 alone, over 310 000 children became orphaned by 2019, with their grandparents becoming sole caregivers. This aging population is particularly vulnerable to economic and physical stresses, so it's imperative that both charitable organizations and the Ethiopian government focus on initiatives to provide relief and social assistance to support them as they raise the next generation, especially when it comes to education.

The United Nations developed the Universal Primary Education (UPE) program in 2002 to encourage children from the age of 6 to attend school regularly, providing opportunities for young people, especially girls, to study, gain knowledge and build the skills they need through education. But UPE fell short of their 2015 attendance goals and there are also significantly fewer girls attending schools in comparison to boys, failing to meet the goal of equal attendance. However, many material benefits have emerged, and attendance has still risen considerably. Children across Ethiopia, Malawi and Uganda where UPE also operates, have attended approximately one year of schooling, which has increased literacy and access to information. Additionally, UPE has been credited with significant decreases in teen pregnancies and child marriages. Furthermore, girls who are already mothers benefit from education by learning more about immunization and other safe health practices. Education for girls has continuously been shown to reduce adolescent pregnancy and increase girls' chances of earning higher incomes, empowering girls to pursue their goals, participate in decision-making for policies, and become closer to attaining gender equality.



Education initiatives in Ethiopia have failed to reach 2015 goals for equal access to education for boys and girls. Education for girls and women is integral to providing relief and social change.

The UPE program is relatively new, but it has not reached its goals; there are far more children whose needs must be met. This underscores the urgent need for action to fine-tune and improve the program so that children stay in school longer and have access better school materials. As of 2019, 34 million children across Ethiopia and Uganda had not been enrolled in a school, and those who did attend were not necessarily better equipped for employment after graduation. Many students also struggle to

access basic nutrition. The majority of schools in Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa, have relied on charity-run free food programs to feed students but this doesn't reach most children. Another government-run food program has seen success after launching in both the capital and rural areas, increasing children's focus and performance in classes. By meeting their nutritional needs, these programs ensure that children are energized and attentive, and ease the burden of parents to provide every meal of the day.

Another factor that impacts access to schools is climate change. A 2016 study found that droughts, which are more frequent under climate change, and the consequent agricultural stresses and crop failures are likely to reduce the number of children attending school. In heat stress events, children are less likely to receive nutrition, and are more likely to try to help parents or grandparents in attaining income, compared to moderate climate years.

The tragic loss of Ethiopia's middle generation has led grandparents and children to rely on each other, especially as they are forced to reckon with greater economic and social pressures. It is imperative that we consider a holistic approach to improving access to education, not only by providing access to high quality schooling, but also improving the global climate and mitigating its impact on nutrition and food resources for students. Education for youth is a path out of poverty and an investment in the future of Ethiopia.

Further reading:

On the historical context of Education in Ethiopia: <https://wenr.wes.org/2018/11/education-in-ethiopia>

On the free food programs: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-climate-change-ethiopia-drought-idUSKCN1U30RW>

On the importance of girls' education: <https://www.unicef.org/education/girls-education>

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