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Assisting Those Who Hold the Key to Ethiopia's Success: A Plan to Reduce Population Growth Through Education and Public Policy Initiatives

A sixteen-year old girl from the Amharan region of Ethiopia bends over the teff plants in her family's one-hectare field. She grips the hand hoe forcefully, hoping her seeds will take root this year and receive the desperately needed rain. The past few years her crop was unsuccessful due to drought. Her family, composed of her husband, three children and herself, cannot continue to survive in this rural Amharan area of Ethiopia if this year's crop is lost. The options available to this young wife and her family are limited. Her life is the product of a tradition of early marriage, which flourishes in this northern area of Ethiopia and eliminates educational and decision making opportunities for a large percentage of girls. Education has not been provided equally to girls and at the same time cultural and traditional practices have forced many of these young women who hold a key to Ethiopia's future success hostage.

This scenario impacts 80-85% of Ethiopia's population of 85,237,338, who work in agriculture. Agriculture is the most important sector of Ethiopia's economy accounting for 40% of the GDP and 80% of the exports (CIA). Ethiopia's chief agricultural products are cereals, pulses (beans), coffee, oilseed, cotton, sugarcane, potatoes, several fruits, livestock, and fish. Chief exports are coffee, leather products, live animals, and oilseeds (FAO). The average Ethiopian family makes the equivalent of \$900 annually, but almost 40% of the population lives on less than one dollar per day. The average land holding for farmers in Ethiopia is 1.2 hectares of land but 55% of the farmers hold less than 1.0 hectare or 2.5 acres (Embassy of Ethiopia).

Ethiopian family life in the Amharan region is affected by cultural practices and a lack in education for girls. The average Ethiopian family consists of a mother, father, and six children (CIA). Marriage in Ethiopia is a "social institution that unites people in a special form of mutual dependence for the purpose of founding and maintaining a family" (Pathfinder International). Marriage before puberty is not unusual and 4 out of 5 women who have ever been wed were married before age 18. Despite an Ethiopian Law which states: "Neither a man nor a woman who has not attained the full age of eighteen years shall conclude marriage," Ethiopia is known for one of the most severe crises of child marriage in the world (Pathfinder International). In the Amharan region, rates of early marriage are higher than the national average of 57%; they are 82%. 14% of women in Amhara were married before age 10, 39% before age 15 and 56% before 18 (Pathfinder International). More than 60% of the women were not informed about the wedding before the decision was made. Three fourths of the women did not know the person prior to the wedding (Pathfinder International). The Amharan region's religious background consists of 82% members of the Orthodox Christian Church and 17% Muslims. Even though membership in organized religion is high, the cultural practice of early marriage doesn't seem to be lessened with assistance from religious leaders. The practice of early marriage and early child bearing is severely impacting female health. The ratio for women who die in childbirth or causes related to pregnancy is 871 for every 100,000 live births (Pathfinder International). If there is going to be quantifiable change in Ethiopia, education along with enforcement of Ethiopian public policy initiatives are crucial in this area of early marriage, especially in the Amharan region.

The population of Ethiopia is 85,237,338, with the median age of 16.5 years for males, 17.2 years for females. With the average age of 16.8 years for an Ethiopian it is clear that intensive work needs to be done in the areas of education and public policy for nutrition, food production, AIDS education and healthcare. The birth rate is 43.66 births /1,000 population and the death rate is 11.55 deaths/1,000

population (CIA). As seen in these statistics, the average age of 16.8 years is a major issue in addition to the population increasing at a rate surpassing the death rate, which means more food will need to be produced for everyone to be fed. Dr. Norman Borlaug said, "Food is a moral right to anyone born into this world." This illustrates how we need to decrease or stabilize the world's population in conjunction with implementation of agricultural practices, which ensure that everyone born into this world is fed.

Another issue, which negatively affects the mortality of Ethiopians, is that 6.4% of Ethiopians (650,000) suffer from HIV/AIDS. It remains the leading cause of death and illness in the country (CIA). Because of male superiority over women, AIDS is difficult to combat because females are not allowed to speak up in support of condom use, multiple sex partners and basic control of their own bodies. Also, many of these young women suffer from fistulas, which form between the vagina and bowel, because of the early rate of sexual activity (Pathfinder International). High numbers of infectious diseases, nutritional deficiencies, low immunization, and very low access to clean water sources and sanitation are also major factors contributing to high death rates.

The mean age difference between spouses in Ethiopia is 10.1 years. The difference in years is one of the reasons the divorce rate is so high, and when polled, in the age group of 35-39, 38% of the women had been married twice and 45% had been married three or more times. Also, around 50% of the women answered that their first marriage only lasted 0-3 years (Pathfinder International). Early marriage creates a number of conditions that expose married girls to poverty and violence. Men's control over the young girls leads to rape, domestic violence, emotional abuse, and physical damage to their bodies. Early marriage is also linked to wife abandonment, plunging young girls into extreme poverty and increases the risk of the girls entering the commercial sex trade in urban areas, either by force, or lack of options (Pathfinder International).

Another factor affecting food security in Ethiopia is the shortage of health personnel, health facilities, and limited access to basic healthcare. The Ethiopian diet is primarily composed of cereals such as corn, sorghum, and teff. Also tubers and root crops such as ensete, potatoes, and sweet potatoes are staples in the diet (FAO). Even though most of the farmers have livestock, the use of these animals for consumption is low, especially in rural areas such as the Amharan region (Future Agricultures). Grain and plant production is also in recent danger due to climate change and severe droughts (Embassy). These components lead to food insecurity and over half of the population is undernourished. Due to the large amount of grains in the average Ethiopian's diet, and limited amounts of meat, there is a sizeable Vitamin A shortage which leads to an epidemic of blindness or very poor eyesight, malformations in bone growth (especially in the skull), increased mortality from infections such as the measles and gastrointestinal infections, scaly skin, and an increased rate of thyroid disease (Bureau of Rural Development). In addition, since the country does not have an iodized salt program there is a high epidemic of goiters and several developmental delays due to the lack of iodine in the body (Bureau of Rural Development).

Educational equality and expansion are key needs if population growth and conditional urbanization are going to be decreased. 35.9% of adults are literate and 49.9% of youth are literate. In 2008, 75% of girls and 81% of boys were enrolled in primary school and 28% of girls and 39% of boys were enrolled in secondary school (Bureau of Rural Development). Though these are national averages, the percentages vary greatly between urban and rural areas. For example, 58.3% of women in urban areas are literate while only 33.4% of women are literate in rural areas. 41.3% of women in urban areas received no education while 64.2% of women in rural areas received no education (Pathfinder International). Literacy is an important skill for citizens to have if we intend to help them gain food security, because literate populations are able to acquire knowledge from pamphlets and other printed material, as well as able to make better-informed decisions regarding food, health, and general well-being decisions. We need to ensure that citizens, especially women, in rural areas of Africa, specifically Ethiopia, receive equal or greater opportunities in education, so we can take technology and sound practices in agriculture, nutrition

and health to where they are needed most. The main reason for girls dropping out of school is that they are forced into marriage, a custom/tradition which needs to change. Only 8.9% of married girls were still able to attend school after being wed. (Pathfinder) Compared to other Sub-Saharan African countries, Ethiopia's urbanization rate is low, only 16% (UN Statistics) of the population is urbanized while other Sub-Saharan countries average around 30% (IFPRE). A location is considered urban if the population is greater than 150 people per square kilometer and is located within one-hour travel from a city of at least 50,000 people. Based on recent population data recorded from the census, most of the Ethiopian population remains at more than ten hours from an urban center.

Actions/Solutions to reduce population growth and urbanization in Ethiopia can be accomplished through education and public policy initiatives such as the following:

Education: Schools need to educate girls about their bodies as this would lead to a decrease in the population. They must teach male and female students about STDs including AIDS, which would reduce the spread of harmful diseases and decrease the number of problems girls acquire while partaking in early onset of sexual activity (fistulas, paralysis, birthing problems, child deformities, death). Students should also learn the problems of early marriage, which includes high divorce rates, abuse, rape, poverty, forced moves to urban areas, and sex trade (IFPRI). This education may move children to re-think practices when it comes time for them to make choices for their future, and to share with their parents the negative consequences when parents arrange marriages. The United Nations states they believe it will take a few generations to change the median age when girls are married. By educating women about their choices and allowing them to further their education they can make informed decisions about marriage and having children. They may also be able to make a life for themselves if they choose. By making women aware of their bodies and the rights they have, we can help to decrease the population. By implementing new policies for child brides and for agriculture we can help to give women rights as well as increasing the food supply.

Law Enforcement: Government officials must stop the practice of "Looking the other way," when they are aware of an underage/early marriage. This practice happens more frequently in rural and isolated areas including the Amharan region. (Ethiopian Law states: "Neither a man nor a woman who has not attained the full age of eighteen years shall conclude marriage.") (Pathfinder) Religious leaders could help change community's views of early marriage and other harmful practices. Some *Kadi* (religious leaders), don't accept under-age couples for marriage and require a medical proof if they doubt the young adult's actual age (Pathfinder). This practice needs to become the norm, so parents learn that even if they want to marry off their children at a young age, they will not be able to because religious leaders as well as law enforcement officers will enforce Ethiopian Law. Girls also need to learn that it is their responsibility to report to the Kebele (police) or schools if they find out their parents are in the process of arranging a marriage. By ensuring an end to early marriages, this destructive tradition will die out.

Extension Educational Expansion: This specific kind of education will improve agricultural production. When I was interviewing Dr. Gebisa Ejeta, agronomist, native Ethiopian, and 2009 World Food Prize Laureate, he stated the technology of new crops, fertilizers, and planting practices are being discovered, but they are not being taken to the people who need them most (Ejeta). By implementing an effective Extension Office Network, farmers could get the help they need and answers to the questions they may have about droughts, insects, problems with animals, and agricultural practices. If Ethiopia's government chose to expand and support the Extension System, they would have to ensure that this information was accessible to all people in the country. Opening offices like this would bring good jobs to native Ethiopians in the country. One of the biggest concepts brought up frequently during the symposium sessions at the 2009 World Food Prize was, "Being able to bring Ethiopian experts who trained in other countries back to Ethiopia to help its citizens." (WFP) A possibility to solving this problem could be having Non Government Organizations (NGOs) or organizations such as the United Nations sponsor

positions like these to help bring a much needed work force to the area. Another possibility would be to have a partner Extension Office with the United States or another willing country to help with sending supplies and trained scientists to aid in projects until the Ethiopian Government is able to take over and support the offices on their own.

Infrastructure: With increased agriculture production, Ethiopian infrastructure needs to expand. “Food availability is not the real issue. The quality of the food is what we need to recognize is the problem.” (Bertini) (WFP). Roads and bridges will help farmers get their products to market more quickly and allow for storage of crops, to help them from rotting. By doing this, farmers will be able to make a higher salary because they’re able to get their crops to market quickly without spoiling and will be able to store their crops for their family’s use later (WFP). By decreasing the amount of food that is wasted from spoilage, the price of food will decrease making nutritious food more accessible to everyone. It is also necessary for farmers to have a global market that will buy their products. This will help to keep prices competitive. Many European countries will no longer buy African grain due to the large uses of biotechnology, or Genetically Modified Organisms (GMO) crops on small-scale farms (WFP). This limits the Ethiopian farmer’s market base along with his fellow African farmers from other countries. To help this problem, I suggest the United Nations and other organizations that provide aid by donations of food, buy the cereals and other crops from the farmers and then give them to the needy who are not opposed to GMO products. Governments who provide lunches for school children and send food home to families with school-age children could also use this same practice.

Financial Support: Associations such as the World Bank and other banking systems who provide loans to African farmers need to focus on extending micro-loans to women farmers (WFP). This would make it possible for them to increase their farm production and buy the much needed supplies and new agricultural technologies. By doing this farms have the potential to drastically increase their production and output, which in turn will provide more opportunities for Ethiopians.

With these types of solutions implemented through family, community programs, government initiatives and policies, educational support, assistance from the United Nations and other nonprofit agencies and NGO’s, the sixteen-year old girl from the Amharan region of Ethiopia described in the beginning of this essay will be able to support and feed her family and move toward equal opportunities for herself and her children. Since women produce almost 80% of the food in Ethiopia (Ejeta), it is essential they are able to get the financial assistance they need in agriculture. This could be accomplished through funding by the World Bank. A woman’s primary goal is to feed her family and she will be more likely to use the money for the children’s and family’s good (WFP). Furthermore, women need to be able to have an avenue to receive micro-loans and materials to increase agricultural productivity. For these reasons most agricultural institutions and organizations trying to increase food production entrust their technologies and monies to the women of the family. This practice needs to include more institutions and organizations. The future of Ethiopia and its people will become brighter when population growth is reduced by the enforcement of the early marriage laws and education of girls and families on the abilities of females. The future of Ethiopian girls can include a childhood uninterrupted by early marriage, disease and early childbearing, a complete education, and the opportunity of choice for their future.

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