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Poverty Alleviation and Development: The Need for and Conditions of Youth Empowerment in Ethiopia

By Adamu Amanu Asari
Jimma University

Abstract- Ethiopia has a huge youthful population who can determine both the current and future development of the country, and it also owns abundant natural resources. However, poverty has been a widespread challenge in Ethiopia. Thus, poverty alleviation is the central concern of the country. The objective of this paper is concerned with explaining the need for and conditions of youth empowerment in Ethiopia. And the paper prepared through extensive consultation of literature and observations. Youth empowerment is a key to alleviate poverty, transform societies, and develop well-balanced citizens. Having cognizant of this fact, Ethiopia has witnessed several development efforts, especially since 2002, which recognize youth empowerment as an invaluable measure to combat poverty. However, although there are significant growth gains and progress as a result, the society still suffers pervasive socioeconomic problems. Particularly, the youth continue to experience a myriad of problems such as lack of access to functional education, appropriate technologies and information, unemployment and underemployment, and mistreatments. Especially young women and rural youth have often experienced more problems throughout the country. They are extremely vulnerable to poverty, illegal migration, risky behaviors, and various social evils.

Keywords: youth empowerment, poverty alleviation, food expenditure, development, ethiopia.

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Abstract: Ethiopia has a huge youthful population who can determine both the current and future development of the country, and it also owns abundant natural resources. However, poverty has been a widespread challenge in Ethiopia. Thus, poverty alleviation is the central concern of the country. The objective of this paper is concerned with explaining the need for and conditions of youth empowerment in Ethiopia. And the paper prepared through extensive consultation of literature and observations. Youth empowerment is a key to alleviate poverty, transform societies, and develop well-balanced citizens. Having cognizant of this fact, Ethiopia has witnessed several development efforts, especially since 2002, which recognize youth empowerment as an invaluable measure to combat poverty. However, although there are significant growth gains and progress as a result, the society still suffers pervasive socioeconomic problems. Particularly, the youth continue to experience a myriad of problems such as lack of access to functional education, appropriate technologies and information, unemployment and underemployment, and mistreatments. Especially young women and rural youth have often experienced more problems throughout the country. They are extremely vulnerable to poverty, illegal migration, risky behaviors, and various social evils. The central challenges to youth empowerment endeavors, in the country, are maladministration, political problems, persistent gender inequality, lack of effective inter-sectoral cooperation, concentration of services and growth in urban areas, an absence of a culture of entrepreneurship, and drought (in some parts of the country). Without tackling these problems and ensuring the empowerment of its large young population, it is unthinkable for the country to achieve sound development. Even, unless youth empowerment is secured, the society may face growing problems and crises. Therefore, the Government must demonstrate strong political commitment, renew its youth empowerment efforts, and aggressively embark on comprehensive and effective empowerment strategies. It must ensure broad community engagement and participation from all development partners, sectors, and stakeholders at all levels to respond to youth issues and problems through integrated and sustainable manner.

Keywords: youth empowerment, poverty alleviation, development, ethiopia.

I. NTRODUCTION

The way people define the concept youth varies across cultures and countries; different societies regard it in different ways. As an age group, it is conceptualized as the period of human development which occurs between childhood and adulthood; accordingly, the UN General Assembly (1995) defines it as persons between the ages of 15 and 24. And the African Youth Charter defines it as individuals aged 15 to 35 (AU, 2006), but the Ethiopian youth policy (2004) defines it as those who are between 15-29 years old. On the other hand, as a socio-cultural phenomenon, youth is regarded as a stage in which young people are confronted with the major roles, symbols, and values of their society that they are supposed to emulate and play in adult life (Eisenstaedt, 1972 and UNDP, 2006). Furthermore, as a gender dimension, it is perceived as the stage at which societal expectations and personal aspirations of young men and young women start to diverge; girls begin to experience new restrictions. Specifically, the attitudes, behavior, conduct, and the sexuality of young women commence to be more closely watched; in other words, it is often the time when the world expands for boys and contracts for girls, specially, in underdeveloped countries (AU, 2011 and UNDP, 2006).

About 20% of the world population is youth, in the age group of 15 to 24, whose situation is, globally, characterized by extreme disparities in terms of economic, social, cultural, and technological matters. Almost 90% of the world youth population are residents in the third world countries. Especially, Africa is the world's youngest continent; over 60% of its population is young people under age 35, of whom youth 15 to 24 years old constitute more than 20% (Greg Mills, 2010; UNDP, 2017 and USAID, 2012). In particular, Ethiopia is a country of a youthful population; from over 100 million of its total population, about 75 % are young people under age 25, and the youth aged 15 to 29 accounts for more than 30% of the population (CSA, 2008; 2014).

As Africa is the most infested continent with poverty and sociopolitical problems, a multitude of troubles characterize the lives of its youth population. Difficulties, such as, lack of access to quality education and health services, lack of viable skills, unemployment and underemployment, lack of meaningful participation in decision-making process, lack of access to resources, overwhelming migration, and mistreatments are familiar among the youth. Mainly, these problems are more widespread among the youth in rural areas than those in urban areas, among females than males,

Author: Jimma University, Sociology Department, Ethiopia.
e-mail: adamu.amanu@yahoo.com

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and in Sub-Saharan African countries, including Ethiopia (AU 2011; Greg Mills, 2010; UNECA, 2009 and World Bank, 2015).

While youth have faced enormous challenges, the realization and sustainability of development of a country are nevertheless determined by the wellbeing and status of its young people. Young people are the source of hope and transformation for their society; they represent the opportunity of today and tomorrow as educators and innovators, entrepreneurs and investors, health professionals and scientists, politicians and peacemakers (Olufunke, 2014; DID, 2010 and USAID, 2012). Due to this fact, more than ever, today youth empowerment is gaining increasing importance in the development agenda of national governments, regional entities and international development organizations (AU, 2006; ICM, 2016 and UNFPA, 2005).

Accordingly, as African Union envisions an integrated African economic, social, cultural, and political development by the year 2025, which is hoped to be driven and realized by its large youth population, it endorsed the African Youth Charter, in 2006, which provides direction for youth empowerment. The Youth Charter provides a framework for developing tangible youth policies and programmes for young people in areas that include education, employment, sustainable livelihoods, health, youth participation, peace and security and law enforcement. Consequently, several African countries are making progress in developing appropriate policies and allocating more resources to the concerns of their young people (Argenti, 2002; AU, 2006, 2011 and Gideon, 2014).

Likewise, as Ethiopia also aspires to alleviate poverty and reach a middle-income status by the year 2025, the Ethiopian Government introduced a consecutive five year development plans and strategies, specially, since 2002. These development plans are: Sustainable Development and Poverty Reduction Program and Agricultural Development Led Industrialization Policy (2002/3-204/5); a Plan for Accelerated and Sustainable Development to End Poverty (2005/6-2009/10); Growth and Transformation Plan I (2010/11-2014/5), and Growth and Transformation Plan II (2015/16-2019/20). And the Government recognizes youth empowerment (especially ensuring gender equality) as an invaluable measure that may help to realize the country's development vision. Thus, empowerment policies, programmes, and packages have been introduced in line with the development plans (FDRE, 2002; 2013; 2016; MoFED, 2006, 2010 and MYSC, 2004).

Consequently, nowadays there are significant progresses, for instance, in education and health services coverage, economic growth gains, labor markets, and women and youth participation. And as the official Government report indicated, the percent of population below the poverty line declined from 45% in 994/95 to 30% in 2010/11(FDRE, 2013; MoFED, 2006, 2010, 2012 and Shimeles, 2011).

However, despite the improvements and in contrast to the Government report, evidences and observation of people's conditions across the country reveal that there is still a widespread poverty, and many people are unable to sustain themselves. And a myriad of problems, such as maladministration, inequality, lack of quality services and facilities, low productivity, weak capital accumulation and investment, lack of or lower level of income, high poverty induced migration, gender inequality, prevalent child labor, violence, and recurrent drought (in some parts of the country) are still central challenges for the society in general and for the youth in particular (Abu, 2013; Ayrorit, 2013; Broussara & Tsegay, 2012; DSW, 2011; Mulugeta, 2013 and Woldehanna and et al, 2011).

Ensuring and promoting youth empowerment is a panacea to these problems and a key to the nation's development (AU, 2006; Bekeh, 2015; ICM, 2016 and UNFPA, 2005). Therefore, the objectives of this paper are concerned with elucidating the need for youth empowerment in poverty alleviation and development endeavors in Ethiopia; examining youth empowerment efforts and conditions in the country; explaining opportunities and challenges to youth empowerment in Ethiopia, and giving plausible policy recommendations. And the paper prepared through extensive consultation of literature and observations.

II. The Need for Youth Empowerment in Poverty Alleviation and Development Endeavors in Ethiopia

Young people are very invaluable to any nation; they have a fresh motivation, great potential, capabilities, and a formidable creative resource that a nation can utilize for its overall development. They are also receptive to new ideas, and they have an ability to respond to challenges in innovative ways (UNFPA, 2005 and USAID, 2012).

They are the cornerstone and vehicle of transformational change and development. Particularly, they are often at the heart of great strategic opportunities and challenges in building the global economy, combating injustice, and building sustainable democracies. They are, often, at the centre point in mounting bitter and persistent struggle against all forms of oppression and for socioeconomic development and justice around the world. And they have been transforming global politics, economics, and societies throughout history and making unparalleled strides in building the foundation of the world's future, even if not through the formal multilateral system (ICM, 2016; DID, 2010 and UNDP, 2017).

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That is, if provided with an enabling environment and opportunities, youth can channel their energies and capabilities effectively into efforts that will benefit sustainable development, democratic consolidation and a culture of peace for both present and future generations. As youth empowerment is concerned with enhancing the political, social, cultural and economic strength and health of the youth, it is a key to boost and unleash their potential. It makes them be more economically and socially responsible and self-reliant and better placed to function multifaceted to achieve the holistic goals of their society (Olufunke, 2014; AU, 2011; ICM, 20016 and UNESCO, 2012).

Specifically, empowering and enabling youth to engage in development activities yields an opportunity to harness their potential, enthusiasm, skills, and innovative ideas thereby to realize economic growth, foster social stability, improve civic participation, realize healthier, educated and productive societies, and ensure sustainable development. For instance, enhancing youth education, health, and organizations; encouraging youth enterprise development, and meaningful youth employment, and collaboration work with the youth are highly significant measures to ensure primary education and universal health service for all, to alleviate poverty, and to ensure peace and sustainability. Because youths can be extremely successful teachers, health service providers, and awareness creators as they can motivate, mobilize and teach each other and their communities efficiently more than anyone can do. They can also be more productive workers and entrepreneurs. And they can effectively combat corruption and injustice, and also they can make consummate progress in science (Bekeh, 2015; DID, 2010; Isiaka, 2015; UNFPA, 2005 and UNDP, 2017).

Hence, evidently, a society where youths are empowered and engaged experiences rapid growth and development, and it is relatively with social peace at all level. And it is better placed to withstand the challenges of the world. On the other hand, a society that fails to acknowledge and address the challenges that face youth is finding it difficult to achieve its development objectives. Even, as history teaches, without addressing young people's needs and issues, societies face growing troubles (Bekeh, 2015; Hilker & Fraser, 2009; ICM, 2016; UNFPA, 2005; USAID, 2012 and World Youth Report 2005).

In general, in addition to making them useful to themselves, youth empowerment makes the youth enormously valuable to their families, communities, and society; it is vital in bringing solutions to development challenges, transforming society, and developing well-balanced citizens. Thus, ensuring the empowerment of the large youthful population like in Ethiopia is tremendously an essential condition and a necessity to overcome the challenges of the poverty trap and undertake sound and sustained overall development.

III. Youth Empowerment Efforts and Conditions in Ethiopia

The Ethiopian Government, recently, recognizes addressing youth issues and problems as a viable mechanism to alleviate poverty. National Youth Policy, which emphasizes on youth empowerment issue, was introduced in 2004, and the issue has been taken as one of the country's development policy focus areas (FDRE, 2002; 2013; 2016; MoFED, 2006, 2010 and MYSC, 2004).

The National Youth Policy envisioned creating an empowered young generation with democratic outlook and principles, equipped with knowledge and professional skills, and organized and built with ethical integrity. It recognizes the importance of youth participation in an organized manner in all societal matters, and benefit properly from the outcomes. Thus, the broad objective of the policy is concerned with guaranteeing active participation of youth in economic, social, political, and cultural matters thereby support democratization, good governance and development. It addressed a wide range of youth issues, ranging from personal health matters to environmental issues. It focuses on exposing the youth to information and knowledge exchange activities, strengthening youth associations and organizations, mainstreaming youth development programs into different development plans, and youth capacity building through the enrichment of training schemes to enable them to understand development and its interventions. It aims to inculcate in the mind of youth self-confidence, creativity, hard work, and entrepreneurship to make them more employable or participate in good income generating activities. It also focuses on increasing the number of young people in leadership positions to make them play active roles in the society. And it notices that young people should not only be passive implementers of development packages that affect their lives but also take the leading role in formulating the packages (MSYC, 2004).

The National Youth Policy also recognizes the need for inter-cooperation and coordination among diverse stakeholders such as Ministry of Youth and Sports, Ministry of Education; Ministry of Health; Ministry of Women; Children and Youth; Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, and Youth Federations to alleviate the problems of the youth at all levels. And to translate into action the National Youth Policy, the Government has formulated the youth development packages by mainstreaming youth issues into national development plans. Accordingly, for instance, within the current five-year Growth and Transformation Plan, the Government's objectives are concerned with the need to safeguard the rights of young people, ensure their access to quality education, increase the number and capacities of youth associations, encourage youth entrepreneurship, and

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expand micro and small enterprises in a large-scale so that the youth may fully participate in and benefit from the society (FDRE, 2002, 2016; MoFED, 2006 & 2010 and MSYC, 2004).

And, in contrast to the previous education system which was generally perceived among the public as a means for public sector employment, the 1994 Education Policy has come with different purpose. It identifies technical education and vocational training with aim that youth will no longer wait only for the white-collar employment but also they must be motivated and supported to create their own jobs. Accordingly, technical and vocational education and training focuses on producing a competent, motivated, adaptable, and innovative workforce, and it encourages the culture of self-employment. In particular, the important feature of technical and vocational education and training is its integration with small and micro enterprises. As spelled out in the country's industrial development strategy, the Government identified small and micro enterprises as a vital source of employment and job creation, and it emphasis on promotion of the private sector and investment; because the Government regards the involvement of the private sector in youth empowerment as critical for the private sector has the resources, expertise, and capacity to generate wealth and to diversify and multiply employment opportunities. Generally, the technical and vocational education and training is not only designed to match the demands of the small and micro enterprises (of private investors) but also trainees are encouraged to generate their own small and micro enterprises. Thus, it is considered as a crucial to enhance economic competitiveness and decent employment, reduce poverty, and boost socio-economic development (Broussara & Tsegay, 2012; Education and Training policy, 1994; FDRE, 2002, 2013; Gebreeyesus, 2007; MOE, 2008; Mulugeta, 2013 and Sintayehu, 2017).

In general, the country has witnessed many youth empowerment efforts, particularly, which are concerned with addressing the major youth problems and issues that include education, employment, health, and decision making related issues.

Consequently, regarding education, recently, Ethiopia has made a progress in improving access to education. The measures of both gross and net enrolment in primary to higher education show a massive improvement. However, still, gender and rural-urban disparities remain big challenges. There is also a high school drop outs rate, and the proportions of those who attained post-secondary education and training are relatively low. In addition, there has been grave quality and relevance problem which hinders a smooth school-to-work transition; majority of the youth have restricted access to relevant and quality education needed to support their post school life. Education and training institutions lack proper curricula, adequate skilled teaching staff, learning materials, and facilities; they also lack explicit measures to tackle the main challenges on the ground. And they have had negative reputation as their graduates are with low caliber, and young people are regarding education as irrelevant or useless as education is mainly failing to provide graduates with an avenue towards a better future (FDRE, 2016; MoFED, 2006, 2010, 2012; MOE, 2008 and TaYa, 2014).

In fact, it is apparent that there is improvement, also, in the labor market and employment. And small and micro enterprises practices and emerging factories in the country have created jobs, for thousands of youths, especially, in towns. However, getting an occupation with living wage/good earnings is still a serious concern in many young people's lives. The growing number of young people from educated to illiterate youth is unable to gain access to a good paid employment and earnings. In particular, graduated young people are increasingly vulnerable to failing to obtain the type of job considered commensurate with their qualifications. And there are a larger number of unemployed and underemployed youth throughout the country, and the incidence of the problem is higher amongst women in both rural and urban areas of the country than among men (Ayrorit, 2013; Broussara and Tsegay, 2012; FDRE, 2016; IGC, 2012; MoFED, 2006, 2010, 2012; MoLSA, 2009; Mulugeta, 2013; Sintayehu, 2017 and TaYa, 2014). Besides, the vast unemployed youth population, sadly, has be seen as an opportunity for exploitation, as a source for labor intensive and low wage jobs, for both domestic and foreign investors. And those young people who faced work-related injury or disability (e.g., at factories), may be because of lack of the required skills or awareness, have been made to go out almost without insurance.

The main reasons for youth unemployment generally include limited expansion of formal employment opportunities, lack of access to finance, rapid population growth, rapid rural-urban migration, and lack of commensurate investments and appropriate technologies, in addition to low-quality education, skills miss-match with the labor market, and low level of entrepreneurship. On the one hand, although some youths have acquired the necessary skills that can help them to run their own businesses or income generating activities, they lack starting capital besides the lack of formal employment opportunities. On the other hand, many youths are neither trained for quality jobs nor for entrepreneurship. Moreover, in rural areas, even if some young people are interested in agriculture as a means of earnings, they find it is an impossible option as they cannot get a plot of land to farm. And in another case many youths are not interested in agriculture because it is not attractive (i.e., traditional and subsistence agriculture) (Broussara and Tsegay, 2012; IGC, 2012; Mulugeta, 2013 and World Bank, 2015).

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Concerning health, also, as the country collectively aspires to universal access to health care and coverage, there is a significant progress on the access to health facilities and services. However, health challenges owing to the effects of poverty, including constraints in health financing, inadequate access to sexual and reproductive health information and services, malnutrition, and sexually transmitted infection, and persistent gender inequalities are still common among the youth. Especially, as large numbers of rural youth are migrating to urban areas, due to abject poverty, in search of better opportunities, many have faced various health challenges. Because job opportunities are scarce in the urban areas, and urban life is not as they initially expected; thus, being hopeless many of them are exposed to various health problems, including HIV/AIDS which is currently on the increase among the youth. Young women above all represent a high-vulnerable group (to different health problems) because of gender-based discrimination, early marriage, female genital mutilation, and other harmful practices, and higher poverty rate among them. A number of females who do not have any source of livelihood are forced to practice sex for money; thus, today, there are thousands of commercial sex workers most of whom are quite young, and they are exposed to various health problems resulting from unwanted pregnancy, abortion, sexually transmitted infections, abuses, hopelessness, stigma, and psychological disturbances (Ayrorit, 2013; FDRE, 2016; MoFED, 2006, 2010, 2012; TaYa, 2014 and Young Lives, 2014).

And regarding youth participation in the decision-making process, efforts to engage them, also, have been improved recently. However, still, there are so many problems. There is a gap between youth policy and its implementation. And there has been lack of genuine political will to involve youth and lack of understanding the benefits of youth involvement in decision-making processes. Thus, there have been few opportunities for active youth participation in decision-making processes, and there are limited skills, tools, and resources among both young people and the government bodies that are required to engage in successful consultative process and to implement youth policy properly (FDRE, 2014, 2016 and TaYa, 2014).

Generally, even though there are significant improvements in all aspects in the country, youth in Ethiopia, continue to face a multitude of challenges. Lack of functional education, lack of marketable and productive skills, lack of appropriate technologies and information, lack of access to formal jobs or good earnings, unmet need for health-related services and information, and mistreatments characterize the lives of the youth; especially young women and rural youth face more problems throughout the country. They are extremely vulnerable to poverty, illegal migration, and risky behaviors and practices. And the uprisings and grievances of the youth and the outbreak of political unrest in Ethiopia (especially since 2014), in which thousands of youths have sacrificed their lives, physically disabled, or imprisoned, are obvious manifestations of youth claims against the above problems.

IV. Opportunities and Challenges to Youth Empowerment in Ethiopia

There are opportunities that may help to realize youth empowerment in Ethiopia. For instance, as Ethiopia is a signatory to various UN and AU commitments and conventions which address the plights of youth, especially, nowadays more than at any time in the past, the Government recognizes youth issues. And the national youth policy which introduced in 2004 advocates the necessity of youth empowerment. Accordingly, different project centers which are concerned with the youth (with an especial focus on combating gender inequalities) opened in the regional cities of the country with the aim to improve youth involvement in the nation's socioeconomic development efforts (AU, 2006; 2011; FDRE, 2014; MoFED, 2006; 2010, 2012 and MYSC, 2004).

Also, although it has been with complex socioeconomic problems, Ethiopia has enormous natural resources such as agricultural land, forestry, livestock, minerals, and others that can offer a lot for young people empowerment. There is adequate untapped potential to attract many investors who can create huge job opportunities for the youth, and there are many possibilities for young people to create their own profitable business. Thus, if they get the required opportunities, including appropriate training, finance, and facilities, youth can involve successfully in various sectors, such as agriculture, agro-allied manufacturing, animal husbandry, bee-keeping/honey production, tourism, mining, construction, and so on. Especially, the agriculture sector which has been the predominant source of income and recognized as the prospective engine of socio-economic development in Ethiopia has vast potential to absorb growing underemployed and unemployed young (rural) population. With rising urbanization, trade and the emergence of larger scale enterprises in the country, it can provide enormous employment opportunities across the agri-food sector. Also as today there is high global demand for agricultural products, young people, especially, those in the rural areas can participate in agriculture and can be very profitable and successful investors rather than undertaking migration (IGC, 2012; Sumberg & Okali, 2013 and World Bank, 2015).

However, despite the above opportunities, there have been so many challenges to the implementation of the National Youth Policy and youth empowerment in Ethiopia. Problems, such as rent-seeking, corruption,

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the abuse of power, persistent gender inequality, and political issues have been posing severe challenges to the socioeconomic and political aspects of the nation and directly challenging youth empowerment. Besides, there are so many challenges, including poor management and supervision of youth programmes, weak monitoring and evaluation tools, absence of a clear strategy, lack of accountability, lack of adequate and effective inter-sectoral cooperation, and inadequate infrastructural facilities. In addition, low manufacturing and industrial base, low levels of economic diversification, insufficient training equipments and low-quality education, insufficient labor market information and low-absorptive capacity of the labor market, and difficulty in accessing resources, including land and finance are challenging youth empowerment. Also, absence of a culture of entrepreneurship and resistance to accept change in traditional and cultural practices, and natural hazards such as drought have been grave difficulties in youth empowerment endeavors (Abu, 2013; Broussara and Tsegay, 2012; IGC, 2012; MOE, 2008 and TaYa, 2014).

Access to finance, which is the core business environment constraint by micro and small enterprises development in Ethiopia, is perceived as an immense problem. Because of limited financial resources, shortage of loan and unbearable interest rate on loan, many youths could not start-up business activities, and most youth-based small businesses have been failing in their first year, or their development lacks sustainability due to this problem and inadequate business skills. Youth empowerment training is often not accompanied by soft loan which graduates could use as start-up capital for their quick integration into the micro and small-scale enterprise practices. Also, often, all categories of unemployed youth are lumped together as if they are homogeneous in terms of education, skills, capabilities, and willingness. But, in fact, there ought to be some distinctions among them on the basis of these issues so that this lumping together of all categories of youths have been making youth empowerment efforts ineffective and less impactful (Broussara and Tsegay, 2012; DSW, 2011; IGC, 2012; Mulugeta, 2013 and Sintayehu, 2017).

Moreover, there is a concentration of job, growth, and facilities in highly capital-intensive and urban-based sectors. Thus, rural youth who have the potential needed to participate effectively in agriculture related activities and can earn better have been exposed to rural-urban migration to seek employment in other sectors because they do not foresee a prosperous future for themselves in the agriculture. Agriculture sector is with few opportunities to earn enough and sustainable income due to lack of land (especially for young women) or boredom in agriculture as a result of drudgery in farm operations or inadequate labor-saving technologies for ease of activities, lack of competitive market for agricultural products, and lack of infrastructure in addition to the lack of start-up capital in rural areas *(*IGC, 2012; Sumberg, 2013 and *TaYa, 2014)*.

Besides, lack of adequate recreational activities and facilities, including sports centers, cultural centers, and lack of sufficient public library services, and failures in social institutions are exposing young people to undesirable and risky behaviours, such as unprotected sex, khat chewing, and other substances and alcohol abuse. And these problems have been challenging youth empowerment efforts aimed at creating healthy and productive citizens *(*Cicchetti, et al., 2000; Candace Currie, et al., 2010; *TaYa, 2014 and* Young Lives, 2014).

V. Conclusion and Recommendations

In spite of its huge youthful population, who can be a great impetus for poverty alleviation and development, and enormous natural resources in its possession, poverty has been a central challenge in Ethiopia. The country has experienced a multitude of problems, including political malpractices, bad administration, and deep-rooted gender-based discrimination among others. Specifically, there has been no favorable environment under which youth could participate meaningfully to ensure their benefits and that of their society.

Recently, the Government has tried to address the needs of the youth along with those of the general population. Particularly since 2002, various government programs, which concerned with poverty alleviation and development, have been making efforts to address the problems of youths in line with the National Youth Policy (2004) which gives attention to youth empowerment and active involvement in all societal matters. And technical and vocational education and training and small and micro enterprises development practices are helping as tools for and sources of employment, job creation, and poverty alleviation to make the youth entrepreneurs, productive and live a better life.

However, even though there are progresses in all aspects as a result, the poverty situation in Ethiopia is still worse. Particularly, youth continue to face so many difficulties; mainly, rural youth and women whose problems are multifaceted and interrelated go on with a myriad of troubles.

Specifically, as getting access to quality and relevant education and training is a central challenge, a majority of the youth are ill-equipped for work life. The creation of decent formal employment opportunities or private jobs is also limited. In spite of the growing number of young people, the private sector, particularly, the small and micro enterprises development, to which the Government gives priority as an effective strategy in creating job opportunities, is also still not at a good position. Hence, across the country, most young people continue to eke out a living in the urban, low paid,

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informal economy, or in traditional, subsistence agriculture, or lack access to any form of employment (as they lack access to education and resources, including land and finance). Also, corrupted system, political problems, and lack of opportunities to participate in decision-making processes remain challenge to the youth. Thus, they could not lift themselves, their families, and communities out of the socioeconomic problems.

Even, as youths have been making a bitter political struggle to bring about positive socioeconomic and political changes in the country, thousands of them have lost their lives, disabled, or criminalized. And as all of the aforesaid problems breed displeasure, hopelessness, and despair in the youth's lives, a lot of them have been driven or exposed to risky and destructive behaviors and practices, such as risk for substance and alcohol addiction, prostitution, and violence, including an increasing domestic and illegal international migrations which have been putting the lives and health of the youth at risk.

And the problem is not only creating immense social, health and economic costs to the youth's lives but also to their families, communities, and to the nation at large as it hinders the development and utilization of youth's potential to the fullest in the nation building. Without appropriate intervention, even the problem may get worse and lead to more socioeconomic crises, given the fact that population is growing, inequality is increasing, necessities for life are becoming more expensive, and most children are born into disadvantaged families with limited opportunities for vertical socioeconomic mobility. Thus, youth problem is one of the most worrying issues, the critical development challenges, and acute security issues in Ethiopia.

Apparently, hence, youth issue is a pressing matter for Ethiopia. It is impossible for the nation to achieve sound development and to secure sustainability without realizing the empowerment of its huge youthful population who can determine both the current and future growth and development of the country. That is, safeguarding and empowering youth, and making an efficient utilization of them is a necessity.

Thus, I would like to provide the following impetuses that may help to ensure youth empowerment.

- ✓ The Government must be increasingly involved, with comprehensive and effective strategies, in enhancing the wellbeing of the young people and in ensuring their empowerment in all aspects.
- ✓ *It must take strong action to improve the* education system in order to produce critical thinkers, innovators, problem solvers, and dynamic and competitive force the nation needs for its socioeconomic transformation. The youth must have skills to manoeuvre through different jobs; they need to be prepared adequately for self-employment and/or for the formal one. Thus, curriculum must match labour market, and education and training centers at all levels should be staffed with qualified teachers and well-equipped with modern tools, equipment, machines and technology to provide the youth with life skills and technological knowhow that would set them on a track of being dynamic and self-reliant. And entrepreneurship courses need to be incorporated in the curricula at all levels to make the culture conducive for the development of entrepreneurship and innovation. Besides, the Government needs to provide incentives to promote entrepreneurship and innovation among the youth.
- ✓ In addition to working to build youth capacity, the Government should work strongly to create more consistent and compatible jobs with good earning opportunities; and it should connect the youth with employment options in local markets and continue to follow and mentor them deep into the career. The Government also must better coordinate and improve the capacity and number of small and micro enterprises. And it must provide youth with an efficient financial service (savings and monitoring systems) for starting up small businesses and for transforming their activities. Also, it should ensure they get adequate training on issues such as financial skills, responsibility, and time management.
- ✓ The Government also needs to work more on enhancing the health of young people. As factors that influence the health of young people are numerous and interrelated (poverty, lifestyle, etc.), health interventions for young people should be multidimensional and comprehensive. Thus, in addition to the above measures, the Government also should provide young people with practical skills and access to adequate quality health services and information on health issues. Especially the Government should properly address the complex issues that underlie adolescent sexual and reproductive health behaviour through community engagement and open discussion to bring positive and sustainable change; young people must be aware and active enough to make the right decisions about health issues. Also, the Government must enable the youth to mobilize themselves and teach each other about the matter.
- ✓ Youth position in decision-making and governance also should be improved. The Government and its agencies, in all its ramifications, must scale up the representation of youth at all levels of government and ensure the meaningful participation of youth in all phases of policy development, including in the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of policies, programmes, and projects affecting

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them and their society. It must make more efforts to increase the number and the quality of youth centers, clubs, associations, and organizations at all levels and to enhance the understanding of the youth about youth policy, constitutional rights, governance, and their negotiating skills to enable them to lift social, economic and political barriers and to better utilize their potential. And, the Government must work hard in cooperation with the young people in combating maladministration, corruption, rent-seeking practices, and other injustices, and in enhancing democratic practices.

- ✓ Moreover, the Government needs to undertake stronger action to address the real constraints to young people in the rural areas, particularly, to improve infrastructures and ensure easy access to resources, services and facilities (including land, credit and loan services, appropriate technologies and information, and quality education and health services). It should strengthen the capacity of the youth in agriculture, create awareness among them to perceive it as a business and commercially viable, make an easy access to high yielding crops to increase profitability of agricultural activities, and boost marketing opportunities for agricultural products. It also should enhance local youth organizations and technical know-how including entrepreneurial activities, and it needs to attract investment to the rural areas to create more sustainable jobs with decent incomes and encourage new on and off-farm job creation and diversify opportunities. Also, stronger actions should be taken to address youth with special needs and other marginalized ones and ensure their inclusiveness and benefit in all aspects.
- ✓ In particular, more commitment is needed to ensure gender equality in all aspects. The Government needs to pay special attention to the empowerment of young women as their situation is worse to a greater extent than that of young men. Women need to be mobilized and endowed with the required knowledge, skills, and productive resources to successfully meet the challenges and fully engage in the societal issues, including in income generating activities and vibrant businesses, and take on decision-making roles in family, community, and society effectively.
- ✓ Generally, the Government must demonstrate strong political will, renew its youth empowerment efforts, and aggressively embark on comprehensive and effective empowerment strategies. It must ensure the broad community engagement and participation from all development partners, sectors, and stakeholders including education, health, agriculture, national employment, sport and science, and the micro and small enterprises development agencies, nongovernmental organizations, parents, teachers, local entrepreneurs, opinion leaders, policy makers, religious bodies, affluent individuals, the private sectors, and all facets of society at all levels to respond to youth issues and problems through integrated and sustainable manner.
- ✓ And close monitoring and evaluation of empowerment programmes and strategies should be regularly undertaken, and the better practices must be identified, scaled up and replicated.

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