

**STATEMENT BY DR. BULTI GUTEMA
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MINISTRY OF LABOUR AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS
INAUGURAL ETHIOPIAN TEENAGER FORUM**

H.E. Mr. Ibrahim Jabr, UNICEF Representative!
Members of the Youth Forum!
Invited guests!
Ladies and gentlemen!

On behalf of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and on my own behalf I wish to express my delight at being here with you to make brief remarks to this gathering.

The Ethiopian population is extremely 'young' as is characteristic of a population experiencing rapid natural growth. Nearly one in five Ethiopians are below the age of five, and almost half are under the age of 18, and those who are in the 15-24 age bracket constitute a large portion of the total population of the country.

However, this young section of the society faces multi-faceted problems, which hinder their participation in national development endeavours. Since, in all societies, youth is a period characterized by a higher level of risk taking behaviour, such problems as abuse of self through drugs, unprotected sexual practices and hopelessness are usually observed among this significant segment of the population. This, in turn, leads to the risk of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, the growing consumption of tobacco, unwarranted risk taking and destructive activities. As it is well known, youth are the driving force in the country's socio-economic development. All of us undoubtedly believe these young people are a source of creativity and initiative of dynamism and the major potential for changes in society for a better future.

The vast potential of youth can be harnessed and effectively utilized only when they are fully involved in the planning and designing programs and implementation of projects of their concern. Without participation of the youth in the country's development program, the national development effort can not be fully realized.

It is recognizing this fact that the poverty reduction strategy has given due consideration to this segment of the population.

As it has already been mentioned, the major social evils of the young people, at present, are the enormous infection of youth with HIV/AIDS. According to some studies, it is estimated that half of the newly affected people with HIV/AIDS in the world are youth. Hence, combating this

alarming situation needs the full participation of youth and a coordinated mobilization of available resources through empowering the community including youth.

Promoting youth-focused programmes on STDS/AIDS must be given due consideration by schools, the mass media, professionals and the public at large. The creation of a supportive environment that enhances the empowerment of youth should be the priority concern of parents, educators, religious institutions, youth organizations, politicians, development planners and every member of the society.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

In conclusion, I would like to thank the organisers of this forum to create conditions that enable young people themselves to discuss issues of concern, develop confidence in forwarding whatever they feel to pertinent governmental and non-governmental organizations and thereby exercising their democratic power and enhance their participation in societal responsibility. It is only then that youth will truly become agents of change in our country's development endeavours.

Finally I would like to assure you that our Ministry supports such efforts, which enhance youth's full participation at all levels in matters that affect their lives.

I thank you!