

STATEMENT BY SOPHIA AYTENEW, MODERATOR THE ETHIOPIAN TEENAGER'S FORUM

Why a Teenager's Forum?

Over the past few years in March 2001 in Addis Ababa, April 2001 in Nairobi Kenya, May 2001 in Cairo Egypt, and the Special Session on Children held in May 2002 in New York, America we have witnessed national and international meetings that have focussed on children and youth. Ethiopian children and youth representatives, government institutions and aid agencies have participated in these above-mentioned meetings.

What has been possible to learn from these meetings is that have all had the same objectives, and that is by working with children and youth we can make our country, and our world a better place to live in.

Our meeting today is a continuation of those previous meetings. In all of those meetings young people met amongst themselves, they spoke about their own problems from their own perspectives with those like themselves. With their peers they sought to identify solutions and that is what we are taking as our starting point today. This forum is for teenagers, and with teenagers we will debate and discuss on the topic of discussion selected for today in order to come up with a shared position and outcome statement.

There are six of us, including myself, who came up with the idea to do this. Among the six, two of us, Woinshet and Zerihun, participated in the Special Session on Children that was held in New York where they represented the voice of Ethiopia's children and youth. At the same time as the Special Session while the other two were participating, three other founding members Elleni, Tireza and Daniel, represented our country in a youth chat conducted over the internet - interacting with other young people living in other circumstances and lifestyles. They were able to learn about their differences, about young people in other parts of the world, about their lifestyles and living conditions. They were able to express their own thoughts and perspectives from Ethiopia as well. I also took part in preparatory meetings held in preparation for the Special Session in March 2001 in Nairobi and in May 2001 at the Africa Forum held in Cairo, Egypt where I represented children and youth from Ethiopia.

The six of us who participated in these different events came together with a similar idea and purpose and approached UNICEF. With the assistance of UNICEF we were able to develop a proposal for this forum. In addition to taking our main idea and putting it into project form, UNICEF has covered all the expenses for this meeting.

Today our contacts with other youth is much stronger and this has allowed us to come together to try and find solutions to the problems that we face. I would like to tell all of you in this conference room, and we want those of you representing the government and NGOs to note this, all of you who are here representing your different schools were given questionnaires which your schoolmates have filled out. You have brought these with you today. You are not only speaking for yourselves but you have brought with you the voices of your schoolmates.

The reason why we chose the topic for today's forum

It has been a while since HIV/AIDS passed the stage of being just a topic of conversation but a serious issue needing to be tackled by all. AIDS is silently destroying the lives of so many, it has been dubbed the silent war.

At this moment, AIDS is spreading among people under the age of 25 at a speed that has never been seen before with six young people catching HIV/AIDS every minute. As studies indicate, during the past year in sub Saharan countries 11.8 million people are living with HIV/AIDS and among these above 2.6 million live in Ethiopia. The saddest part of all is that the majority of these are youth.

Studies also indicate that in 12 countries in sub Saharan Africa 10% of young people aged 15-19 are HIV positive. Various sources also tell us that the 15-24 age group is the most affected by the disease.

I would like to say that our meeting today will seek to break the silence about this disease that is leaving children without parents, elders without children to take care of them in their old age, and countries without citizens. The meeting will allow us to speak to each other in an open and frank manner. Following our discussion we will ask questions and state our opinions, and provide our answers, and at the end of the day we expect that we will be able to come up with a common position statement.

The time for us to implement the Global Movement for Children, which calls for working for children and youth *with* children and youth, in our country is from this hour, this minute on. Therefore in order to make sure that this forum is sustained and continues we call upon government and non-governmental organizations, the private sector, indigenous NGOs, United Nations Agencies, and similar institutions to listen to us when we speak. It is our hope and expectation that when we come knocking that your doors will be open to us.

Finally, to all of you who are members of society, we ask you to listen to the questions and demands of teenagers, and to give it weight. We expect positive responses from you, and whenever we come to you for assistance we expect you to receive us with good faith.

Thank you very much.

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