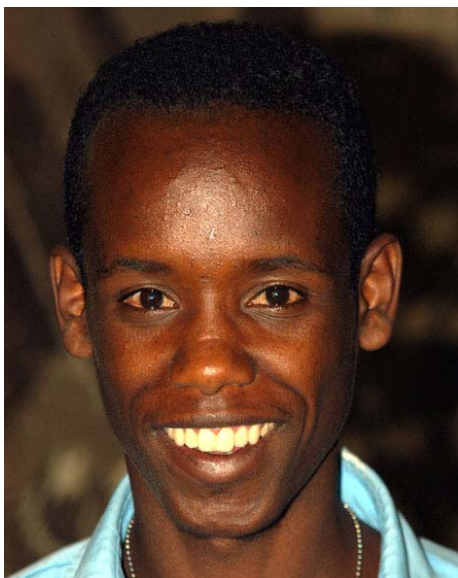


FEATURE

21 November 2003

INTERVIEW WITH MELISACHEW ASSEFA, 20, SPEAKER AT THE ETHIOPIAN TEENAGERS' FORUM ON "POVERTY REDUCTION AND YOUTH"



Tell me about yourself?

I was born in Addis Ababa in the Teodros Square part of town. I finished my elementary and primary education at John F. Kennedy #1 public school, and I finished high school at Tikur Anbessa Secodnary School. I scored 2.0 on the Ethiopian School Leaving Examination. This was in 2002.

As you were growing up, what did you want to become when you finished school?

My dream was to be able to attend Addis Ababa University and eventually become an engineer. My exam results, however, were not good enough to enter the University. Instead I am living at home.

What kinds of higher education opportunities are available for students that have scored 2.0 in their school leaving exams?

There are a number of private colleges and universities opening. This is good, however you need money to attend. My exam results, 2.0, it is a passing grade and should get me into college. The problem in our country is that there are not enough public universities so they have no room for students who score 2.0. If my family had the financial means I could have enrolled in a private college. Because we are poor that is not a possibility for me.

How do you spend your days?

I like the theater and I write a little bit. I write short stories, dramas and poems. If I find someone to support me then I may get an audience for my works that way I may be able to support myself in the future.

Have you ever tried to get a job?

No, I have not tried to find a job. Perhaps it is because I have convinced myself that there are no employment opportunities out there. What we hear is that there are no jobs. Besides, what I want to do is write. I believe that is work itself, and that is what gives me hope. I believe I can change my life if I find an audience for what I writer.

FEATURE

I have submitted some dramas that I wrote to Mega Theater. They keep returning the scripts to me saying that they need a little improvement. I am trying to improve them.

FEATURE

What does your family do?

I live with my parents. My real father passed away. I live with my step-father, my sister's father, and my mother. He is a daily laborer. If he finds a job, he works, and there are days when he does not work. My mother works in peoples' homes washing clothes and baking *injera* for feast days.

What do your parents think about you staying at home – what do they say?

There is an Ethiopian saying that goes, 'the cow does not feel the weight of her horns.' My mother comforts me. She tells me not to give up. She advises me to stay clear of drugs and HIV/AIDS. "Don't give up," she says. "You are still young. You have barely lived. You have hope. Even though you are disappointed that you can't continue your education – you have hope. Keep strong and stay away from the things that can pull you down," these are the things that she says to me.

From my father, however, I don't expect anything positive. He is after all my step-father. He asks, "how long do you intend to be a dependent?" He has a drinking habit, and when he comes home after drinking he says words that are demoralizing and kill my spirit. He says, "you should be supporting us in our old age instead of sitting on our necks. Aren't you ashamed of yourself?" He says things like that to me.

What has happened to your classmates – where are they today?

I would say that 70 per cent of my class did not do well enough to go to university and are sitting at home. Most of them do not have the means to enroll in private colleges. About 30 per cent are in college or university.

What happens to those who stay at home?

Some will give up hope. Some will try to find a way to become independent. Most will take up chewing chat in their neighbourhood.

I have a friend who now chews chat and smokes cigarettes. He is even smoking hashish. When he sees me on the road he gets embarrassed. I asked him once, "Why are you doing this? Just because our 12th grade results were poor that doesn't mean that our lives are ruined. We have to find a way out." His answer to me is, "Just living in Ethiopia is enough to make you give up hope." And he smokes his cigarettes and hashish and chews chat, because he has given up hope.

Do you know of any young people who have become successful?

Until now, really, I do not know of any young person who has made it. There are those who are trying hard to become independent. Mostly these are manual laborers who look for daily work carrying stones in construction sites or building roads whenever [the NGO] Care Ethiopia has a project.

FEATURE

You may have heard on the radio or television about poverty reduction being the key to development in Ethiopia. What are your thoughts on this?

I have heard the term poverty reduction being repeated constantly. However up to now I have not seen any poverty actually being reduced. We hear slogans that poverty should be eradicated and that youth should become actors in development. However up until now we have not seen poverty being reduced. Instead we hear youth being chastised, blamed and accused of being impediments to development. We are told that youth are exposing themselves to AIDS – instead of receiving advice that can keep us away from dangerous lifestyles. What is being said and done is destroying the morale of young people. It is not encouraging youth to be productive.

I hear adults saying, “What do young people know but to go after girls, drink, smoke and fight?” Sure, there are those who fight, but that is not all youth. Those who fight should get counseling, and those who want to work should be given the opportunity to prove themselves. Instead, we hear that our generation does not want to work.

So poverty reduction remains a theory. Government speaks, but in my life I have not seen anything that goes beyond talk. It has been many years since we have been hearing about poverty reduction – but nothing has happened. Government wants poverty to disappear, but wanting something and seeing it actually happen are different things.

What are the things that give you hope for the future?

There are NGOs with programmes that give hope. NGOs who embrace youth and support their activities – establishing clubs for youth, drama clubs and other activities. These are good things.

What about the new education system where students who don't score high enough in tenth grade exams are given vocational training instead of continuing with academics?

This is a very good development and I wish I could have benefited from the new system. When I finished 12th grade, we only had one chance to take the school-leaving exam. But those who have come after us are learning carpentry or tailoring so at least they will have skills which will make it easier for them to find work. I have graduated from high-school so I am not eligible for vocational training.

What is your message at this Ethiopian Teenagers' Forum on 'Poverty Reduction and Youth'?

My advice to the students is to do well in school. Education is very important for Ethiopia. I believe that if you are not educated life will not be sweet. I tried my best, but my results were not good enough. I will encourage the participants to study hard, but if they make an effort and don't succeed, then they should not give up hope. Being poor has its terrible sides, but they should never give up hope and always try hard to improve themselves.

FEATURE

My message to the Government is to provide opportunities for young people to work. NGOs should hire more people – give employment opportunities for young people.

Young people should never give up hope. They should stay away from drugs and protect themselves from HIV/AIDS. They should even try to be part of the employment generation process. We can help eradicate poverty from this country.