COUNTRY: ETHIOPIA

Gender, poverty and the challenge for adolescents

Although Ethiopia remains one of the poorest countries in the world, its economy has been growing, and many programmes to improve the health and education of children have shown success. The country is on track to reach Millennium Development Goals 4 and 5 to reduce child mortality and improve maternal health. Enrolment rates in primary school increased from 2008 to 2009, and girls’ participation in education has improved. In the global economic recession, the Government has taken steps to maintain budget allocations for the benefit of the poor. Yet environmental challenges such as drought and subsequent water shortages, along with poverty and violence against girls and women, present obstacles to development and threaten to reverse the progress that the nation has made.

Ethiopia’s population is young; over 50 per cent was under 18 in 2009. It is one of seven countries worldwide that account for half of all adolescent births (the others are Bangladesh, Brazil, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, India, Nigeria and the United States). In a country where most people survive on subsistence agriculture, children are valued for their labour as well as for the emotional and physical support they give parents, and many rural communities perceive large numbers of children as a social and religious boon. In urban areas, however, fertility levels have dropped due to a number of factors including decreasing poverty and improved access to medical services, including contraception.

The Population Council has found that 85 per cent of adolescents in Ethiopia live in rural areas, where education levels tend to be much lower, particularly for girls. Some regions have very high rates of early marriage, and almost 70 per cent of young married girls interviewed in the Amhara region had experienced sexual debut before they began menstruation. A substantial number of adolescents do not live with their parents, especially in urban areas; one third of girls between 10 and 14 in cities live with neither parent. Nationally, there are between 150,000 and 200,000 children living and working on the streets, where the girls among them face sexual abuse by adults, rape, unwanted pregnancy, early motherhood and the risk of HIV infection.

Programmes tend not to reach the most vulnerable children – rural youth, married girls and out-of-school adolescents. Rather, older, unmarried boys who live in cities and attend school are the most likely to benefit from development initiatives. A survey conducted in Addis Ababa in 2004 that asked boys and girls aged 10–19 about their use of reproductive health programmes found that boys in the city’s poorer sections were significantly more likely than girls to be in school or to live with one or both parents; they also enjoyed greater mobility and better access to services. Although older boys and girls were more likely to use programmes than their younger counterparts, younger boys were more likely than older girls to use them, showing that age did not correct for gender disparity. A major obstacle for girls was their heavier workload, particularly in domestic settings, as compared to boys who worked in manual labour or trades.

The Ethiopian Ministry of Youth and Sport, working with regional and local governments as well as international partners, initiated the Berhane Hewan (‘Light for Eve’ in Amharic) programme in 2004 to prevent early marriage and support married adolescent girls by focusing on three areas: mentorship by adult women, continuation of school, and livelihood training for out-of-school girls. Over the course of two years the programme, which targeted girls aged 10–19 in the Amhara region, increased girls’ friendship networks, school attendance, age at marriage, knowledge of reproductive health and contraceptive use. The intervention owed its success in large part to its attention to the complex social and economic drivers of girls’ isolation and disadvantage. Following an 18-month pilot period, the project is being expanded to other parts of the region.

Further programmes need to be designed with an understanding of local cultural perceptions and social dynamics, especially those that create multiple forms of disadvantage for Ethiopia’s adolescent girls and rural youth. Many of the basic needs and rights of adolescents are not being met, and when economic and environmental constraints combine, the situation worsens. A recent study of food insecurity in the Jimma region, for example, found that girls in food-insecure households suffered more than boys. It is clear that investments must be targeted and should begin with efforts to ensure a decent standard of living for all the country’s girls and boys, no matter their ethnic origin, place of residence or class.

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