

The Missing Links: Poverty, Population, and the Environment in Ethiopia

By Mogues Worku

Over the past several decades, Ethiopia's potent combination of high population growth, unsustainable land use, and ambiguous land ownership policies has led to the

The Ethiopian government, donor agencies, community-based organizations, and national and international NGOs are making significant efforts to eradicate poverty and ensure food security. But many development practitioners do not recognize the interdependence of population and environmental issues, so they have taken mostly single-sector approaches, with some focusing on food security, others on natural resource conservation, and still others on reproductive health and family planning. Unfortunately, integrated approaches remain uncommon.

Twenty-nine Ethiopian professionals founded The Environment and Development Society of Ethiopia (LEM Ethiopia) in March 1992 to increase awareness of the interconnectedness of poverty, health, and the environment. A citizens' movement inspired by the concept of sustainable development, LEM Ethiopia seeks to establish and strengthen environmental education and promote appropriate technologies for improving people's livelihoods. This article describes the link between population and the environment in Ethiopia, outlines LEM Ethiopia's efforts to bring attention to this connec-

tion, and recommends ways to improve programs seeking to help the country's people.

Population and Environment: Ethiopia's Dual Challenges

Ethiopia's wide range of ecosystems—desert in the east, rainforest in the west, and high altitude Afro-alpine vegetation in the central, southeastern, and northern highlands—offers diverse biological resources. For most of the country's history, the majority of its citizens have relied on climate-dependent agriculture for their livelihoods. Over the last 100 years, however, increasing population growth—currently 2.7 percent a year, according to the country's Central Statistics Agency (CSA; 2007)—has accelerated land degradation at an alarming rate, as forests are converted to farms and growing numbers of households use unsustainable agricultural methods to eke out a living on marginal land.

In 1900, the population of Ethiopia was 11.2 million. Today, there are 77.1 million Ethiopians, 42 percent of whom are under 14 years of age (CSA, 2007). The UN Population Division (2006) predicts the population will reach 100 million by 2015, and double by 2040. This burgeoning population places an enormous strain on Ethiopia's natural resources; the fact that such a large percentage of the population is young means the pressure on the environment will only increase over the next several decades.

As in most other parts of the developing world, geography largely determines the distribution of Ethiopia's population. Most of the country's lowlands are not suitable for human settlement due to malaria, other human and animal diseases, and lack of access to water. Thus, about 80 percent of the population, and about 70 percent of the livestock, live in the ecologically fragile highlands, which constitute only 45 percent of the country's land (Ministry of Water Resources, 2001). While the highlands have been farmed for thousands of years, the number of households involved in non-pastoral agriculture has increased recently. Vegetative cover has dwindled and soil fertility and productivity have declined. In some parts of northern Ethiopia, the land has been completely degraded and is no longer



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Ethiopia has one of the largest livestock populations in Africa, which includes more than 40 million head of cattle.
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discontinuities in service and leaving international agencies and a few local NGOs to tackle this massive problem. In addition, it is not only lack of knowledge about contraceptives that prevents women from having smaller families, but also their limited power to decide how many children to have.

Land: The Crucial Resource

More than 80 percent of Ethiopia's population is rural and depends on subsistence agriculture (CSA,

capable of supporting human habitation, yet the population continues to increase at breakneck speed. Deforestation—currently estimated at between 150,000-200,000 hectares annually—could denude the country completely in under 20 years (Teketay, Fetene, & Abate, 2003).

Ethiopia has made some progress on reproductive health in recent decades: Data from the 2005 Demographic and Health Survey indicate that fertility has declined from 6.4 births per woman in 1990 to 5.4 births per woman in 2005, and that the percentage of currently married women using any contraceptive method has increased from 4.8 percent in 1990 to 14.7 percent in 2005 (CSA & ORC Macro, 2006). However, there is still a long way to go in the struggle to check Ethiopia's population growth, and numerous obstacles remain. Despite the high population growth rate and demand by women for contraception, the Ethiopian government allocates very little funding for family planning efforts, leading to

Land ownership in Ethiopia is contentious. Currently, the government owns all land, but this system is being debated by the ruling and opposition political parties. The Ethiopian government has declared that in rural areas, farmers have the right to use and inherit land, but they cannot sell it. Most scholars argue that such a system deters long-term investment due to fear that the government will one day seize the land, and thus discourages sustainable development practices.

The increase in family size and the lack of arable land affects family relationships in rural areas. An old man in North Shoa Zone who has a hectare of land, a wife, and five grown children told me that three of his children are currently living at home without jobs. They would be happy, he said, if their father died soon so that they could inherit the land. Without land of their own, it is difficult for young men to marry; thus, they must share their relatives' existing land in order to form their own families.

The Rural-Urban Relationship

As population and environmental stresses increase in the highlands, more and more Ethiopians are migrating to the country's cities. The overall population growth rate declined from 2.87 percent in

local policymakers to raise awareness of Ethiopia's high population growth rate and the importance of family planning and sustainable resource use. These workshops also connect Ethiopians with national and international organizations involved in family planning services and other development activities.

LEM Ethiopia promotes the use of technologies

high population growth and large family size on health, services, and resource use, as well as provide training and materials for government institutions and health posts offering family planning services.

Institutions and organizations may believe that they lack the resources to address the complex issues facing Ethiopia today. Yet partnerships between organizations, careful planning, and creativity go a long way toward developing effective, integrated interventions. If Ethiopia is to escape from poverty, all actors must consider how environmental conservation and family planning initiatives can increase the success of development efforts. Only then will we be able to guarantee a peaceful, healthy, and prosperous future for the coming generations.

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