



Empowering Youth and Children in Ethiopia: A Study of Socio-Economic Challenges Faced by Guji Youth and Children in the Oromia Region, Southern Ethiopia, and Their Policy Implications

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.47814/ijssrr.v8i6.2760>

Abstract

This paper explores the socio-economic challenges faced by Guji youth and children in the Bule Hora district of the West Guji Zone in Southern Ethiopia. Purposive sampling was used to select participants for key informant interviews and focus group discussions (FGD), focusing on individuals with insights into the socio-economic challenges of youth and children in the study area. According to the findings, the primary socio-economic challenges faced by Guji youth and children include unemployment, recurrent droughts, drug addiction, and lack of start-up capital. Currently, both

governmental and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are engaged in various development interventions, such as livelihood diversification, income-generating schemes, saving and credit associations, and a revolving fund for youth and children to address these socio-economic challenges. However, the study's findings indicate several obstacles to the effective implementation of these interventions. These include inadequate provision of the youth and children revolving fund, corruption, the widespread aspiration among youth and children to secure paid employment, and irregular funding from donor organizations. The study suggests that expanding livelihood diversification options and loan facilities are essential strategies to improve the socio-economic status of youth and children. This study provides valuable insights for policymakers and development organizations, offering practical implications for addressing the socio-economic challenges of youth and children in future development interventions.

Keywords: *Empowering Youth children, Socio-economic, Guji, Oromia Region, Ethiopia*

1. INTRODUCTION

Ethiopia is the second most populous country in Africa, following Nigeria, with an estimated population of nearly 95 million as of 2018 (Desta et al., 2018; Tigabu and Gebeyehu, 2020). With an average population growth rate of 2.6 percent among the highest in Africa—the population is projected to reach approximately 105 million by 2022 (ILO, 2016). Of Ethiopia's total population, 40.5 percent is under the age of 15, and 30 percent consists of youth and children aged 15 to 28 (Developing Ethiopia's Youth, 2018).

A 2016 ILO evaluation indicated that the combination of population pressure, limited economic prospects, and inadequate livelihood options for youth and children has resulted in significant socio-economic challenges in both urban and rural areas of the country.

Youth and children in Ethiopia are particularly affected by these development challenges, often facing high levels of unemployment, limited access to education, and widespread social intolerance and exclusion (Broussara and Tekleselassie, 2012; Ancey et al., 2020). The socio-economic conditions of Ethiopian youth and children are marked by low growth rates in income and savings, inadequate access to loans, high population growth, and high unemployment rates (Schmidt and Bekele, 2016; Woldeasilassie, 2016). In a similar vein, the Youth and Children Economic and Social Council (2016) reported that Ethiopian youth and children have lower participation and employment rates, with higher rates of unemployment and informal sector employment compared to the national average.

The increasing youth population in Ethiopia presents a critical opportunity and challenge. The degree to which this population is integrated into the country's economic development and self-reliance efforts will largely determine Ethiopia's ability to plan, finance, and implement effective solutions to its development challenges. Although policies aimed at improving the livelihoods of Ethiopian youth have been established, these efforts have often been inconsistent and insufficient. Given that the youth population continues to make up a large proportion of the overall population, there is a clear need for more comprehensive and scalable development initiatives targeted at youth.

In particular, youth in Ethiopia's pastoralist communities, especially in the lowland areas, face unique pressures. Steglich and Bekele (2009), citing UNOCHA (2007), noted that these youth are increasingly caught in a downward spiral of resource depletion, unemployment, poverty, and diminished resilience to drought. Cartmel and Furlong (2000) highlighted that the greatest challenge for rural youth in

Ethiopia is limited access to financial resources, including loans, training, and youth development programs.

In the southern lowlands of Ethiopia, particularly in the Bule Hora district of the West Guji Zone, the socio-economic challenges faced by youth have not received adequate attention from either governmental or non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Bule Hora is an agro-pastoralist district in the central part of the West Guji Zone. Like many parts of Ethiopia, youth in Bule Hora are struggling with severe challenges, such as unemployment, recurrent droughts, drug addiction, rapid population growth, and a lack of start-up capital.

2. Materials And Method

2.1 THE STUDY AREA

Bule hora town of the capital city of west Guji zone, is located 590km South of Addis Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia. The town is located between 7°8'50"N to 7°18'17"N latitude and 38°32'43"E to 38°40'58"E longitude.

The total population of the 265,877; the male and female accounted for 131, 039 (49%) and 134,838 (51%), respectively and 40,209 total household head; 39,026 (97%) and 1,183 (3%) male and female household headed respectively (BHWA, 2017). The population distribution of Bule hora city by age group in 2020 indicated that, out of the total population, about 39.8% of its population is less than 20 years of age, 58.2% in the intermediate age group (20-64) and 2.0% above 64 years of age.

As to the recent organizational division, Bule hora is divided into eight sub-cities kebeles, namely: Bule kanga, Bule Kilta, Arda Biya, Ejersa Fora, Goro Abayi, Kacha ya'a, Burka Midadi, and Goro Gudina respectively. While this study was conducted on, Ejersa Fora, and Arda Biya districts of the town.

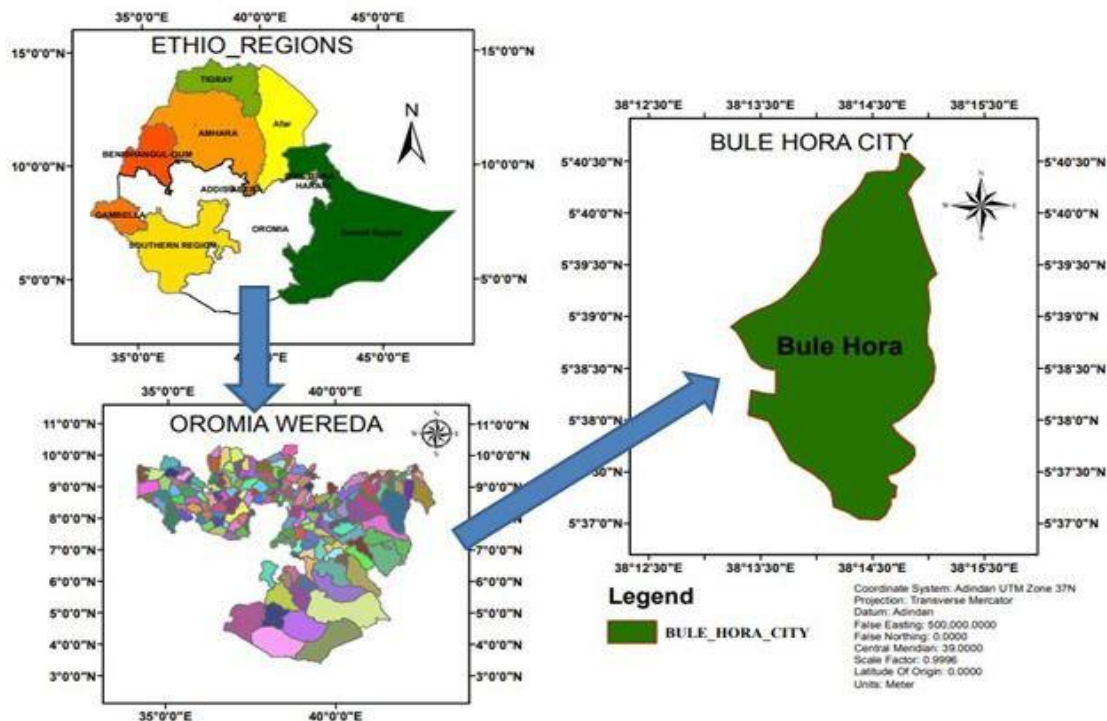


Figure 1: Map of the study area

2.2 DATA COLLECTION

2.2.1 QUALITATIVE METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

Qualitative methods, including semi-structured key informant interviews and focus group discussions (FGD), were employed to investigate the socio-economic challenges faced by youth and children in the study area. A guiding question was used to gather data through the key informant interviews and FGDs. Purposive sampling was applied in the selection of participants for both the interviews and the FGDs.

2.2.2 KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

A total of 37 key informants were interviewed. These included three government officials (one at the zone level and two at the district level), 12 community elders, 20 youth (10 male and 10 female), and 2 school representatives. Key informants were selected purposively, taking into account their knowledge, role, and the relevance of their insights to the study. Informants were chosen based on their roles, information, expertise, and willingness to participate in the study.

2.2.3 FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS (FGDS)

Two FGDs were conducted separately with male and female youth in the Ejersa Fora and Arda Biya Kebeles (one FGD per Kebele). Each group consisted of 8 participants, aged between 15 and 28 years, who were selected purposively in consultation with the Kebele superintendent. The participants included economically disadvantaged youth, unemployed youth, members of saving and credit associations, and individuals involved in small and micro-enterprises. The discussions focused on the culturally assigned roles of youth, the socio-economic challenges they face, and the development interventions led by the government and NGOs.

2.3 DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis process began with categorizing and organizing the data in search of patterns, themes, and meanings that emerged. Data collected from key informant interviews and FGDs were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method commonly used for analyzing qualitative data. Information on the culturally assigned roles of youth, socio-economic challenges, and development interventions was summarized, categorized, and described to enhance understanding. Key informant interviews were analyzed and compared with the results of FGD transcriptions, and the findings were triangulated to ensure consistency and draw accurate conclusions.

3. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

3.1 CULTURALLY ASSIGNED ROLE OF YOUTH AMONG THE GUJI OROMO

"We cannot always build the future for our youth children, however, we can build our youth children for the future."—Ex U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Culture has the power to transform societies, strengthen local communities, and create a sense of identity and belonging for people of all ages (Culture and Youth Development, n.d). As a pathway to youth development, culture plays a critical role in promoting sustainable social and economic development for future generations.

The roles of youth in Guji societies are evolving as a result of structural changes in family organization (Evans-Pritchard, 1940). According to the Guji Oromo, *ijjolle kichu* (youth children) represents a transitional period between childhood (*ijjolle*, ages 1-15) and adulthood. The Guji Oromo define *ijjolle kichu* as individuals aged 15-28, who pass through specific life stages and share the same status, often participating in common rites of passage. For statistical purposes, the United Nations defines youth as those between the ages of 15 and 28, although this can vary by country.

The transition from childhood to *ijjolle kichu* begins with the formal promotion ceremony of *Dabballee* (age-mates), which marks changes in roles and responsibilities. Each year, a group of *ijjolle* is organized under the guidance of the *hayyu* (age-mates counselor) and their families. During the final phase of *ijjolle melqeqqoo*, a ritual ceremony is performed to mark the youth's transition into adulthood. This ceremony occurs every eight years at a location called Fooqaa in the Ganale district of the Guji zone.

Evans-Pritchard (1940) noted that youth among the Guji have culturally assigned roles, with a strong emphasis on the gender-based division of labor. Among the Guji Oromo, youth carry out specific roles that are deeply ingrained in their daily lives. Informants described the culturally assigned tasks of youth, which include: building cattle pens, excavation work, shepherding livestock, defending the community, hauling water from deep wells, and guiding livestock to remote areas in search of grass and water. Similarly, young women are responsible for many domestic tasks, such as fetching water, building huts, collecting firewood, cooking, and milking livestock. However, they are generally not allowed to travel long distances with livestock to search for pasture and water or to build pens for the animals.

This division of labor, where building livestock pens is considered a male task and hut construction is a female task, is a significant aspect of Guji culture. Legesse (1973) observed that, "except for a few cases where people of different ages or sexes participate in the same tasks, there are powerful taboos serving to keep the role distinct. For instance, it is an insult to suggest a man should build a hut, fetch water, cook food, or look after calves." Age and sex categories are fundamental in Guji domestic organization, and this division of labor, coupled with taboos against role reversal, creates a complex system of complementary relationships that serve as a powerful mechanism for social integration.

This study supports Legesse's (1973) argument that, unlike men, women in Guji society do not have the same age-based social categories in the Gada system. However, women enjoy different rights and responsibilities as they age, which are recognized within the community's social structure.

3.2 THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHALLENGES OF GUJI YOUTH CHILDREN

The majority of youth in Ethiopia live in rural areas, with an estimated 30 million individuals aged 15-28. This number is projected to rise to 40 million by 2030 (Desta et al., 2018). Despite the distinct socio-economic challenges faced by youth in Ethiopia, government interventions to address these issues have been initiated only recently. In Bule Hora district, youth are the hardest hit by poverty and represent the highest unemployment group in society. The number of youth seeking jobs continues to rise over time. A key informant from the Bule Hora City Administration's Women, Children, and Youth Affairs Office revealed that, despite the government's efforts and various NGOs launching significant programs since 2016 to alleviate the socio-economic challenges of Guji youth, these interventions have not been fully effective. The informant noted that the approaches taken were not sufficient to match the scale of the challenges faced by youth in the region. According to the informants, the primary socio-economic challenges faced by Guji youth in the Ejersa Fora and Arda Biya Kebeles of Bule Hora district include:

3.2.1 UNEMPLOYMENT

Youth in both Ejersa Fora and Arda Biya Kebeles identified the lack of sustainable income (employment) as the main barrier to their success. A key informant stated, "Due to the diminishing opportunities for sustainable income and employment in the area, a significant number of youth, particularly those from economically disadvantaged families, are affected." Desta et al. (2018) also noted that many young people in rural Ethiopia live below the poverty line.

As of 2014, national estimates indicated an unemployment rate of 26.7% for youth aged 15-28 (ILO, 2016). The combined effects of rapid population growth, limited economic opportunities, and scarce livelihood options have exacerbated the challenges faced by youth in both Kebeles. Many youth, particularly those from poor family backgrounds, are increasingly unable to find work, and their socio-economic problems are intensifying. These young people struggle to earn money due to a lack of skills or the trust of potential employers (Desta et al., 2018).

Despite government efforts to reduce youth unemployment through revolving funds and small-scale micro-enterprise associations, youth in both Kebeles feel that the government is not adequately addressing their financial constraints. The ILO's 2010 Youth Employment Report highlighted that while unemployment is high across Africa, underemployment and working poverty are even more prevalent, pointing to a lack of adequate job prospects for youth. Effective youth employment policies and interventions must thoroughly understand the demographic of unemployed youth, where they are located, and the types of jobs they seek.

3.2.2 DRUG ADDICTION

In both Kebeles, informants reported that drug addiction, including to substances such as khat (a stimulant leaf) and alcohol, is a major challenge for youth. The khat trade has flourished in rural Ethiopia due to a lack of policies regulating its production and sale (Desta et al., 2018).

Guji elders and youth interviewed for this study explained that a significant number of youth have fallen into drug addiction due to unemployment and the lack of credit provision to start their own businesses. They often spend much of their time using drugs such as khat, alcohol, and roll-ups, and more recently, shisha and ganja. A 2004 study by the Ministry of Youth, Sports, and Culture of Ethiopia also echoed these findings, stating that "a considerable number of unemployed youth have become addicted to alcohol, smoking, khat, and other narcotics, all of which are harmful to their health and mental development."

3.2.3 PERENNIAL DROUGHT

Debsu (2013) and Birch (2018) noted that rural areas in Ethiopia are highly vulnerable to environmental changes, and recurrent droughts have severely impacted the ability of families to maintain stable livelihoods. According to informants, the most significant impact of these droughts is the loss of livestock, which are a key asset for many families. Youth in the affected areas are increasingly unable to generate sufficient income due to the diminished livestock populations.

Participants in FGDs from the Malka Soda and Dugda Dawa woredas shared their experiences: "Perennial droughts have created a substantial threat to the livelihoods of youth in our woredas. The challenges have intensified due to the loss of livestock from frequent droughts and the sale of drought-stricken livestock at below-market prices. Unfortunately, most cash income from livestock and livestock products has diminished as a result. Perennial droughts are particularly disadvantageous because the lack of livelihood diversification makes it harder for us to adapt to an increasingly volatile environment."

In the face of escalating climate change, it is crucial to identify the resources most important to the livelihoods of youth and develop strategies to build their long-term financial capacity.

3.2.4 LACK OF START-UP CAPITAL

Livelihood analyses in Guji areas show that while livestock rearing should remain the main economic activity (Pastoralist Livelihoods Initiative, 2009), there is a need for credit and loan institutions to support alternative income generation activities to diversify livelihoods. Key informants and FGD participants consistently mentioned the lack of start-up capital, business and innovation skills training, access to credit, and favoritism (nepotism) as some of the main obstacles faced by youth in Ejersa Fora and Arda Biya Kebeles. One FGD participant from Ejersa Fora Kebele stated:

"Although we have organized ourselves into micro and small-scale enterprises, we have never received revolving capital [seed money] from the government or NGOs to strengthen the financial capabilities of our associations."

Tigabu and Gebeyehu (2020) indicated that the Youth Revolving Fund (YRF) was established by Proclamation No. 995/2017 on March 10, 2017. This proclamation stipulated that the federal government should allocate 10 billion ETB for regional governments to provide financing to assist youth in creating job opportunities (Desta et al., 2018; Watts, 2019; Tigabu & Gebeyehu, 2020). However, youth participants in FGDs argued that the government and private credit institutions do not fairly address the needs of youth. They claimed that these institutions tend to favor certain youth groups with connections to officials in credit institutions. Additionally, a key informant from the Women, Children, and Youth Affairs Office noted that the delivery of the youth revolving fund has been hindered by corruption and the influence of wealthier segments of the community, which has prevented the fund from benefiting the youth as intended.

Despite the efforts of numerous NGOs to provide seed money and support youth associations through various interventions, the number of organized youth seeking credit and the scale of their interventions do not meet the needs of youth in the study area. Therefore, both governmental and NGO efforts need to be better coordinated to implement new approaches with common objectives, ensuring fair credit delivery and strengthening the financial capacity of youth.

3.3 GOVERNMENTAL AND NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS' YOUTH DEVELOPMENT INTERVENTIONS

3.3.1 NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS DEVELOPMENT INTERVENTION

To understand the socio-economic challenges faced by youth in the study area, it is important to examine the roles that NGOs have played and the impact of their interventions. This study included interviews with staff from small enterprises. Currently, Mulata Fago SCORE is working to create economic self-reliance for economically disadvantaged youth in the Ejersa Fora and Arda Biya Kebeles of Bule Hora district (see Table 1 for details).

Table 1: Major areas of selected NGOs interventions
Source: Mulata Fago and Score, 2024.

No	Major Areas of Their Interventions	NGO Schemes	
		Mulata Fago-Oromo Grassroots Development Initiative	SCORE
1	Diversification of Livelihood and Income-Generating Schemes	Training unemployed youth and children on income-generating skills	Organizing savings and credit associations
		Organizing income-generating groups	Livestock feeding and fattening
2	Capacity Building Training	Market-relevant or short-term skill training courses	Hay-making training
			Entrepreneurship and business management skills training

According to the data obtained from key informant interviews, the major areas of intervention by HOGDI and SCORE were capacity-building training, livelihood diversification and income-generating activities, and savings and credit associations. The following section briefly elaborates on the key areas of intervention undertaken by HOGDI and SCORE in Ejersa Fora and Arda Biya Kebeles.³

3.3.2 LIVELIHOOD DIVERSIFICATION AND INCOME-GENERATING SCHEMES

Livelihood diversification is defined as the pursuit of any non-pastoral income-generating activity by pastoralists to enhance productivity and raise incomes through a diverse portfolio of activities. This approach helps improve their standard of living and reduces various livelihood risks (Watson and Binsbergen, 2008; Belay, 2017; Birch, 2018; Ancey et al., 2020). As part of these non-pastoral income-generating strategies, youth who received capacity-building training and initial capital from HOGDI and SCORE in Ejersa Fora and Arda Biya Kebeles have begun to diversify their livelihoods through petty trade and cattle fattening. According to HOGDI (2020), the goal of the capacity-building training was to help Guji youth identify and understand their current situation, capacities, opportunities, and resources, thus improving their living standards on a more secure and sustainable path. Currently, youth in Ejersa Fora and Arda Biya Kebeles are progressively pursuing non-pastoral income strategies to meet subsistence livelihood needs and to buffer against shocks triggered by climate change and poverty.

Livelihood diversification helps create opportunities for youth to improve their economic well-being by achieving stability in both spending and earnings (Watts, 2019). According to HOGDI, a total of 90 socially and economically destitute youth (56 male and 34 female) were enrolled to receive market-relevant skill training at Bule Hora City Technical Vocational and Educational Training (TVET) College, where they graduated after successfully completing the program. Additionally, a key informant from HOGDI noted that these youth are now successfully engaged in small business enterprises.

To assess the overall progress of the livelihood diversification projects in Arda Biya Kebele, a key informant interview was conducted with a female income-generating group of youth. The Mulata Fago income-generating group, currently comprising 7 female youth, was formed and registered in 2023 by the Bule Hora District Small Scale and Micro Enterprises Office after receiving training and initial start-up capital from HOGDI. Most group members were pastoralists who had diversified their livelihoods after graduating from high school and TVET College. Initially, petty trade was not part of the traditional livelihood of Guji pastoralists, and many youth were skeptical about starting such businesses. However,

once they realized the success of their petty solar trade, the group members became confident that unemployed youth were increasingly attracted to their solar businesses to advance their livelihood opportunities. The group members are now pleased to follow rules and regulations and sell solar products in designated areas allocated by the Ejersa Fora Kebele administration office.

Evidence gathered through focus group discussions (FGDs) suggests that livelihood diversification has played a pivotal role in transforming the livelihoods of youth in pastoralist communities, generating supplementary incomes and alleviating financial constraints. The findings of this study also reveal that the lack of adequate capital, access to credit, and insufficient business knowledge and skills remain key obstacles for resource-poor pastoralist youth.

3.3.3 SAVING AND CREDIT ASSOCIATIONS

Saving and credit associations are legally established supportive institutions, often created under national laws governing saving and credit associations, to meet the basic financial service needs of low- and middle-income individuals. As Watts (2019) explains, saving and credit associations involve organizing beneficiaries into groups, facilitating internal savings and loans, and building technical and business planning skills.

Currently, saving and credit associations have been widely implemented, particularly for rural youth. As part of poverty and unemployment alleviation efforts, youth in Ejersa Fora and Arda Biya Kebeles have been organized into saving and credit associations by NGOs operating in both Kebeles. The study shows that Mulata Fago and SCORE have provided tools and seed money to help youth strengthen the financial capacity of their saving and credit associations, enabling them to safeguard against sudden financial needs. A key informant from SCORE explained:

"In order to ensure participatory interventions, SCORE held discussions with relevant stakeholders regarding the establishment of youth saving and credit associations in Ejersa Fora and Arda Biya Kebeles in Bule Hora District. As a result, 72 youth (36 from each Kebele) were selected to form saving and credit associations. After the youth were selected in both Kebeles, they named their saving and credit associations Mulata Fago and Kontoma Darimu in Ejersa Fora and Arda Biya, respectively. Each member of the associations was instructed to contribute 60 birr every two weeks. Once the group members had saved 12,000 ETB (6,000 ETB per person), a start-up capital of 15,000 ETB and two bulls were provided to each association. In total, 30,000 ETB and four bulls were distributed as working capital. As a result, both saving and credit associations are now successfully running their businesses thanks to the start-up capital provided by the project. Additionally, the members of both associations received training in haymaking, cattle fattening, entrepreneurship, and business management. They are currently engaged in various income-generating activities, such as livestock fattening and other petty trade in their Kebeles."

Promoting creativity among youth and harnessing their potential should be prioritized in finding innovative solutions to today's challenges.

3.4 CHALLENGES TO NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS' INTERVENTIONS

NGOs operating in Ejersa Fora and Arda Biya Kebeles of Bule Hora District identified several challenges to their interventions. According to HOGDI, these challenges included a lack of start-up capital, resistance to saving, and staff turnover. Similarly, SCORE highlighted inadequate funding from donor organizations and incoherent project design as the main obstacles to their development efforts. In general, these projects, which often have limited involvement in funding and running youth support programs, tend to be discontinuous and dependent on external funding. This dependence limits their long-term impact on youth.

3.4.1 GOVERNMENT DEVELOPMENT INTERVENTIONS

In addition to discussions with NGOs, representatives from the Small Scale and Micro Enterprise Office and the Women, Children, and Youth Affairs Office were also interviewed to understand the primary areas of government development interventions and the challenges facing Guji youth today. Although many government offices are involved in youth development projects, only the most pertinent ones were included in this study. Accordingly, this study focuses on one major area of government intervention that has implications for the economic development of rural youth. Based on key informant interviews and focus group discussion (FGD) participants' insights, the study identifies the following key government interventions for youth:

3.4.2 YOUTH REVOLVING FUND FOR YOUTH

The Youth Revolving Fund is a youth-specific intervention that was approved on March 10, 2017, to address socio-economic challenges faced by youth in both urban and rural areas of Ethiopia. The fund serves as a permanent financial source to help youth create job opportunities by utilizing their capabilities (Desta et al., 2018; Tigabu and Gebeyehu, 2020). The fund is specifically targeted at youth aged between 15 and 35 years old, who are unemployed, have a business plan, are organized under small-scale micro-enterprises, and can save 10% of the loan amount while maintaining good behavior.

According to a key informant from the Bule Hora City Administration Women, Children, and Youth Affairs Office, there are 12,394 youth (7,154 males and 5,240 female) in Bule Hora district. Of these, 2,593 youth (1,826 males and 767 female) are unemployed or have no permanent source of income. Furthermore, a key informant from the Bule Hora District Small and Micro Enterprises Office noted that 70 youth, organized into 14 small and micro-enterprises in Ejersa Fora and Arda Biya Kebeles, received a total of 1,050,000 ETB (75,000 ETB per association) as a revolving fund to start their businesses. Additionally, they received training in entrepreneurship, business strategy, and market linkage.

Although government interventions through the Youth Revolving Fund have assisted youth in creating job opportunities and generating income, a significant number of youth have not benefited from this intervention due to a gap between the fund's provision and the demands of the youth. Concomitantly, Desta et al. (2018, p.46) described the issue as follows:

"There is a significant gap between government employment opportunities and the number of youth demanding jobs, resulting in high unemployment rates. The belief among many youth that job creation is solely the responsibility of the government is one of the main causes of dissatisfaction among young people. As a result, they do not take personal responsibility for finding or creating jobs."

The extent to which Ethiopia's growing youth population is involved in the country's path to self-sufficiency will determine how dedicated and capable the government is in proposing, financing, and implementing solutions to youth socio-economic challenges (Developing Ethiopia's Youth, 2018). Youth have immense potential to drive Ethiopia's development. However, if socio-economic challenges are not addressed and youth unemployment remains high, all development efforts could be negatively affected.

3.4.3 CHALLENGES TO GOVERNMENT INTERVENTIONS

To understand the challenges faced by government development interventions, representatives from the Women, Children, and Youth Affairs Office and the Small and Micro Enterprises Office at both the district and Bule Hora City Administration levels were interviewed. The main challenges identified by the government officials were corruption, a mismatch between the provision of the Youth Revolving Fund and the demands of the youth, the prevalent aspiration of youth to attain paid employment rather than to

create their own jobs, and the lack of commitment by government officials in creating timely employment opportunities in rural areas. These were identified as the primary obstacles to the successful implementation of government interventions in the study area.

3.5 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

1. **Collaboration between Government and NGOs:** Government and NGOs should collaborate to introduce new approaches with shared objectives to ensure equitable credit and loan delivery systems that strengthen the financial capabilities of youth.
2. **Support for Economically Disadvantaged Youth:** Since the majority of youth saving and credit associations have been organized by NGOs to diversify youth livelihoods, support from NGOs and other relevant organizations must focus on prioritizing economically disadvantaged and unemployed youth.
3. **Promoting Livelihood Diversification and Savings Initiatives:** The increasing incidence of droughts has not only exacerbated the vulnerability of previously economically disadvantaged youth but has also reduced their ability to recover. Therefore, interventions aimed at livelihood diversification and saving and credit associations should be promoted as part of pastoral youth livelihoods diversification strategies.
4. **Transparency and Learning in Project Implementation:** Development organizations should prioritize transparency in project implementation and encourage sustained reciprocal learning mechanisms to improve their interventions for youth.
5. **Collaboration to Address Socio-Economic Challenges:** Addressing the socio-economic challenges of youth requires cooperative efforts from both government and NGOs to help youth transition to economic self-sufficiency.
6. **Scaling Up Successful Activities:** The positive impact of livelihood diversification and saving and credit associations for youth justifies scaling up these activities, particularly in pastoral communities.

4. CONCLUSION

In the Guji zone of Ethiopia, youth face significant socio-economic challenges that hinder their well-being and future prospects. This region, primarily known for its pastoralist communities, struggles with high unemployment, limited access to resources, and environmental hardships like recurrent droughts. Despite efforts by the government and NGOs, such as job creation programs, skill development, and microfinance opportunities, the youth continue to experience difficulties in securing stable livelihoods.

High unemployment remains a major issue, as traditional livelihoods such as farming and herding are no longer sustainable due to climate change and market limitations. Moreover, access to financial resources is restricted, making it difficult for young people to start businesses or invest in education. The frequent droughts further exacerbate food insecurity and reduce income opportunities, leaving many youth in a state of vulnerability.

Social challenges, such as drug addiction, also hinder the development of youth, preventing them from fully engaging in education or economic activities. This creates a cycle of poverty and instability that is difficult to break.

To address these challenges, the study suggests that targeted strategies are necessary. Tailored interventions, such as specialized job training for pastoralist communities, increased access to loans, and programs to combat drug addiction, are essential. Additionally, long-term solutions to mitigate the effects of drought and diversify income sources are crucial. As the youth population continues to grow, it is

important to develop strategies that will help them succeed and contribute to the region's overall development.

5. RECOMMENDATION

5.1 JOB CREATION AND SPECIALIZED TRAINING PROGRAMS:

To address the high unemployment rate, it is crucial to introduce job creation initiatives specifically tailored to the needs of pastoralist youth. This can include providing specialized training in alternative livelihoods such as agriculture, agro-processing, and entrepreneurship. Focusing on skills that adapt to modern market demands, like digital literacy, vocational training in trade skills, or eco-tourism, can offer new opportunities for youth in rural areas.

5.2 ACCESS TO FINANCIAL RESOURCES AND MICROFINANCE SUPPORT:

Improving access to financial resources is essential for fostering entrepreneurship among youth. Microfinance initiatives should be targeted toward young people to help them start small businesses or invest in their education. This can include low-interest loans, savings programs, and financial literacy training to equip youth with the necessary tools to manage their finances effectively.

5.3 CLIMATE-RESILIENT AGRICULTURAL PRACTICES AND LIVELIHOOD DIVERSIFICATION:

Given the vulnerability of pastoralist communities to climate change and recurrent droughts, it is vital to implement climate-resilient agricultural practices. This includes introducing drought-resistant crops, water conservation techniques, and sustainable grazing management. Furthermore, promoting livelihood diversification by encouraging activities like handicrafts, small-scale trade, or farming innovations will reduce reliance on livestock alone and increase income stability for youth.

5.4 COMPREHENSIVE DRUG ADDICTION PROGRAMS:

To combat the growing issue of drug addiction, a comprehensive community-based approach is necessary. This includes prevention campaigns, awareness programs in schools and communities, and the development of rehabilitation centers for youth struggling with addiction. Addressing this social issue will help reintegrate youth into education and economic activities, improving their overall well-being.

5.5 YOUTH-CENTERED HEALTH AND EDUCATION SERVICES:

Ensuring better access to health services, including mental health support, is critical for youth development. Improved education systems, especially in rural areas, should focus on vocational education, skills development, and job readiness programs. Collaborations with NGOs and government entities can facilitate the establishment of mobile schools or training centers to provide education and healthcare to remote areas.

5.6 LONG-TERM POLICY PLANNING FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT:

As the youth population continues to grow, it is crucial for local governments to design long-term policies focused on youth development. This includes creating youth-friendly policies that promote access to education, employment, health, and affordable housing. Collaborative planning between local communities, government agencies, and NGOs will ensure the effective implementation of these policies.

5.7 EMPOWERMENT THROUGH YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN DECISION-MAKING

Engaging youth in decision-making processes related to their development will empower them to actively contribute to solutions. Establishing youth councils or forums can provide a platform for young people to voice their concerns, propose ideas, and become leaders in their communities, ultimately fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility toward their futures.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, we give our heartfelt thanks to God for His blessings, guidance, and strength throughout the course of this research. Without His support, this study would not have been possible.

We would like to express our deepest gratitude to Mulata Fago and SCORE for their invaluable assistance and unwavering support during the fieldwork. Their generosity, cooperation, and dedication to the success of this study were instrumental in enabling us to gather critical data and insights from the community. We greatly appreciate their commitment to facilitating our research and ensuring that the fieldwork process was smooth and productive.

We also extend our thanks to the youth participants, local leaders, and community members of Ejersa Fora and Arda Biya Kebeles for their openness, time, and willingness to engage in the interviews and discussions. Their perspectives were crucial in shaping the findings of this study.

Additionally, we would like to acknowledge the contributions of the government and non-government organizations whose efforts continue to make a difference in the lives of youth in the region. Their support and initiatives have played a significant role in addressing the socio-economic challenges faced by the youth.

Finally, we express our sincere gratitude to our families and colleagues for their encouragement, patience, and understanding throughout the research process.

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