

Country and community information



Ethiopia

ActionAid in Ethiopia



Ethiopia facts:

- The population is 69 million people
- Average life expectancy is 45.5 years
- 58.5% of people are illiterate
- 1 in 6 children die before their fifth birthday

Situated in the Horn of Africa, Ethiopia is a spectacular country with physical features which include the Rift Valley, the Simien mountain range, the Danakil desert and the highlands of Central Ethiopia. The climate varies according to the geography, dividing the country into three distinct areas: the cool highlands, the temperate areas at middle altitudes and the hot, dry lowlands where the nomadic pastoralists live.

Ethiopia is one of the poorest countries in Africa. Nearly 85% of its 69 million people live in rural homesteads and villages, and are entirely dependent on subsistence farming. Seventeen years of civil unrest, which finally ended with the overthrow of communist dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam in 1991, has taken its toll on the country.

High expenditure on the military during the war meant that there was little money for investment in industry or agriculture, on which so many people are dependent for a living. With peace and political stability, steps are now being taken to improve basic services like health and education.

ActionAid has been working in Ethiopia since 1989. We work with over 700,000 of the country's poorest people to improve access to basic healthcare, safe, clean water and education. We also lobby the Ethiopian government for changes to the policies which affect the lives of poor people.

We work in partnership with local organisations and community groups, such as peasant associations, local health committees and farmers groups, so that change can be appropriate and long-lasting.

Making a difference to the poorest people

The first stage of any project supported by ActionAid is to work with the community to identify the most important local issues. The next step is planning how best to tackle these problems. Every project we are involved with in Ethiopia is different. The priorities of the people vary according to the severity of local problems.



Seven people make up a typical household in rural Ethiopia, five of them children. Houses are made of mud or wood with a thatch roof – only more affluent families can afford corrugated iron. Most families own less than an acre and a half of land, from which they must produce the food they need – both to eat and to sell for income.

Water and sanitation

Access to safe, clean water is a problem faced by many Ethiopians. Women and children must spend many hours queuing at municipality water supply points to collect enough water for their families' daily needs. ActionAid has helped bring clean water to communities and trained women to manage the water projects.

Sanitation facilities are also very restricted and many homes have no latrine at all. There are some communal facilities but many families use a small river for washing, collecting water and as a latrine. ActionAid is helping householders to construct proper pit latrines in houses or at appropriate locations for communal use.

Education

In some rural areas, up to 85% of the population are illiterate. Although there are primary schools in many villages, they are often poorly equipped and poor families can ill-afford either fees or books. Most poor children cannot go to school because it would be too far to walk and because they are needed to work at home or in the fields – collecting wood and water or looking after their younger brothers and sisters.

ActionAid works with local people and government teachers to set up learning centres in remote areas. These centres (usually simple village houses or barns) offer lessons to children and adults at flexible times to fit in with their housework and farming. A special curriculum has been developed to enable children to gain basic numeracy and literacy skills before they go on to official primary schools.

Parents play a key role in maintaining and managing the centres. Help is also given in training teachers and providing appropriate course material to ensure the children gain good basic literacy and numeracy skills.

Health

In many of the rural communities where we work, there are no health facilities. There are health centres and private clinics in neighbouring districts but they are too expensive for most families. Instead, they mostly rely on local knowledge or traditional practices.

Outbreaks of meningitis and malaria epidemics in the rainy season are common, causing many deaths every year. Children are especially vulnerable – in Ethiopia, one in six children dies before reaching their fifth birthday.



ActionAid has helped establish health posts equipped to provide basic medical care, which are managed by local health committees. Regular immunisation and mother and child clinics are held and measures to prevent malaria are made available to local people in the rainy season. Committee members and health post workers are trained in the importance of good nutrition, sanitation and the practicalities of family planning. They then share their knowledge with other members of the community.

Raising community awareness of HIV/AIDS and training counsellors is also a priority. Staging educational drama is proving a very effective way of involving local people in the issue and getting across an important message.

A lifetime's wisdom helps mothers

Balote Dilechu, age 80, is a village traditional birth attendant (midwife). Her long experience of working with mothers and babies has been added to by the training and equipment ActionAid provide. Balote says:

When I was young, many women died in childbirth; now very few die. Now we know that we can take measures to stay healthy.

Livelihoods

The local diet amongst poor farmers is very basic. The staple food is *injera*, an unleavened bread made from *teff*, a grain crop unique to Ethiopia. This is eaten with stewed cabbage or pulses. A porridge of dried maize and sorghum is also commonly eaten. Meat is a very rare treat. Other important edible crops include *enset* or 'false banana' and *kotchoko*, made from tree stems.

Families tend to own relatively small plots of land. This, combined with unpredictable rainfall and lack of money to buy fertilisers and equipment, makes producing enough food to live on a challenge for subsistence farmers. When the harvest has been poor or the rains are late, the situation can quickly turn into famine.

Life can be very hard, particularly for women. They are largely responsible for the home and children, fetching water, collecting firewood, weeding, harvesting and preparing food. Women are also expected to supplement the family income by spinning cotton or producing handicrafts.

ActionAid trains farmers in agricultural techniques, which enrich rather than deplete the soil, conserve water, prevent erosion and increase the size and variety of the harvest. These techniques include improving grain stores, cultivating a variety of crops, terracing and tree planting. Advice and support is also given in protecting and treating animal health.

ActionAid supports community schemes which provide affordable bank loans and credit to people (usually women) who have barely enough to survive. Members of savings and credit groups take out loans to buy livestock, seeds and tools for farming. They also invest in small businesses to increase their family incomes. By saving small amounts each month, they can repay their loan and build up their assets.

Building for the future

In the village of Sheba YoYo in Koysha (Mareka Gena), local women's groups have joined together to build a mill, with money from an ActionAid savings and credit scheme. Asenakech Okanso, aged 19, and a mother of three, is a member of the women's group:

“My life is different from my mother's life. She did not have the chance of education, or the mill. I'm sure there will be many changes in how my daughters will live in the future. My daughters may have jobs. The mill will change everything.”



Emergencies

In times of crisis ActionAid provides immediate relief. For instance, we supported the Ministry of Health's efforts to combat malaria and outbreaks of meningitis in various years, providing essential drugs and training medical staff. We also work with the government to prepare communities to respond to drought. Our analysis of local information such as rainfall, population movement and grain and livestock prices gives the communities early warning of impending food shortages. When famine threatens, we provide grain, seeds and fertiliser (on credit where appropriate).

Thanks to the generosity of our supporters, ActionAid is able to do so much to improve the lives of some of the world's poorest families. Since 1972, we have helped millions of people throughout the world, giving them the chance to enjoy a healthier, happier and more dignified future. Ethiopia is one of over 40 countries where we work.

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