



Butterfly Foundation and Ethiopia's Education System

The Foundation

After the loss of his young daughter struck his life in 2000, Claudio decided to transform his pain into something to impact other peoples' lives positively.

In 2002, he founded Butterfly Foundation in Italy, a non-profit organization with the mission to give education to kids from the most deprived areas in the world. Over time, dire conditions of specific regions inspired Claudio to expand the scope of his actions to include facilitating access to water and healthcare.

Claudio shared his story with the world through the publication of a first book, and soon started to receive the first donations from parents who suffered similar losses. Immediately after the loss of a dear relative or sibling, parents rarely take the initiative to transform their pain into a positive impact. Butterfly Foundation is there to inspire them to look beyond what is lost, and facilitate grievance by offering solutions to help people in need.

At its inception, Butterfly Foundation relied on Claudio's connections of missionaries in emerging or frontier countries. The first projects were completed in remote areas of Nepal, Madagascar, and Myanmar with the support of local ministers. Despite the positive impact that these projects had on the community, it became clear that the areas in which they were built lacked the prerequisite to scale the NGO's impact. The beneficiaries of such projects were, in fact, from small remote villages, with limited connection with the rest of the country. Besides, it was tough to establish long-term relationships with local contractors, to potentially expand the area of work beyond the initial target.

- Strong ties with local enablers are of critical importance for NGOs that want to ensure the relevance and scalability of their impact; some of the benefits are:
- Higher bargaining power with suppliers;
- Potential for cooperation with the government;

It was only when Butterfly Foundation set foot in Ethiopia for the first time that more favourable operating conditions materialized. In 2005, a primary Italian Insurance company decided to make a significant donation as part of their CSR commitment. Under their influence, Butterfly Foundation then took contact with COOPI, a leading Italian NGO, to finance the construction of five water wells in the Oromian region of Ethiopia.

Claudio supervised the works in person, and witnessed first-hand the dire conditions of people in rural areas of Ethiopia. In an interview, he said: "Butterfly Foundation intends to promote education, but when I went there, I realized that these people had more basic needs, like surviving."

This experience pushed him to focus his efforts on facilitating access to water for rural areas and collected more funds to ramp up the project pipeline.

Funding for the second project was secured one year after, but the cooperation with COOPI failed due to a difference in priorities. Butterfly foundation decided then to turn directly to VIS, an NGO established by the Catholic Religious Institute of Salesians that had a long-standing presence in Ethiopia. Under their guidance, they built the new water wells in the Tigray region, a border territory torn by the long-running war against Eritrea,



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with the on-site help of the ECC-SDCOAd-B, that coordinates on-site execution by employing local sub-contractors.

This project proved instrumental in setting up what would have become the most significant relationship of Butterfly Foundation in Ethiopia. From then on, Butterfly decided to integrate vertically and turn directly to the ECC-SDCOAd-B for planning and construction activities. Figure 1 shows the cumulative number of beneficiaries and water wells that Butterfly Foundation has constructed or rehabilitated in Ethiopia.

Figure 1. Cumulative number of beneficiaries and water wells in Ethiopia

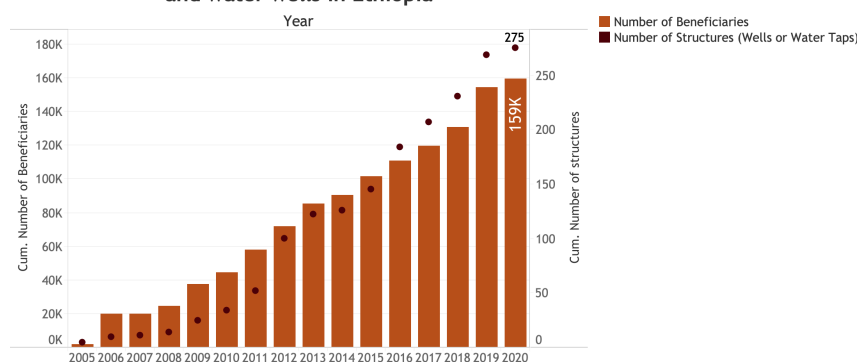


Figure 1. Source: Butterfly Foundation

To date, 95% of all the projects run by the foundation has been realized in Ethiopia, acquiring extensive local expertise and understanding of the needs of the people in the region.

In parallel to water access projects, the charity also stepped up its efforts in the education sector. Figure 2 shows the cumulative number of students and structures (i.e., new schools or renovation of existing) built prior to 2020 in Ethiopia.

Figure 2. Cumulative number of Student Beneficiaries and Structures in Ethiopia

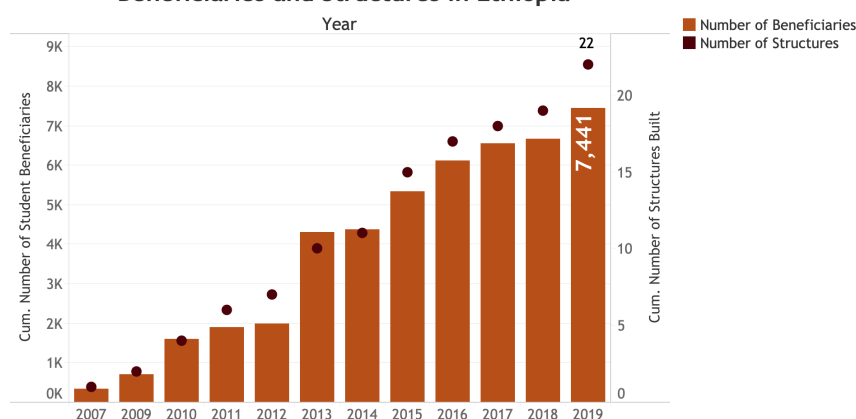


Figure 2. Source: Butterfly Foundation

With a constant attention on local population needs (at the end of each project, on-field representatives never miss to ask local communities: "What do you need?"), Butterfly Foundation undertook a variety of projects, with four different types of intervention:

- Building new schools in rural areas
- Renovating run-down structures
- Expanding capacity of existing schools
- Giving furniture to existing facilities (e.g., tables, blackboards)

Ethiopian Education System

Geographically, Ethiopia is split into a federation of nine states (divided by ethnicity), in addition to two separate cities - Addis Ababa, the capital, and Dire Dawa. Funding for the country's education system is shared among the regions. The allocation is decided upon by the federal government, which provides about 50-60% of its funding through non-recourse grants to the regional governments, as well as to individual schools within each state.

The education system in Ethiopia is governed by the Ministry of Education (MOE), which has recently announced its plans to reform the current system and teaching practices within the country's schools. As part of this reform, the system has been divided into three segments:

- a) 6 years of primary education;
- b) 2 years of junior school;
- c) 4 years of high school.

The government has focused intensely on guaranteeing universal access to all grade levels for children within the country; initial reports from the country's Education Sector Development Program show that access has increased substantially for primary and junior levels¹, but no increase in educational access has been shown in high schools.

Historically, the Ethiopian economy has been agrarian in nature, and many people still make a living by doing subsistence farming. There have been many conversations within the MOE to determine whether the school system should focus on the skills necessary to perpetuate the agriculture sector, or whether it is better to focus the academic curriculum on more 'technical', less agrarian subjects. The conclusion has been borne out in recent years, which has led to a dichotomous outcome: first, it has led to a higher rate of attrition for students who know they will be returning to their families' farming functions, and second, it has led to a higher level of preparation for those few students who are able to enter university level studies and eventually enter into 'white-collar' work. It remains to be seen whether this approach is the best one for the country. Despite the sweeping changes to the Ethiopian education system in recent years, the country still faces many challenges.

Challenges

One of the primary challenges Ethiopia faces is determining in which language students should be taught. The native language of Ethiopia is Amharic; however, the federal government and MOE realize the importance of internationalization and English competency to drive further economic growth in the country. It has been shown that teaching courses in English has led to a significant decline in the quality of the education standards as course material becomes more challenging. The decline is driven by a lack of teachers that are proficient in English to the extent that is needed to service the entire national high school system. Additionally, students' English skills become underdeveloped due to the lack of English teachers, and thus the more advanced content in English becomes more inaccessible over time.

Another challenge in the Ethiopian educational system has been the implementation of a centralized policy regarding curricula, expected student competency levels for each grade, and staff quality (among others).

¹ Source: World Education News and Reviews (<https://wenr.wes.org/2018/11/education-in-ethiopia>)

Part of this difficulty is due to the lack of funding for the national school system. Although the MOE exists, and is funded by the central government, the nominal amount of support received by the MOE is insufficient to allow for a strong centralized education policy, and implementation thereof, around the country. Historically, Ethiopia has spent approximately 4.5% - 5.5% of its GDP on funding education². This percentage is relatively low as compared to other developing African nations. Additionally, with a nation-wide GDP of ~\$85 billion, the national education budget amounts to only ~\$4 billion annually. Compared to developed nations that have a similar population size (e.g. Japan), the amount is very small. Japan spends approximately 9.5% of its \$5.5 trillion annual GDP on education³, equating to ~\$522 billion. Figure 3, from UNICEF shows the relative spending levels of various comparable African nations, including Ethiopia.

An increase in the percentage of GDP that is spent on the education system would surely add more resources to tackle these important issues.

Figure 3. Education expenditures as a percentage of GDP in selected African countries

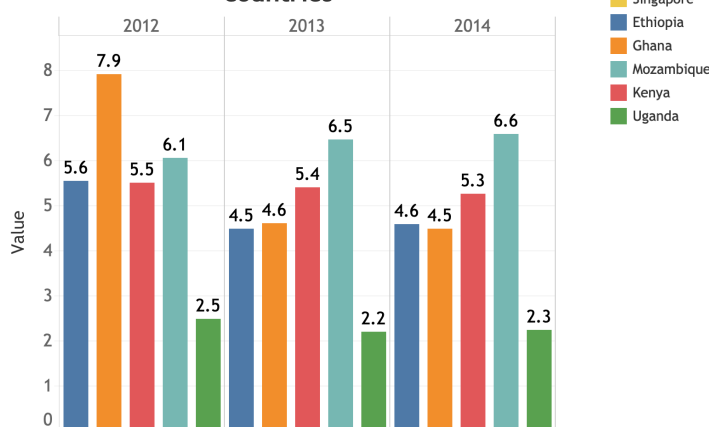


Figure 4. Source: UNICEF

Figure 4. 2014-2018 Average government education expenditures (% of government spending)

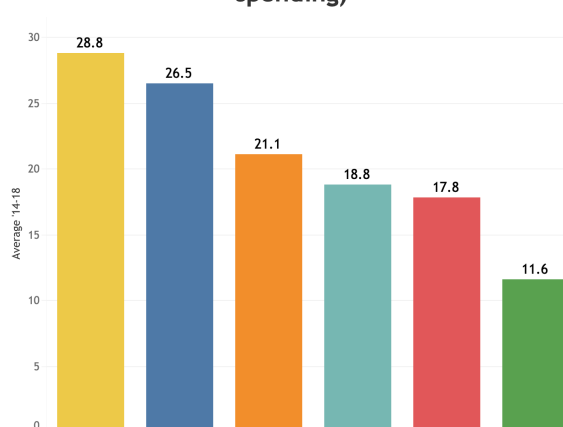


Figure 4. Source: World Bank

If we look at this issue from the government's standpoint, the picture is considerably different. For the period 2014-2018, Ethiopia is the second country in the world for spending on education as a % of government expenditures (Figure 4). Although the funding levels are a challenge, it is clear that the Ethiopian government recognizes that sufficient funding is important.

Education is the largest expense item of Ethiopian's federal budget, but, unfortunately, the nominal amount spent is not enough to guarantee expansion and education standards.

² Source: Trading Economics (<https://tradingeconomics.com/ethiopia/public-spending-on-education-total-percent-of-gdp-wb-data.html>)

³ Source: Macro Trends and World Bank (<https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/JPN/japan/education-spending>, <https://data.worldbank.org/country/japan>)

The role of NGOs in supporting governments in improving the education system

We have identified four primary areas of response of governments in underdeveloped economies:

1. Promote and enforce participation
2. Building and maintaining structures
3. Employ teachers and staff
4. Guarantee quality and relevance of education

In a developed economy, all these four areas are almost entirely a government's responsibility. NGOs intervention, if any, is limited to facilitate access to minorities in lower-income bands through scholarships.

In developing economies, however, governments will face difficulties in all of these four main areas. Budgetary constraints, lack of infrastructure, and cultural factors are only a few of the obstacles that these economies face in promoting education. The role of NGOs in this context is very challenging, as it has the potential to impact all the areas mentioned above.

In explaining all these factors and what NGOs can do to contribute, we will focus specifically on the underserved rural areas of the country.

Ethiopia made education the priority of the government (24.2% of government spending in 2015/16). For this reason, officials are very welcoming of NGOs efforts, and they are keen to provide knowledge and support.

1. Promote and enforce participation

The latest reported primary school enrolment rate of Ethiopia was 84%⁴ in 2015. Since 2000, the government took decisive measures to boost participation that translated in doubling participation over the course of 10 years. Drop-out rate, however, is still a big concern: just about 50% of children complete elementary education, and most of the drop-out happen in rural areas. Secondary school (junior and high schools) data are even worse, as participation stands only at 30%.

One of the practices promoted recently to increase participation is to involve local community in the educational institution. USAID went as far as to formalize best practices in the report: "First Principles: Community Engagement in Education Programs"⁵. There are several domains in which participants can contribute to it, also related to the other areas of intervention considered. With the specific case of Ethiopia, Jennifer Swift-Morgan⁶ has found that the application of this practice increases considerably the participation rate, and the commitment of children in learning.

The current process provides the creation of a one-year plan for the school at the start of the academic year by involving school management, teachers and parents. Monthly meetings are then held to evaluate the ongoing process. Additionally, parents meet with teachers at the end of each term to evaluate the results of the exam.

Whilst effective in theory, this process is very hard to enforce, especially in rural areas, where parents are often busy in agricultural work.

⁴ Source: World Bank

⁵ Source: USAID

⁶ Swift-Morgan, Jennifer. (2006). What Community Participation in Schooling Means: Insights from Southern Ethiopia. [http://lst-iiiep.iiiep-unesco.org/cgi-bin/wwwi32.exe/\[in=epidoc1.in\]/?t2000=023328/\(100\).76.10.17763/haer.76.3.e475j32j69q27x63](http://lst-iiiep.iiiep-unesco.org/cgi-bin/wwwi32.exe/[in=epidoc1.in]/?t2000=023328/(100).76.10.17763/haer.76.3.e475j32j69q27x63).

2. Build and maintain structures

It's not surprising that, in a country like Ethiopia, schooling structures are not enough to guarantee education to the whole population. The government reported that the number of elementary structures nearly tripled between 2011 and 2014, and this considerably affected the ability of the government to ensure quality of education and learning outcomes.

NGOs in Ethiopia have been heavily involved in building, renovating and expanding schools. Appendix 1 is a map of known charities operating in the country and data around the initiatives related to education.

In rural areas of Ethiopia, the process of building new schools is mostly community initiated. The steps are as follows:

1. The local community requests the new facility (or the renovation of existing ones) to the local "Woreda" offices, the third-level administrative division, which represents the government in educational matters.
2. NGOs who have funds to finance the construction actively engage with the office and the local constructions companies.
3. Local construction company liaises with local office to ensure the new school respects all the standards required by law (Ethiopian government issued extensive guidelines to guarantee sound educational infrastructures).
4. The works are then carried out under the supervision of the NGO.
5. Once the school is built, the government provides books and employs teachers.

To maximize the relevance of their impact on building infrastructure, NGOs have to keep a constant dialogue with local offices.

After construction, there are no specific rules mandated by the government for community engagement in infrastructure maintenance. Such practices would be very effective in conveying the importance of education at all levels of the social framework, and we believe they could be a potential area of NGO intervention.

Leveraging on its network in the region and a good relationship with the local "Woreda" offices, Butterfly Foundation was able to complete 16 projects (i.e., new schools or renovations of existing structures) in the Tigray region only. It is very encouraging to hear from the Foundation how instrumental the government is in the effort to promote education. A "can-do" attitude is present at many levels of civil society and represents the spirit of a country that is fighting to emerge by empowering its citizens to grow.

3. Employ teachers and staff

Despite the significant efforts by the government in growing the education system, there are several challenges to face. As a growing part of the population needs to access education, budgetary constraints place a substantial limit on the government's action to employ personnel.

NGOs' role in this is minimal. We argue that the employment and training of public teaching personnel are critical to the development of the education system, but the sole responsibility of the government. As the latter works to shape the education system to be relevant to the country's growth, the influence of external participants could result in disrupting the process.

One area of intervention is the building and maintenance of private education facilities. Whereas this practice might be useful in creating an impact for students who are lucky enough to participate in it, it does not support the government in developing a healthy education system.

4. Guarantee quality and relevance of education

The relevance of education typically refers to learning experiences that are either directly applicable to students' interests or aspirations, or that are connected to real-life issues. Ethiopia adopts a national curriculum framework, where textbooks and programs are (respectively) written and defined at the MOE level ⁷.

As the quality of education, we describe the ability of teachers to deliver instruction to students. Currently, the government trains elementary school teachers in public training colleges before being assigned to a school. Secondary teachers instead are required to hold at least a bachelor's degree, a very high barrier to entry as very few people in the country can afford it.

Despite the intense focus of Ethiopia on education, budgetary difficulties place a heavy burden on the number of teachers that can be employed and trained. If the MOE can, at the best of its abilities, guarantee a minimum level of relevance through centralized curricula, the constraints resulting from lack of resources heavily impact the quality of education profoundly.

NGOs can play a very active role in this area. Initiatives can span from direct training to the facilitation of access to university to prospective teachers.

There is a further challenge that non-for-profit organizations face in this space. Donors typically like to see the impact of their donation maximized, which often translates into having a direct emotional connection with how their money is employed. Knowing that your money contributed to financing a school for children who were attending classes sitting on a rock under a tree is much more appealing than if the same amount was employed to improve adult training. Also, local Woreda offices don't coordinate NGOs' actions on these types of initiatives, as it is not in their direct responsibilities. For example, Tigray's minister of education told Butterfly Foundation, who is looking to build an English training center for teachers, "do whatever you want, you have our full support." Although these projects might not be seen as appealing in first instance by the public, we argue that at the current state of Ethiopia's educational development, programs that improve teaching quality would profoundly contribute to the improvement of society's standards, and deliver a truly lasting impact.

Following these beliefs, Butterfly Foundation is now looking to build a new English training centre in Adigrat, Tigray region, which will train both people working in the hospitality sector as well as local teachers.

This school will be realized with the support of a local businessman, involved in the planning, and Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, who will send volunteers to teach periodically.

The long-term plan is to turn this school in a self-sustaining formation institute and to expand the scope of the formation to teaches far beyond English.

⁷ Ethiopian Ministry of Education.

<https://childresearchinternational.files.wordpress.com/2017/02/ethiopia-curriculum.pdf>



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Appendix 1. Map of known charities operating in Education sector in Ethiopia

