

P3.6. Saving a Holy Land through Integrated Environmental, Livelihoods, & Reproductive Health Interventions: A Youth led Initiative in Lalibela, Ethiopia - Yemane Guesh, Save Your Holy Land Association (SYHLA); Tewodros Alemu, SYHLA; Yemane GebreHiwot, SYHLA; Shimljaw Alemnew, SYHLA

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Background/Significance: Lalibela, Ethiopia, is a town known for its famous monolithic churches built in the 12th century. Located in the northern highlands of Ethiopia, Lalibela is considered one of the holiest locations for followers of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, with frequent pilgrimages made to the area. The area is also extremely susceptible to recurrent drought, land degradation, and declining agricultural productivity. Communities that live in and around the highlands of Lalibela suffer from periodic famine with the area considered one of the most vulnerable areas in the country in terms of food security. At the same time, livelihoods remain a major concern for young people in the area, and the status of young people is further exacerbated by the generally poor health indicators in the region.

Intervention/Activity Tested: *Save Your Holy Land Association (SYHLA)* was established in 2001 by two young university graduates who witnessed the parallel challenges of environmental degradation, livelihoods concerns, and poor health circumstances among their peers in their hometown, Lalibela. This is a youth-led, community-based program which undertakes environmental conservation and livelihoods for young people, through strong community mobilization and participation activities. The program also served as an entry point to address reproductive health (RH), HIV/AIDS and other harmful traditional practices (HTPs) including early marriage.

Methodology: *Save Your Holy Land Association* mobilizes out-of-school youth and forms them into groups. SYHLA assists groups to request for and acquire land from local authorities responsible for the land allocation. Once land is acquired, group members work as a cooperative, planting trees, growing vegetables, and undertaking other activities such as bee-keeping. These activities are aimed at reducing further land degradation and protecting the environment, as well as improving the livelihoods of young people in peri-urban and rural areas. In addition, one of the groups is engaged in improving the urban-slum health and sanitation efforts through garbage collection, and planting of trees in and around Lalibela Church.

This intervention was intended to create a model for environmental conservation, effectively creating examples for the wider community to replicate. This youth-led approach has also empowered adolescent boys and girls economically through agricultural activities. In addition, participants are trained as youth peer educators both in rural and urban areas, and conduct awareness creation and community mobilization. Environmental protection, RH, HIV/AIDS, HTPs including early marriage, and community sensitization meetings are peer education activities, among others.

Data: A total of 230 young people, one third of which are female, formed groups and secured land from local authorities, implementing the program in Lasta District and Lalibela town.

Lessons Learned: This youth-led program is not focusing on vertical approaches; rather it integrates community capacity building interventions to empower community members in land protection and better health. Moreover, SYHLYA activities underscore the positive social contribution of young people, demonstrating that youth can take the lead in preserving history and the environment, and setting examples for others to follow.