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*“Transcultural Impacts and Perspectives on the Future”*

*perspectives from across the globe*

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### **The Future of Education in Ethiopia**

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The future of education in Ethiopia has received a shot in the arm after languishing for decades. Enrollment has skyrocketed, there are schools in more places than ever before, and there are signs that this trend will continue for the foreseeable future. However, significant challenges remain that require meaningful breakthroughs in the areas of access to basic resources for both students and educators, improvements to the quality of education that is available, access to technology – including computers, the Internet and online learning tools – and last but not least, a reduction of the student-to-teacher/classroom ratio.

For a long time, imperial Ethiopia had the heart to educate only royalty and the elite in society. The rest were kept in the dark so they could be dominated and exploited. A few in Ethiopian societies did manage to attend the two universities that existed. It was students from those universities who revolted and managed to end a Solomonic dynasty that had reigned for millennia. For the masses, that was truly the start of the education revolution in Ethiopia.

Although few and far in between, the Mengistu regime had build a few token schools around the country. I started in one of those schools. Many young people enrolled with great excitement and anticipation of brighter future. The excitement did not last very long as wars raged on in several parts of the country. It was only after the regime was brought down and several years later that many Ethiopian youth started to see a significant change in the educational system and access to education. Since then, the number of schools across the country has increased in leaps and bounds. This has become welcome news to millions of young boys and girls who are eager to learn and never thought they would have the opportunity. In many parts of Ethiopia, it is amazing how many school children are in school compared to how many used to be.

Zorat Elementary is one of those schools that had its roots in the early 1970s, was abandoned for several years, and found life again after the regime change. Although the school is considered relatively small, they have an average of 1,400 students. The student to teacher ratio is around 55, which is down from a high of 62 a few years ago.

In fact there are so many students that the school does not have enough classrooms for all the students to attend at the same time. Many schools in Ethiopia have devised a rotation system which – besides allowing them to have enough classrooms – also supports farming parents who need to keep their children working for half of the school day.

For those who are attending school, it is very exciting. They are eager to learn, and they feel they understand that education is one of the key ingredients for a successful future. They believe that life will get better with an education. However, coming from the outside looking in, nothing can be further from the truth. Yes, there are significant strides being made, yes there are more kids enrolled in school, and there is no doubt life will improve to an extent. The question becomes, relative to what? I have a seven and a thirteen year old daughter. I closely follow and observe their interaction with people and technology here in Canada, and I am often comparing differences between them and their cousins at Zorat Elementary. I am amazed at my daughter's knowledge at their age. At the same time, I am heartbroken for my nieces and nephews at Zorat Elementary. The future is bleak *if* they continue on the path that they are now. Here is the problem:

It begins at home. Most Ethiopian adults cannot read or write. As a result, many parents do not have a full appreciation of education. The practice in the developed world, according to which learning starts at home, does not exist here. This puts many students in Ethiopia at a significant disadvantage. Students are often fighting with their parents about wanting to go to school; the parents objecting as the children are needed to work in the farm. Simply going to class everyday is a luxury in the eyes of many parents. The idea of coming home and studying or doing homework is simply out of the question for many. If there is homework, which often there is, students must try to complete it before they return home. Even if they are allowed to do their homework later in the evening, many of them lack proper lighting, a chair to sit on, and a table to do their work. The odds are always against the students.

As an Ethiopian born Canadian, I have a clearer understanding of the difference between Canada and Ethiopia. The future belongs to those who will be in it, the young. The question is, "What can we do today that would make a significant impact on young students in Ethiopia?" Zorat.org, a small not for profit organization, has been trying to make a dent on this issue. Its goal: start with the basics. Schools must have electrical power, which they can obtain by connecting to the grid or from renewable solar energy. Once a school is connected to a power source, governments, people, and organizations can find ways to provide access to the Internet. The Internet will allow schools to accelerate learning, giving them a chance to catch up to the rest of the world.

Connecting them to the Web is one part of the solution. Zorat has been raising money to support this rural school to provide basic supplies like chairs and desks, school uniforms, and library books. Why is it so certain that they will be able to catch up fast, if they had the resources? My own experience suggests an answer. In 2004, I brought three of my youngest siblings out of the same environment to

Canada. Granted, the full immersion in Canadian society helped; it was astounding how fast they were able to pick up the language and the technology. Technology was really the catalyst that helped them get empowered. Information was available to them at the click of a mouse, and that has made all the difference. Today, one of them is at a university finishing up a civil engineering degree, the second is graduating with an engineering technologist diploma from collage, and the youngest of the three is graduating from nursing school in two months.

Of course we will not be able to bring every child to the developed world to have him/her educated, although some countries do as they can to send their young to educational institutions around the world. In the case of Ethiopia, the one thing doable on a massive scale to make the significant change that will yield results in shorter time is to connect them to online resources and technology. If and when this takes place, I see a future that is significantly brighter with many more Ethiopians participating in the world stage. Short of that, I see a future that will continue forward but at a painfully slower rate.

***Yemane Muzey** was born and raised in the Northern Ethiopia, near the historic town of Axum. He lived and attended school there until he completed grade 8. In 1983, Yemane left a war-torn Ethiopia and went to Sudan when he spent three years in Refugee camps. He was sponsored and supported by a Canadian family and brought to Canada in 1987. After completing high school, he attended Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Yemane works and lives in Fredericton, New Brunswick. Yemane and his wife Katherine founded Zorat.org ([www.zorat.org](http://www.zorat.org)) after a trip to Ethiopia in 2008 to visit family. They are currently campaigning to raise money to electrify the school which they will lead into providing access to computers and the Internet. Yemane can be contacted at [school@zorat.org](mailto:school@zorat.org).*

**POINTS FOR THE CLASSROOM** (send comments to [forum@futuretakes.org](mailto:forum@futuretakes.org) or post on FUTUREtakes blog):

- *The Ethiopian government has placed you in charge of the school system just as educational infrastructure development (electrical power, Web access, libraries, desks, and chairs) is nearing completion.*
  - *What next steps might you implement to prepare Ethiopian children for life in a rapidly-changing world – a world in which careers-for-life are no longer assured?*
  - *How might you overcome the challenges of many parents not having a full appreciation of education?*
  - *To what extent might your proposed steps “westernize” the Ethiopian educational system, and what cultural elements of Ethiopian society might they maintain?*