

Prioritizing the PHE Approach: Linking Population, Health, and the Environment for a Better World

Intro

Human population stands at over 7 billion people, with a mid-range projection by the United Nations of 9.6 billion by 2050. It is undeniable that population growth is straining the earth's limited resources. And it is – and has been – a huge task to help the world's poorest nations rise above poverty. Ninety-five percent of the growth in world population occurs in the poorest and least-developed countries, straining families, livelihoods, the environment, and social stability.

Disconcertedly, fertility rates have remained higher than expected in some developing countries, especially many in sub-Saharan Africa, where the need to stabilize population and invest in and empower communities is great.

The good news is that through prioritizing voluntary family planning services and healthcare, providing education for girls and marginalized peoples, supporting economically empowering people with sustainable livelihoods, and assisting with environmental management, global society can confront these challenges, even in the face of climate change and other environmental and social difficulties.

Efforts to successfully and positively stabilize population growth must be grounded in a holistic, rights-based approach. It is not so much a matter of numbers but of concrete ways to improve lives and protect nature. One of the best ways to do this is by integrating population, health, and environment issues, known as PHE programs. Such programs are key to overcoming the environmental and social challenges facing the world.



What is PHE?

PHE projects are relatively new in the development sector, but this holistic approach recognizes the interconnection between natural resource management, family planning/reproductive health, and sustainable livelihoods. PHE projects are especially important because it can help the country overcome poverty, food insecurity, environmental degradation, unmet needs for family planning, and improve women's rights.

The main objective of the PHE approach is to simultaneously address the need for healthcare and family planning while helping communities manage their natural resources in a manner that will protect the environment and empower the people who depend upon it for their livelihoods.

What makes PHE so exciting is that it is a multi-sector approach to enable people and communities to overcome the many challenges they face in their daily lives, from high population growth rates to unemployment to severe environmental degradation.

The global environmental and human rights community should take note of what is happening here and encourage similar work in other areas needing to improve the well-being of people and the ecosystem.

The Components of PHE

Population: the United Nations' report [World Population Prospects: The 2012 Revisions](#) states that the current world population of 7.2 billion is projected to increase by 1 billion over the next 12 years and reach 9.6 billion by 2050. The world's 49 least developed countries are projected to double in size from around 900 million people in 2013 to 1.8 billion in 2050.

Health: access to healthcare and voluntary family planning services is especially critical for women. Globally, 222 million women want to use contraceptives but lack access. Addressing this need, reducing the rate of maternal and child mortality, and pre and post-natal care should be priorities for any country.

Environment: the world is facing incredibly serious natural resource and environmental challenges. These include climate change, fresh water depletion, ocean over-fishing, deforestation, air and water pollution, and the struggle to feed 7 billion people. Often the best solutions to environmental problems are local and based on traditional knowledge.

In 15 high-fertility countries of sub-Saharan Africa, the UN's estimated average number of children per woman has recently been adjusted upwards by more than five per cent. These include Angola, Cameroon, Congo, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Niger and Nigeria. All places where greater investment is needed for human rights, women's empowerment, education, healthcare/reproductive health, and protecting ecosystems.

Taking a Closer Look at Ethiopia

Much of this brief is based on the 7th [PHE Ethiopia Consortium](#) General Assembly and other PHE site visits in and near Addis Ababa in March 2013. PHE projects in Ethiopia are still in an early phase, and much of the conference was devoted to how to monitor and evaluate projects and share best practices. A big impetus is on the need for more international literature and reviews to provide evidence and show governments and donors the potential of PHE work.

Ethiopia is the second most-populous nation in Africa, with close to 94 million people. Along with rapid population growth, there is a high percentage of Ethiopian women who would like to avoid pregnancy but aren't using family planning. In Ethiopia 25% of women report an unmet need for family planning.

The U.S. Agency for International Development reports that Ethiopia has too few health professionals and a weak health delivery system to service a rapidly growing population spread across vast distances. And its young population, combined with high fertility, the low status of women, limited access to family planning/reproductive health services and low contraceptive use, contributes to Ethiopia's rapid population growth and poor maternal and child health.

Ethiopia is also grappling with major environmental problems, including land deforestation, soil erosion, pollution, degradation due to overgrazing of livestock, decreasing biodiversity, and increasing effects of climate change.

Here are just a few statistics that highlight the need to invest in Ethiopia:

- The population of Ethiopia is projected to double by the year 2050 to nearly 190 million;
- 2 million people are added to population every year;
- The average woman has 5.4 children;
- 1 in 10 births is assisted by a skilled health provider;
- Most of the country is rural, with just 16% of the population living in cities;
- 47% of Ethiopians are under the age of 15;
- Ethiopia's maternal mortality rate is one of the highest in the world, at 676/100,000;
- 29% of Ethiopians live on \$1/day or less;
- Only 2.7% of Ethiopia is forested land; the UN predicts it could be completely deforested by 2020.

According to the country's [2011 Demographic and Health Survey](#) (DHS): "Ethiopia is one of the least urbanized countries in the world; only 16 percent of the population lives in urban areas. The majority of the population lives in the highland areas. The main occupation of the settled rural population is farming, while the lowland areas are mostly inhabited by a pastoral people, who depend mainly on livestock production and move from place to place in search of grass and water. More than 80 percent of the country's total population lives in the regional states of Amhara, Oromiya, and SNNP."

Given these sobering statistics, it is imperative that solutions be found that can improve the lives of all Ethiopians while at the same time protect vital ecosystems.

The PHE Ethiopia Consortium, made up of over 40 organizations that work in Ethiopia on population, health, and environment issues, defines PHE as:

PHE interventions in Ethiopia are a holistic, participatory approach whereby issues of environment, health and population are addressed in an integrated manner for improved livelihoods and sustainable well-being of people and ecosystems.

Ethiopia, along with the Philippines, is at the forefront of PHE implementation. Currently, there are over 40 PHE pilot sites across Ethiopia.

Guraghe People's Self-Help Development Organization (GPSDO) and Impact of PHE

The Guraghe People's Self-Help Development Organization (GPSDO), a 50-year-old organization, is a member of the PHE Ethiopia Consortium that is implementing this holistic, integrated approach in local villages as a way to bring them healthcare, education, family planning, sustainable livelihoods and environmental/natural resource management.

The Guraghe are an ethnic group in southwestern Ethiopia. This is a densely populated area where most of the people are subsistence farmers. The main issues facing Guraghe communities, according to the GPSDO, are the following: 1) high population pressure (due to large family size and few family planning services); 2) health problems (especially high maternal mortality); and 3) environmental problems (namely soil erosion). Other problems include poverty, female illiteracy, gender inequality, and unemployment.

GPSDO is currently implementing the PHE approach in five of the nine *woredas*, or districts, in the Guraghe zone.

GPSDO is working with Guraghe communities to create sustainable livelihoods, improve healthcare, and address environmental degradation. It has trained women and farmers on income generating activities such as beekeeping, vegetable production, and sheep and goat rearing, along with training on basic computer skills and business entrepreneurship.

A program on youth peer education on reproductive health and family planning has been implemented, that allows young people to openly discuss issues of concern to them. The youth are also involved with planting seedlings to combat soil erosion.

In regards to the environment, one of the main factors of Ethiopia's deforestation is demand for wood for fuel, resulting in severe soil erosion. GPSDO runs a women's project training them how to make and sell energy saving stoves, using locally available materials. The stoves use about one third of the firewood used by traditional stoves.

Other attempts to halt further soil erosion include the planting of native seedlings (such as acacia trees), the building of flood diversion canals, and soil rehabilitation catchments.

GPSDO provides family planning services to local communities by training voluntary community health in conjunction with government sponsored health extension workers who provide education on reproductive health. GPSDO states that they have increased the Guraghe Zone's contraceptive prevalence rate from 8.1% in 2005 to 33.46% in 2010.

Many of the Guraghe women prefer using long-term contraceptives, especially injectables such as depo provera. However, the supply is very limited.

Through educational outreach to young people, and by providing workshops and training with religious leaders and elders, GPSDO has been able to raise awareness on the importance of voluntary family planning and reduce maternal mortality.

In GPSDO's experience, the integrated PHE development approach is a "far better approach to address the diverse and serious problems of the community with a minimum of resources" and which can "bring about sustainable development."

Advocating for PHE projects

U.S. taxpayers, through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), are funding a fair number of PHE sites around the world. In Ethiopia in particular, total investment through USAID was \$541 million in 2012 (including \$77.5 million for maternal, child and reproductive health and \$4 million for the environment).

Other countries with PHE programs include Madagascar, Rwanda, Uganda, the Philippines, and Ecuador. As more attention is directed to PHE work, more donors are beginning to invest funds in this integrated approach.

Guraghe women discussing family planning



Recent UN population projections have had to be adjusted upwards in the latest set of predictions. Globally, the world is failing on supporting the desire for family planning services, amongst many other issues.

According to the [Woodrow Wilson Center](#), modern contraceptive use has nearly doubled recently in Ethiopia, increasing from 14 to 27 percent. And total fertility rate is now below replacement level in the capital of Addis Ababa. However, the UN had projected that fertility would begin dropping even more dramatically to 3.9 nationally by 2010-2015. That projection has now been revised upwards to 4.6 in alignment with the recent DHS results.

Over 222 million women in the developing world want access to contraceptives. The Guttmacher Institute stated that in 2012 the use of modern contraceptives in the developing world would have prevented 218 million unintended pregnancies, which, in turn, would have averted 55 million unplanned births, 138 million abortions (40 million of them unsafe), 25 million miscarriages and 118,000 maternal deaths. What is the cost to meet this global need for family planning? 8.1 billion dollars, or what Americans spent on Halloween in 2012.

U.S. Representative George Miller's office reported that the U.S. supports family planning projects in more than fifty developing nations. Each year, these programs help prevent 60 million unplanned births, 105 million abortions and nearly 3 million infant deaths. Projects promote safe motherhood initiatives, combat sexual and gender-based violence, and prevent and treat HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections, reducing the risk of mother to child transmission.

In addition to advocacy, there is monitoring and evaluation of PHE projects that should be undertaken that can help make the case that this is a successful approach in which to invest. In theory, more data can translate into more donors. By documenting and showcasing best practices and lessons learned, more donors, policy-makers and others can see the cost-effectiveness of integration.

With academic and peer reviews backing PHE projects, more can be implemented in other countries facing population, health, and environment challenges. Ultimately, only by increasing the understanding that these issues should be linked and dealt with jointly can we overcome the tendency to back projects only by sectors. At this point, only a well-rounded, holistic approach can solve our most pressing problems.

The need and desire is there to support women and families around the world, so they can take care of their communities and environment. What is most needed though is the political will and breaking out of individual silos through linking issues and alliance-building.

The promising attribute of PHE projects is that it is an integrated approach dealing with multiple, critical issues. In doing so, one sector is not ignored to the detriment of another. If only environmental challenges are dealt with but not the need for family planning services and sustainable livelihoods, the chances of success are much lower. When issues are linked and addressed jointly, resources can be better managed and protected, social needs met, and population growth stabilized.

The vision of the PHE Ethiopia Consortium is an "Ethiopia with a healthy population, sustainable resource use, improved livelihoods and resilient ecosystem." This is true the world over, and what global society should strive to create and implement for the betterment of all.

PHE Spotlight: Ethiopia's Youth

One project in Ethiopia's capital is providing hope for the country's youth. It is called [Tena Kebena](#), and it is empowering a small, impoverished community in Addis Ababa where the people live next to a polluted river and garbage dump and also close to luxury hotels (in the Amharic language, Tena means health and Kebena and Ginfle are the names of two local rivers).

Started by two young men concerned about the community's pollution and garbage problem, Tena Kebena's official mission is to enable citizens to free themselves from poverty and lead healthy and productive lives by promoting urban agriculture, environmental education, HIV/AIDS awareness, and promoting gender and social issues, such as family planning.

With the exception of the occasional small donation, the project is all-volunteer run. Approximately 30 youth from the community currently participate in the community resource center.

A visit to the Tena Kebena site is an amazing experience. They do so much with so little. The road leading up to the community center is full of passion flower and other indigenous plants. Inside the property, there is an abundant garden of organic fruits, vegetables and herbs, plus a greenhouse. There are close to 50 medicinal plants on the property, including a plant endemic to Ethiopia used to treat malaria. Plant containers are often recycled containers such as shoes or plastic items found amongst garbage. There is also a bee hive that produces organic honey.



Tena Kebena container garden

The main activities and services of Tena Kebena are many, and include:

- Peer to peer education on condom use and HIV/AIDS
- Sustainable agriculture (including tomatoes, lettuce, bee hives/organic honey)
- Seedlings to sell to locals and raise money
- How to recycle (and make goods from recycled products to sell)
- Education about indigenous knowledge (especially of plants for natural/traditional medicine)
- Bio-intensive gardening
- Environmental protection efforts (i.e., planting native trees to combat soil erosion)
- Natural resource management skills
- Computer skills

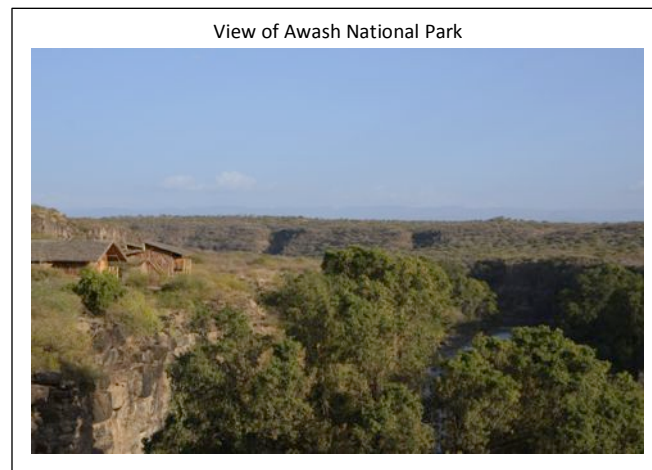
This small organization has successfully taken on many projects to educate and empower local youth who otherwise would have nowhere else to go and/or would get into trouble. Instead, they are building skills to help out not only themselves and their community, but the entire country. And they are doing so by integrating social, economic, and environmental issues, a much better approach than dealing with each as a stand-alone sector.

PHE Spotlight: Awash National Park and the Need for an Integrated Approach

Ethiopia is the cradle of humankind. It is also home to an array of animal species. Yet both people and nature are under threat, mainly due to environmental degradation, poaching, and human population growth.

A visit to Awash National Park, just a few hours drive east of Addis Ababa, sadly showcases many of the serious issues facing the country. Though it still has much wildlife diversity, there has been a dramatic decline in biodiversity, with some species, such as zebras, having died off due to human impacts.

Currently the biggest concern facing Awash National Park is one that a visitor can immediately see and smell. The Metahara Sugar Company, located in the nearby city of Metahara, is reportedly dumping chemicals and polluting the Awash River. If it continues, this will have serious consequences for local communities and the natural environment.



Dr. Yirmed Demeke, director of [Wildlife for Sustainable Development](#) and founder of the Awash Falls Lodge located in the park, said the sugar company is the main source of pollution and “is a headache for us.” He and others have written letters to various government ministers to resolve the problem, so far to no avail. He noted that the Awash River is used by millions of people and livestock.

Beyond the pollution issue, other impacts on the ecosystem include livestock grazing within the national park. One doesn’t have to look hard to see cattle, goats and even camels roaming the grounds, practically side-by-side with baboons and oryx.

Despite these pressing problems, there is reason to be hopeful for this particular park, and for local communities. It is a hot but very scenic area, with the falls gushing even in the dry season, and a beautiful gorge with easy access to views. Tourism – truly sustainable ecotourism that protects nature and benefits locals – has great potential. There are over 450 species of birds in the park. Dr. Demeke

says he is “committed to conservation” and that Awash National Park is a priority for him and his organization.

According to Dr. Demeke, local people mainly from the Afar community, who live by the national park, are being trained as guides and involved in other types of livelihoods (thus far 12 locals have been trained as tour guides). Women are also being trained in alternative forms of income such as handicrafts – making jewelry, knives, and weavings, as well as baskets made from indigenous trees.

Educational outreach efforts have also been undertaken to help people understand the benefits of the park (this is being done in conjunction with the Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Authority, a government entity). One such project is a zoological center to promote education on the region’s flora and fauna.

Wildlife for Sustainable Development is part of the [PHE Ethiopia Consortium](#), which works on the population-health-environment approach. It has obtained funding for increasing collaboration among stakeholders and beneficiaries in Awash National Park, building the capacity of park management and the leadership of partners, and for promoting best practices. The hope is to meet the needs of the community via integration of the population-health-environment sectors and thereby ensure sustainability of the national park.

One of the mandates of the Consortium “is to play a role in protected areas for bringing a sustained conservation and management through integration and harmonizing the ecosystem with the interest of the surrounding communities.” The PHE Ethiopia Consortium was a main organizer of a 2011 workshop on rescuing Awash National Park. And prior to this workshop, a working group of Ethiopian organizations was set up in 2010 to develop “lasting solutions” for the park.

The PHE Ethiopia Consortium believes that community ownership and participation must be core issues to be considered to bring about change in the park.

Negash Teklu, executive director of the Consortium, tirelessly spreads the message of the potential of the population-health-environment approach, stressing the need to combine natural resource management with family planning services. “Without it”, he has said, we “cannot solve the protected area problems.”

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The Institute for Population Studies is a non-governmental organization that works to address environmental and social problems by including population growth in the discussion. Read more at [howmany.org](#) and [6degreesofpopulation.org](#).

[Photo credits: Suzanne York]

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