

USAID's Building the Potential of Youth
Marking "16 days of Activism against Gender Violence": Improving Youth Access to
Employment and Livelihood Opportunities
Remarks by U.S. Deputy Chief of Mission to Ethiopia Peter Vrooman
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Dehaando hadrikum and good morning!

I am really excited to be here this morning to join you in marking the global "16 days of activism against gender-based violence campaign" and also to open this Youth Economic Strengthening hub made possible by USAID's Building the Potential of Youth activity.

I would like to thank our partners from Save the Children and the Relief Society of Tigray for inviting me to participate in today's event and to speak about these important development issues. This is my first trip to Tigray, so it is really an honor for me to be able to join you on this occasion.

Over the past two decades, Ethiopia has experienced impressive economic growth and made great strides in reducing poverty. Ethiopia is on track to become a middle-income country by 2025 and has set ambitious socioeconomic development targets for the coming years. This is very exciting.

I'm proud that the U.S. Government has partnered with the Government of Ethiopia over the last few decades to drive these positive developments. Through USAID and other U.S. Government agencies, as well as committed partners like our colleagues here with Save the Children and REST, we have helped address some of the issues which matter most to Ethiopian families. We are committed to continuing this partnership.

In countries around the world with large youth populations, including Ethiopia, which has the second largest youth population in Africa, there is optimism about the potential of youth as future drivers of economic growth. While it is true that youth can play this role, a youth bulge alone won't make economic growth happen. The potential of youth needs to be nurtured in order to be realized.

And what we've found globally is that female education and female empowerment is a critical part of that—as President Obama and Ethiopia's leaders have repeatedly highlighted.

Sustained economic growth will only occur if we are able to connect young people with meaningful jobs after they leave school. Otherwise, the youth bulge becomes a burden, rather than an opportunity.

As I look around at everyone here today, I see quite a few people like myself—slightly older and with a few different jobs under our belts. But, I think we can all remember back to when we were younger and trying to figure out just what we wanted to do with our lives. I'd like you all to take a few moments to think back to when you were 18 or 20 years old.

We were full of energy, ideas, and ambition, weren't we? We were excited about that first job—no matter how simple it was. We were excited about learning something new, like a new skill. We were excited to be recognized for the good work we did, and we were certainly excited about receiving that first paycheck! We were excited to contribute some money—through our own work—to our families and to our own futures.

There are millions of Ethiopians in that same position today—including quite a few of you in this room— young men and women just now embarking on adult life. It’s our responsibility to help them so they can contribute to further build this great country. If we don’t, we fail them and we fail Ethiopia.

Lack of access to training and services increases the economic vulnerability of these young people and also increases the likelihood that they will face discrimination, difficult choices, or even worse— violence. If we don’t engage with young people now, they are less likely to have the technical and life skills to access employment opportunities, build a strong family, empower their own children and resist various forms of violence. That is a fact.

Implemented by Save the Children and its partners, including REST, USAID’s Building the Potential of Youth activity will address the employment challenges young people face through various interventions such as:

- Providing access to the knowledge and skills training which they will need to enter local and regional job markets
- Offering career counseling services to allow young men and women to better understand the range of opportunities for self-employment
- Building institutional capacity and the ability of youth facilitators and woreda officers to address the specific impediments facing young men and women
- Supporting young women in nurturing their small business ideas into successful ventures
- Organizing motivational and information sessions lead by inspirational role models who can show youth that nothing is impossible, including men and women in nontraditional careers.
- Providing male and female mentors
- Involving parents/guardians and raising awareness of opportunities for women and work.

Through USAID activities, including the Building the Potential of Youth activity, we aim to promote gender-equitable attitudes and behaviors among employers, adolescents and their communities. It is important to respond to gender-based violence as soon as we hear about it, and equally important to prevent gender-based violence, including in the workplace, from the very beginning.

Gender-based violence is not a women's issue. It is a serious development challenge. And, when we talk about violence—we are not only talking about physical violence—it can also be verbal or psychological. In all of its forms, this violence has very serious negative impacts, both on the individual, on society, and on long-term economic growth.

Gender violence and discrimination can be as simple as not hiring someone or overlooking a promotion for an individual because of their sex. These practices are detrimental to society and to the vitality of small- and medium-sized businesses. Economic inequalities are one of the major causes of gender-based violence at all levels—individual, household, community and society. The inequalities are evident in use of household resources, employment, wages, and access to and control over productive resources.

I am happy to note that the Youth Economic Strengthening hub we are launching today will include addressing discrimination based on gender. The hubs will support individuals, groups and local organizations with the tools and resources they need to lead healthy, productive lives.

Though these hubs, I am confident that stronger partnerships will be forged among technical training institutions, the private sector, youth-focused programs and the wider community working together as a result of these hubs. That is exactly what they are intended to do.

In closing, let me quote President Obama from his speech at the United Nations in New York just two months ago. He said, “Let’s invest in our greatest resource—our people—their education, their skills. Let’s invest in innovative entrepreneurs, the striving young people who embrace new technology and are starting businesses and can ignite new industries that change the world.”

Together, we will build the potential of this future generation of youth who will in turn contribute to Ethiopia’s growth and transformation.

Yemesgen and thank you very much.