

Agar: Promoting Peace through a Youth Mentorship Website in Ethiopia

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Project Summary

Ethiopia has a population of over 100 million people of which close to 42% is under the age of 15. This makes it the second most populous country in Africa and among the youngest countries on the continent. In the past year, Ethiopia's political climate has drastically changed after the newly elected Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came to power. Mr. Abiy is committed to promoting democracy and tackling the problems that are the root cause of the violent protests that have occurred since 2015. These protests were led by youth across the country who desperately wanted political reform, greater respect for human rights, and good jobs. While the protests ended last April after the election of Prime Minister Abiy, the real work of addressing the grievances raised begins now. Youth unemployment was one of the chief causes of the protests. We would like to support our country's new journey of reform by doing our part to address this problem.

Our project will create a website called "Agar" that will make it easier for university students to find jobs by connecting them with professional mentors in their fields of interest. These university students will then themselves serve as mentors for high-school students, as they prepare for work or continued study after graduation. University mentors will gain valuable support from their professional mentors, while at the same time providing support to their high-school protégés.

The word "Agar" in Amharic means "supporter." We chose this name because our project aims to help Ethiopia's youth find meaningful work and thereby reduce the frustrations that lead to violence.

Project Rationale

The protests that took place in Ethiopia in recent years have showed us how social and political unrest can result from youth unemployment. And, as Ethiopians, we know the frustration that comes with the lack of resources that connect young people to mentors who can help them find jobs. Our experience living abroad has shown us the power of mentorship in reducing youth unemployment, and this has inspired us to build a mentorship website, the essential tool for giving young people the help they need. In designing our website, we want to take the very best features from existing websites and make it easy to use, especially for students from underprivileged communities.

The website's features will also include a business partner search, volunteer and internship opportunities, as well as workshop search. This will allow us to provide a wide range of support to both high-school students and their university-student mentors.

Partnerships

Our Agar website will match university-student mentors with professional mentors in various fields, and then match those mentors with high-school student protégés. The first phase of our project will be recruiting the first set of professional mentors, whom we will identify through a partnership with Ethiojobs.net. Ethiojobs.net is the first provider of online recruitment services in Ethiopia. Their website advertises jobs across a wide range of categories and employers. These employers include both public and private, and local and international organizations. We have contacted Mr. Yusuf Reja, CEO of Ethiojobs, and he has confirmed that he would like to partner with us. Specifically, he will provide recruitment services at a reduced fee in exchange for advertising at our Agar website.

We have also established a relationship with ICog Labs, a technology company based in Addis Ababa. ICog Labs currently runs a student-apprenticeship program that mentors undergraduate and graduate students interested in Artificial Intelligence (AI). We will partner with them in order to connect their apprentices with high-school and university students eager to find work in AI and computer technology. The connection will take place via our Agar website, and these apprentices will become an additional pool of mentors with a specific professional focus.

360 Ground, a web development company in Ethiopia, will design and build our Agar website. Though the first version of the website will be in English, we will add Amharic, Afaan Oromo, and Tigrigna after the first-year trial period. These languages are widely spoken in Ethiopia, and we want to be sure that a student's native language does not become a barrier to finding a mentor.

Project Execution

We will launch our website at Addis Ababa University. There we will select our first group of university students whom we will match both with professional mentors and with high-school students whom they will mentor. If our project is successful, we plan on establishing relationships with other Ethiopian universities to expand the mentorship program. We chose Addis Ababa because it is Ethiopia's capital and the location of some of the worst youth unemployment in the nation. In addition, it is our home city. We have contacted Professor Tassew Woldehanna, president of Addis Ababa University, and he has agreed to partner with us and launch our Agar website there.

We will travel to Ethiopia in May and select a representative at Addis Ababa University who will manage and promote our program to ensure we reach as many students as possible. President Woldehanna will help us identify which faculty member will be best suited for this position. The position will be part of this individual's professional responsibilities and will represent the university's investment in our project; our project will not be required to pay a salary but will provide a transportation stipend. We will be in touch with our program manager bi-weekly.

Through our professional connections, we will establish an advisory committee of five individuals in greater Addis. The committee's job will be to check in with the program manager and mentors at Addis Ababa University monthly in order to assess progress, provide support, and help solve problems. This will allow us to assess the progress of our program and learn how it can be improved.

We will also hold a two-day launch event for our website that will be open to the public and will include workshops on topics such as how to write a resume, how to network, and how to utilize resources like our website. We will also have a speaker series that will address the importance of youth employment for the future of the country. This will take place in Addis Ababa in early June. We will provide promotional materials such as posters, brochures, and T-shirts and will send invitations to major press organizations in the city to attend our event and promote our work.

University Students Mentoring High-School Students

Addis Ababa University mentors will support high-school students academically and will serve as positive role models. After an introduction to their roles and responsibilities, university mentors will be matched by the Agar website to their high-school protégés, and will travel to their high schools to meet them and prepare a mentorship plan. Thereafter mentors will meet with their protégés once a month. Similarly, university mentors will be matched by the Agar website with their own professional mentors, and will meet with them monthly. As they support their protégés, university mentors will emphasize the importance of doing well in school, planning for work after graduation, and learning the basic habits of becoming a valuable employee. In so doing, university mentors and their high-school protégés will also learn the importance of working with others and giving back to society, both of which are important for the promotion of peace and social cohesion.

Impact of Our Project and Future Goals

We believe our project will help alleviate the problem of youth unemployment in Ethiopia and create a culture of collaboration that will contribute to peaceful development. If our project is successful after a 12-month trial period, we envision expanding it to Adama University in Adama, and Hawassa University in Hawassa. We will have proven the effectiveness of our Agar website in creating mentorships, and will be eager to bring its benefits to as many more new students as possible. By funding this proposal, Projects for Peace will help reduce conflict in Ethiopia by increasing youth employment and promoting social unity. We are honored to have the opportunity to apply for a Projects for Peace grant to create a more peaceful and prosperous Ethiopia by enabling a better future for her youth.