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Youth Engagement and Leadership in Climate Action: A Humanistic Approach to Education for Climate Resilience

(The Case of Green Agro Solution, Ethiopia)

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1. Introduction

Climate change is not merely an environmental issue; it is a profound challenge that intertwines with social, economic, and political factors across the globe. In Ethiopia, where agriculture remains the bedrock of the economy, the effects of climate change are increasingly severe. Farmers face erratic weather patterns, prolonged droughts, and rising temperatures that significantly threaten food security and rural livelihoods.

Climate action must focus on empowering youth, who represent a considerable demographic within Ethiopia. Engaging young people in sustainable practices can stimulate intergenerational change, fostering a collective movement toward climate resilience. This article explores the strategies employed by Green Agro Solution and highlights the intersection of youth leadership with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, focusing on Goals 4 and 13. Goal 4 advocates for Quality Education, while Goal 13 champions Climate Action.

2. Climate Change in Ethiopia

2.1 Context of Vulnerability

Ethiopia is classified as one of the most climate-vulnerable countries in the world, with a heavy reliance on rain-fed agriculture. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Sixth Assessment Report (2021), the country is experiencing increasing variability in rainfall and rising temperatures, leading to adverse impacts on agricultural productivity. The 2011 Ethiopian Climate Resilient Green Economy Strategy emphasizes the urgent need for transformative changes in practices and policies to mitigate these impacts.

In 2021, the Ethiopian National Adaptation Programme identified key priorities, including improved water management, agro-ecological practices, and community-based approaches to adapt to climate variability. However, these efforts depend significantly on engaging youth who are both the most affected demographic and critical stakeholders in the fight against climate change.

2.2 The Case for Youth Engagement in Climate Action

Youth engagement is crucial in addressing climate challenges for several reasons:

Demographic Impact: Nearly 70% of Ethiopia's population is under the age of 30, positioning youth as influencing actors in advocating for sustainable practices.

Adaptability to Innovation: Young people are often more adept at adopting new technologies and methodologies, facilitating the transition to sustainable practices.

Intergenerational Knowledge Transfer: By fostering intergenerational dialogue, youth can bridge gaps between traditional knowledge and modern agricultural innovations.

Peer Mobilization: Youth have a unique ability to galvanize their peers, amplifying messages of sustainability and resilience within their communities.

Engaging youth actively can lead to the creation of a shared vision for climate resilience, thereby strengthening community bonds and fostering collective agency.

3. The Role of Education in Climate Action

3.1 UN Sustainable Development Goals Overview

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) outline a global agenda to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all by 2030. Two critical goals within this framework directly pertain to the themes of this article:

- **Goal 4: Quality Education:** Ensures inclusive and equitable quality education and promotes lifelong learning opportunities for all.
- **Goal 13: Climate Action:** Urges urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.

Both goals are interconnected—the absence of quality education stymies progress in climate action, while effective climate education enhances resilience and empowers communities to adapt to changing conditions.

3.2 Empirical Data on SDG Goals

According to UNESCO, as of 2020, approximately 258 million children and youth are out of school globally, with millions more attending poor-quality schools. In Ethiopia, where educational reforms are underway, challenges remain, particularly with access to quality education in rural areas. The UN reports indicate that:

- **Enrollment Rates:** The primary school net enrollment rate was around 82% in 2019, yet disparities exist based on rural-urban divides and gender.
- **Quality of Education:** A significant portion of the youth population lacks essential skills, with UNDP suggesting that more than 70% of graduates are unable to find jobs due to inadequate preparation.

In terms of climate action:

- **Community Resilience:** Studies reveal that educating communities about climate-smart agricultural practices can increase resilience, with successful case studies demonstrating gains in productivity and environmental sustainability.
- **Youth-Driven Initiatives:** Programs that involve youth in decision-making processes regarding climate strategies are shown to enhance both engagement and outcomes.

3.3 Linking Education to Climate Action

Integrating climate education into school curricula is paramount for fostering an informed youth that can advocate for climate resilience. Education must not solely focus on scientific understanding, but also encompass ethical dimensions, critical thinking, and local knowledge. By bridging traditional practices with modern techniques, educators can cultivate a new generation of farmers prepared to face future challenges.

4. Green Agro Solution (GAS): A Model for Empowering Youth

4.1 Overview of Green Agro Solution

Green Agro Solution (GAS) is an Ethiopian organization established in 2014, dedicated to empowering smallholder farmers through a comprehensive digital platform. Focused on leveraging opportunities within the agricultural sector, GAS aims to enhance productivity and resilience among youth farmers by providing tailored advisory services and resources related to climate-smart agriculture. Central to its operations is the Lersha platform, which integrates various data services into a single application, addressing challenges faced by farmers. This one-stop digital solution enables smallholder farmers to invest wisely, manage risks, and respond effectively to agricultural shocks, all under the motto “Making Agriculture Easy for Everyone.”

By employing diverse models, GAS benefits multiple stakeholders across the agricultural value chain. The organization targets farmers, youth agents, and service providers, working to improve the interconnectedness of agricultural systems. Through partnerships with farmer-based organizations and Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), GAS seeks to capitalize on local, national, regional, and global market opportunities. MSMEs play a vital role in job creation and economic growth, especially for women, youth, and vulnerable populations.

Active in six Ethiopian regions—Amhara, Oromia, Central Ethiopia, Sidama, Tigray, and the Somali region—GAS collaborates with over 64 agro-dealers, 174 mechanization service providers, and more than 1,100 smallholder farmers. Additionally, it has enlisted over 1,470 digitally enabled youth, known as Lersha agents, to support farmers across both highland and lowland areas.

With a team of more than 127 full-time staff members, including 45% women and 90% under 30, GAS emphasizes gender diversity and youth engagement. Recent assessments underscore its commitment to building a gender-transformative approach in agritech, aiming to create flexible training and employment opportunities, particularly for young women.

The Lersha platform operates within a contextualized framework, providing value to smallholder farmers while contributing to broader resilience-building efforts. Key activities include deploying digital tools, offering agro-climatic advisory services, facilitating mechanization, and bundling agricultural services with financial support. By enhancing market efficiency and productivity through data-driven insights, GAS has positively impacted over 220,000 farmers. The organization continues to expand its digital solutions, including five platforms designed to improve agricultural service provision, market linkage, and access to finance, ultimately transforming Ethiopia's agricultural landscape.

4.2 Features of the Lersha Platform

Lersha includes several innovative features aimed at maximizing youth engagement and promoting sustainable agricultural practices:

- **Mobile Application:** The user-friendly interface provides critical agricultural information, including weather forecasts, pest management advice, and farming techniques.
- **Localized Content Delivery:** Information is disseminated in local languages, making it more accessible to younger farmers who might be illiterate.
- **Community Networks:** Local agents facilitate trust and credibility, enhancing the dissemination of knowledge and resources.

4.3 Competencies of GAS on Youth engagement and Leadership in creating Climate resilient agriculture

Our robust experience in deploying digital solutions, strengthening community-led initiatives, and building resilient agricultural systems makes us an ideal partner to contribute to Ethiopia's agricultural transformation. These strengths collectively position us as a reliable and capable partner for ATI's transformative agricultural initiatives. Below are the key technical qualifications, competencies, and relevant experiences of GAS:

1. Youth Network: Creating Opportunities and Empowering Communities

The Lersha Youth Network is integral to Lersha's mission, aiming to foster economic growth and social transformation in rural communities. By creating sustainable employment opportunities, Lersha empowers its agents to improve their livelihoods while contributing to community development. The network focuses on recruiting motivated, agriculture-educated youth passionate about advancing the agricultural sector and supporting local farmers. Acting as vital intermediaries, these agents help bridge the gap between technology and farmers, many of whom are unfamiliar with digital tools.

Lersha's recruitment process targets unemployed youth from rural areas, collaborating with regional job creation offices and the Ministry of Agriculture. Selected candidates undergo comprehensive training in areas such as climate change strategies, the use of the Lersha digital platform, agronomy, livestock management, and business development services. This training equips agents not only to facilitate digital transactions but also to assist farmers in optimizing practices.

The expansion of the Lersha Youth Network has generated significant job opportunities for rural youth, with agents earning commissions for their services, thereby fostering a culture of entrepreneurship. To promote digital financial services, Lersha offers training that enhances financial literacy, particularly focusing on mobile wallets and microcredits.

Recognizing the gender gap in representation, Lersha implements initiatives to encourage female participation. Women call center agents lead workshops to empower more women to join the network. By bridging the digital divide and supporting sustainable agricultural practices, the Lersha Youth Network enhances the economic and social fabric of rural communities, contributing to a more equitable future for all.

2. Creating Jobs for Youth through Financial Literacy and Digital Empowerment Initiatives

Green Agro Solution (GAS) has provided financial literacy training to over 1,400 smallholder farmers and 200 Lersha agents across 44 Woredas in Oromia and Southern Ethiopia. This program empowers participants, especially youth, with essential knowledge on accessing financial services such as loans and micro-insurance, crucial for building sustainable livelihoods. By dispelling misconceptions about Tax Identification Numbers (TINs) and tax responsibilities, GAS encourages confidence in financial systems, fostering greater trust among participants.

These training efforts significantly benefit youth Lersha agents, who gain the skills to become micro-entrepreneurs, thus playing vital roles in their communities' economic development. GAS creates pathways for youth to secure meaningful employment within the agricultural value chain.

In addition to training, GAS promotes awareness and adoption of digital agricultural solutions through youth and women agents. Equipped with digital tools and resources, these agents can better serve farmers and enhance their own professional opportunities.

To maximize impact, GAS utilizes engaging social media, strategic outreach campaigns, and insights from its call center, providing tailored support to youth agents and fostering sustainable growth. Gender-inclusive initiatives also promote the active participation of young women, ensuring equitable job creation within the community.

3. Empowering Youth and Driving Job Creation through Market Output Aggregation and Financial Innovation

Green Agro Solution (GAS) is leveraging market output aggregation as a pathway to create jobs for youth and improve access to finance for rural communities, including young and women farmers. By strengthening farmer organizations, anchor firms, and third-party warehouse service providers, GAS has established aggregation centers linked to a warehouse receipt system and Digital Market Linkage Platform (DMLP). This initiative promotes financial inclusion and job creation by connecting smallholder farmers to markets while offering collateral-based financial access.

In addition, GAS is piloting innovative financial solutions in the Sidama and Oromia regions in partnership with Sinquee Bank, Hibret Bank and Dashen Bank. A digital credit scoring model tailored to smallholder farming needs, including inputs, labor, and climate resilience, is a cornerstone of this initiative. The model emphasizes financial responsibility and loan repayment while creating job opportunities for young people as agents supporting the system. Through this program, GAS facilitated \$300,000 in loans for 600 farmers and plans to scale up to reach over 2,000 farmers in the pilot phase. Youth are key beneficiaries of this initiative, as the program develops pathways for financial literacy, employment, and active participation in agricultural innovation.

5. Facilitating Youth Empowerment through Agriculture from GAS perspective

5.1 Climate-Smart Agriculture

Lersha promotes climate-smart agricultural practices designed to optimize productivity while minimizing environmental impact. Core strategies include:

- **Resource Management:** Encouraging efficient use of water and soil resources to support high-yield farming while conserving natural ecosystems.
- **Crop Diversification:** Promoting the cultivation of varied crop species to enhance resilience against climate-related risks.

5.2 Educational Initiatives

Lersha organizes hands-on training sessions focused on sustainable practices. These sessions cover crucial topics, including soil health management, pest control, and efficient irrigation practices.

Recognizing the importance of technology, Lersha invests in digital literacy training. Young farmers learn to use the application effectively, access agricultural data, and communicate with peers and experts.

5.3 Access to Resources

Lersha facilitates access to essential resources, spanning from financial services to agricultural inputs:

- **Microloans:** Partnerships with local financial institutions provide youth with necessary funding to invest in sustainable agricultural practices.
- **Inputs Distribution:** Collaborations with local suppliers ensure that youth have access to quality seeds and fertilizers, crucial for enhancing productivity.

6. Youth Leadership in Climate Action

6.1 Building Leadership Skills

Lersha emphasizes the need for developing leadership qualities among youth, providing foundational training that incorporates:

- **Communication Skills:** Training in effective messaging enhances the ability of youths to advocate for sustainable practices. This includes public speaking, persuasive writing, and digital communication, equipping them to convey their ideas clearly and confidently.
- **Conflict Resolution:** Teaching negotiation techniques enables young leaders to manage disputes and facilitate collaboration within their communities. They learn to approach conflicts with empathy, identify underlying issues, and foster a culture of mutual respect.
- **Teamwork and Collaboration:** By engaging in group projects and collaborative exercises, youths develop the skills to work effectively in diverse teams. They learn the importance of listening to different perspectives and leveraging the strengths of each group member.
- **Critical Thinking and Problem Solving:** Training programs encourage youth to analyze complex problems, consider various solutions, and implement effective strategies. This skill set fosters innovation and resilience in facing challenges.
- **Goal Setting and Planning:** Teaching young leaders how to set realistic goals and develop actionable plans helps them navigate their projects effectively. This includes learning how to break down larger objectives into manageable tasks and track their progress.

- **Mentorship and Networking:** Providing opportunities for mentorship allows youths to connect with experienced leaders who can guide them. Networking skills foster relationships that can open doors to future opportunities and collaborations.

6.2 Mobilizing Peer Networks

Empowered youth serve as catalysts for change, mobilizing their peers and communities to adopt climate-smart practices. Initiatives such as youth-led forums encourage dialogues among young farmers, fostering shared responsibility and collaboration.

7. A Humanistic Approach to Climate Education

7.1 Ethical Considerations

Through its programming, Lersha embodies a humanistic approach that prioritizes values of inclusivity, equity, and ethics:

- **Social Justice:** Recognizing the disproportionate impacts of climate change on marginalized communities is crucial for designing equitable solutions.
- **Empowerment of Women and Minorities:** Lersha ensures that programs are inclusive, giving voice to young women, PWD, IDPs, and minorities who may traditionally be marginalized in agricultural sectors.

7.2 Promoting Empathy and Global Citizenship

A humanistic approach nurtures empathy among youths, encouraging them to understand their role in the global context of climate action. This perspective fosters a commitment to local and global sustainability efforts.

7.3 Cultivating Lifelong Learning

Lersha encourages a culture of ongoing education, promoting the idea that adaptation to climate change is an evolving process. Through workshops and training programs, youths are encouraged to remain engaged and proactive.

8. Challenges and Opportunities

Despite the achievements facilitated by Lersha, certain challenges still impede progress, requiring comprehensive strategies:

8.1 Main Challenges

8.1.1 Infrastructure Limitations

Rural communities often experience infrastructural deficits that inhibit access to quality education and technology. Limited internet connectivity restricts the use of digital tools essential for effective climate action.

8.1.2 Market Instability

Young farmers frequently confront unpredictable market conditions that can deter commitment to climate-smart practices. Fluctuating prices for agricultural produce can lead to uncertainty, discouraging further investment.

8.2 Opportunities for Growth

8.2.1 Policy Advocacy

Lersha has opportunities to collaborate with local and regional policymakers to advocate for funding and support for youth-led climate initiatives, aligning with national goals for climate resilience.

8.2.2 Leveraging Technology

Emerging technologies, such as data analytics, robotics, and blockchain, can enhance Lersha's ability to support farmers in accessing markets and predicting weather patterns effectively.

8.2.3 Collaboration with Educational Institutions

Partnering with universities and training institutes can enhance Lersha's capacity to provide skill development programs, further bridging the gap between education and practical application in agriculture.

9. Conclusion and Recommendation

9.1 Conclusion

Youth engagement and leadership are vital components of building climate resilience in Ethiopia. Green Agro Solution provides a paramount case study of how digital platforms can empower youth through education and resource access, promoting climate-smart agricultural practices. The integration of local knowledge, ethical considerations, and collaborative approaches highlights how effective climate education can lead to sustainable development in alignment with the SDGs.

As Ethiopia navigates the challenges posed by climate variability, investing in youth leadership becomes imperative. By strategically fostering the capabilities of the next generation, the nation can pave the way for a sustainable future, balancing economic, environmental, and societal needs.

9.2 Recommendations

To enhance the potential impact of youth engagement in climate action, the following recommendations are proposed:

- **Integrate Climate Change Education in Curricula:** Educational systems should incorporate climate literacy as a fundamental subject, aligned with the broader SDG framework.
- **Develop Community-Based Agricultural Projects:** Encourage practical, project-based approaches that connect youth directly with local agricultural practices.
- **Establish Intergenerational Mentorship Programs:** Encouraging partnerships between youth and experienced farmers can facilitate knowledge sharing and strengthen community bonds.
- **Strengthen Partnerships for Resource Mobilization:** Collaborating with local leaders, NGOs, and educational institutions can enhance the effective allocation of resources for climate initiatives.
- **Promote Gender Equality in Programming:** Ensure youth engagement strategies specifically address the barriers faced by young women and marginalized groups in agriculture.
- **Invest in Research and Innovation:** Stakeholders should prioritize research initiatives aimed at uncovering innovative practices that merge traditional knowledge with modern agriculture.
- **Implement Monitoring Frameworks:** Establishing processes to assess the effectiveness of youth engagement programs will facilitate continual learning and adaptation.

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