

interview with  
Adanech Abiebie

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*Mayor of Addis Ababa*



**“My hope is for Addis to be the best city in Africa to raise a child and to be a mother”**

**In March 2021 the city of Addis Ababa in Ethiopia launched a new early years initiative – Children: The Future Hope of Addis Ababa ECD programme. By 2026, the mayor of Addis Ababa aims to achieve city-wide coverage for services in parent coaching, childcare and pre-primary education, and to expand 1,000 daycares and build 12,000 playgrounds. Additionally, the city is setting up a Centre of Excellence, Innovation and Learning, which will provide technical support to the city administration and host study tours and seminars for leaders in other parts of Ethiopia and Africa interested in investing in early childhood development at scale.**

**The city's bold plan has already generated interest from several regional governments in Ethiopia and from international foundations who have pledged support including Big Win Philanthropies, the Van Leer Foundation, ELMA Philanthropies and the Hilton Foundation. Mayor Adanech Abiebie sat down with Van Leer Foundation CEO Michael Feigelson to share why she put early childhood and family wellbeing at the top of her agenda, and the prosperous future she envisions for the residents of Addis Ababa.**

#### **How did your leadership journey start? What made you want to be the mayor of Addis?**

My interest in leadership began as a young girl. I grew up in a village and from an early age I wanted to create a better life for women and families in my community. As a student I volunteered to provide social services and took up leadership opportunities like being a class monitor or head of a club. Many of the girls I studied with were bright, but were not able to finish their education and go to college. There was a lot of social pressure to get married young.

I then trained as a teacher but did a lot of work outside the school classroom, from providing community literacy programmes to volunteering for the electoral committee during elections. This is when I decided to run for district council, where I began to engage in leadership-prompted community services. I wanted to bring about change on issues that had a direct impact on women, but as a district councillor my jurisdiction was limited. My conviction

was strengthened after I studied law. I then had to choose between becoming a lawyer or going back into public service. I chose the latter, continuing my journey pursuing women's rights – this path led to becoming the Mayor of Addis.

**“I think that investing in early childhood is the best way to achieve long-term transformation and to make the people of Addis prosperous.”**

#### **You've made early childhood development your signature agenda. Why did you make this choice?**

As a mayor, there are many competing priorities that need to be addressed every day. Looking at all of these, I put investing in early childhood development at the top of my administration's agenda. I think that investing in early childhood is the best way to achieve long-term transformation and to make the people of Addis prosperous. I believe that it is a strategic node to break the vicious circle of poverty. I want to make sure no child is left behind.

This vision aligns with the national government's philosophy about investing in people. For me, there is no better example of a people-centred decision than investing in children.

#### **We know that for children to do well, it's important that their parents are also doing well. How do you see this programme supporting the health and wellbeing of mothers?**

The wellbeing of families and mothers is key for ensuring good outcomes in children. This is why every development effort in my administration is centred on families.

As part of the Future Hope of Addis early childhood development programme, we've hired 2,200 parent coaches and plan to hire another 2,800. This workforce will allow us to reach households

across the city and part of their responsibility is to ensure the wellbeing of mothers.

We also strengthened social protection schemes for women, and developed nutrition-smart agriculture programmes to ensure healthy food is on the table, particularly for families below the poverty line. We also have several initiatives to create jobs for women in vulnerable circumstances, such as a new injera factory in Addis which employs 4,000 people.

My hope for the future is for Addis to be the best city in Africa to raise a child and to be a mother.

**After visiting the programmes this week, I had the impression that the Future Hope of Addis itself is going to contribute to economic development in the city, not just in the long term but in the present. Is this part of the strategy and rationale for the programme as well?**

We see early childhood programmes as having multiple benefits. The expansion of childcare will create jobs and support mothers' participation in the workforce. Through the parent coaching programme, we are hiring 5,000 women to do home visits. The 12,000 playgrounds will be built by micro-enterprises that will be trained to build with natural, sustainable materials, so that is also a way of investing in small businesses in the city. It is all interlinked.

**You also have said that you want these ideas to extend to other parts of Ethiopia and other countries in Africa. How do you see the ideas you are demonstrating in Addis travelling to other places?**

We need to grow together as a continent. The journey starts with being humble and learning from others. As we scale up, we hope to learn not only from our experiences but also the experiences of our African brothers and sisters. We hope that the Center of Excellence, Innovation and Learning will

enable this kind of exchange. Recently we signed an agreement with colleagues in Kenya to help with the design of our childcare curriculum and conducted our first study tour for leaders from other regions of Ethiopia. In the future, we hope to host leaders from many other parts of the continent so we can learn together.

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**Do you have any advice for other mayors thinking about their policy agenda?**

Don't count the years you stay in office, but the legacy you will leave behind. If you invest in children and families, they will carry your legacy long after your term is over. I also advise mayors, as leaders, to provide opportunities for others to engage and flourish.

My success is not just mine. Many have joined hands and hearts. I am grateful to my party and my prime minister Dr Abiy Ahmed for entrusting me with this programme and for providing the opportunities for me to serve my nation.

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