

Background to the Conflict: Ethiopia

Instructions: Your group will represent one of a number of stakeholders in the water conflict in southern Ethiopia. Stakeholders are groups or individuals who have an interest in an event or situation. There are many stakeholders in southern Ethiopia with different perspectives about the water crisis and conflict. This activity will help you consider water scarcity in southern Ethiopia from the perspectives of the different stakeholders.

Read the background information below and then the description of your assigned group. Use this information to answer the questions on your worksheet. Be prepared to share your group's findings with your classmates.

Background Information: Historically, groups in this region have competed for scarce resources such as water and land. Conflict over these resources is not a new development. But the current economic and political situation in Ethiopia has fueled the conflict over water.

- Ethiopia is one of the world's poorest countries. In 2007 the UN's Human Development Index (which measures things like life expectancy, literacy, and economic growth) ranked Ethiopia 169 out of 177 countries. With the second largest population in sub-Saharan Africa, Ethiopia has an economy that is approximately one-fifth the size of the average in sub-Saharan Africa. Although the current government has put resources towards poverty alleviation, the country has only seen gradual improvement in living conditions in the last two decades.
- Part of the reason that water scarcity has such a strong impact is that agriculture, which depends on water, is the largest sector of the Ethiopian economy. Approximately 80 percent of the labor force is involved in agriculture. Nevertheless, drought, flooding, population pressure, decreased soil fertility, and reduced land productivity leave the majority of households without access to enough food. Over 52 percent of the population lives with hunger and fear of starvation.
- Political change has heightened tensions between groups. Since the end of the military dictatorship in the early 1990s, Ethiopia has struggled to become a more democratic society. Many groups within Ethiopia remain under-represented in the national government. The government has changed Ethiopia's system of government and redrawn Ethiopia's the boundaries of its states along ethnic lines. Some of the changes have caused tensions between new local government representatives and traditional leaders. Civil unrest and the government's lack of respect for human rights continue to be issues.
- The water crisis is further complicated by development issues. Ethiopia is not a water scarce country. According to the World Bank and the United Nations, the country has a substantial amount of water resources, including twelve major river basins. Nevertheless, Ethiopia depends largely on unreliable rainfall for the bulk of its water needs. There are two major reasons for this. One is that much of the country's surface water supply is located on its borders. This means that Ethiopia must negotiate with its neighbors over water rights and usage. The other problem is that the country's water collection, management, sanitation, and irrigation systems are poorly developed. Although there is water, there are not enough good systems in place to manage it.