

The 5th Annual Reading Summit April 2-3, 2025



**“Cultivating a Nation of Readers: Inspiring Parental Involvement
and Cultural Story Telling For Early Childhood Literacy”**

**April 2-3, 2025
Sapphire Addis Hotel
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia**

Introduction

The 5th Annual Reading Summit, organized by Ethiopia Reads, was held on April 2–3, 2025, at the Sapphire Hotel in Addis Ababa under the theme of "**Cultivating a Nation of Readers: Inspiring Parental Involvement and Cultural Storytelling for Early Childhood Literacy.**" The event brought together over 100 participants, including educators, government officials, authors, NGOs, and literacy advocates with the primary aim of promoting collaboration among stakeholders dedicated to advancing early childhood literacy in Ethiopia.

The summit emphasized the critical role of reading in children's cognitive and emotional development, particularly in emergency and underserved contexts. It served as a platform for sharing innovative practices, research findings, and personal experiences that highlight the importance of fostering early literacy, especially during times of crisis. Participants engaged in interactive discussions that addressed the multifaceted challenges of children's literacy, advocating for a collective and inclusive approach to nurturing a culture of reading.

Key discussions underscored that promoting a love of reading goes beyond access to materials; it requires supportive environments where children can explore, imagine, and grow. The strong commitment of attendees laid the foundation for future collaborations aimed at improving literacy outcomes nationwide. The summit's outcomes are expected to influence educational policies and practices, contributing to sustained efforts to enhance early reading experiences particularly for children facing adversity.

The event opened with motivating remarks from prominent figures in the field, setting a purposeful tone for the sessions that followed. The summit was structured in five key segments which include presentation, experience sharing, panel discussion, and recognition and book exhibition.



A warm welcome to the participants of the 5th Annual Children's Reading Summit was



made by **Ms. Yemisrach Worku**, Country Director of *Ethiopia Reads* and introduced the agenda for the two-day event. She highlighted that the primary aim of the summit was to offer a platform for stakeholders to connect, thereby reducing redundant efforts in parental involvement and cultural storytelling initiatives for early childhood literacy across Ethiopia, while also fostering networking opportunities among participants. She stressed the

significance of utilizing this opportunity to learn from one another's experiences and expertise, emphasizing that collaboration and the exchange of knowledge are critical for advancing the field. She further underscored the summit's objective of fostering a robust reading culture throughout Ethiopia, with the goal of inspiring collective action and commitment among all stakeholders.

Following that, **Mr. Abraham Mengistu**, representative for Executive for Strategic Affairs, Ministry of Education, delivered an opening speech. He highlighted the crucial importance of addressing children's issues in order to enhance their learning and reading abilities. He commended organizations such as Ethiopia Reads for their efforts in the area of pre-primary education. Mr. Abraham emphasized the government's duty to ensure access to education at all levels, noting that the government has recently pledged to provide free pre-primary education as part of its commitment to addressing the low levels of learning and reading proficiency observed within the education system.



A Keynote speech was made by **Mr. Yikunnoamlak Mezegbo**, Director of National Archives and Libraries Services. He emphasized the vital role of storytelling in imparting wisdom, using a folktale about an ape's cleverness to demonstrate how stories convey essential social, economic, and natural laws to children. He explained that these narratives, passed down through generations, not only offer moral lessons but also showcase literary complexity, with well-developed characters and engaging storylines.



Mr. Yikunnoamlak pointed out that while ancient cultures, including Ethiopia's, have long valued storytelling; modern education systems often treat it as a novel concept, neglecting its historical significance. He argued that contemporary education has distanced itself from traditional community knowledge, calling for a reevaluation of educational approaches. He also acknowledged the role of digital technologies in revitalizing storytelling traditions and stressed that teaching reading should build upon existing knowledge, rather than being viewed as a foreign skill. He expressed concern over the literacy challenges faced by many university students, attributing this to the misconception of reading as an alien skill. He advocated for promoting reading as an established practice to improve literacy and contribute to personal and societal development. In conclusion, Mr. Yikunnoamlak thanked ER for addressing these critical issues in literacy and education.

Following this a vibrant musical performance was presented by the kids from Fiker Ethiopian National Association for Intellectual Disabilities which the audience had enjoyed do much. After that a little minute speech was made about the vision mission goal and value of the organization by the member of the association.

After the performance, Ethiopia Reads program profile, updates and major Activities of Ethiopia Reads in 2024 was presented by **Mrs. Sintayehu Dugassa**, *Government Relation Coordinator*. Mrs. Sintayehu provided an overview of the key activities of Ethiopia Reads. She emphasized the organization's primary focus on supporting children in conflict-affected regions, particularly through the Education in Emergency project, which is being implemented in collaboration with the World Bank. The Storybook Support for Conflict-Affected Schools initiative aims to provide appropriate bilingual children's picture books and supplementary materials to support the educational needs of children in conflict-affected regions.



The project involved the printing of 135,120 storybooks in five languages, which will be distributed across 1,126 schools in 35 Woredas within the Amhara, Oromia, Afar, and Benishangul Gumuz Regional States. This effort seeks to bring hope to children affected by conflict and alleviate traumatic memories by offering engaging and positive

educational resources. Additionally, the initiative aims to support children in learning to read and preparing for school. To enhance the quality of education, educators will receive Training of Trainers (TOT) to improve their instructional capabilities. The project is a collaborative effort with key partners, including the World Bank, the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE), Ministry of Finance (MOF), the Ministry of Education (MOE), Open Hearts Big Dreams, and various Regional Education Bureaus (REB), Zone Education Bureaus (ZEB), and Woreda Education Bureaus (WEB). The books, which are available in both fiction and non-fiction formats, will cater to a range of skill levels from pre-readers to emergent readers, and they will be bilingual, written in five local languages, with a focus on mother tongue education.

Afterwards **Dr. Eiffa Gurmu**, CEO of Educational Assessment and Research at the



Educational Assessment and Examinations Service presented a comprehensive analysis of the current state of early childhood education, highlighting both progress and persistent challenges. The study examined children's performance in key developmental areas pre-literacy, pre-numeracy, executive function, and fine motor skills and revealed significant disparities. While children performed well in expressive language, with an average score of 94.8%, their abilities in name writing, initial sound discrimination, and letter identification were notably weaker.

Numeracy outcomes were comparatively stronger, with a mean score of 64%, indicating that teaching practices in numeracy may currently be more effective than those in literacy. Gender and location analyses showed that boys generally outperformed girls, except in fine motor skills, where girls held a slight advantage, and urban children performed better than their rural peers in most areas. Language also played a role, with Amharic-speaking children outperforming those who spoke other local languages. In socio-emotional development, around 23% of children struggled with emotional regulation and empathy, suggesting a need for more focused support in this area.

The study also shed light on critical limitations within the learning environment. Teachers reported feeling overwhelmed due to overcrowded classrooms, inadequate teaching materials, and a lack of professional development opportunities. Only a small fraction 7.4% used multiple effective literacy strategies, while a majority relied on repetitive instructional methods, underscoring the need for more dynamic and

engaging pedagogy. The physical conditions of pre-primary schools were also deeply concerning, with more than half lacking organized learning spaces, essential resources, and age-appropriate materials. The absence of diverse reading materials limited children's exposure to literacy and creativity. Additionally, poor infrastructure in water, sanitation, and hygiene, as well as insufficient school feeding programs, posed serious risks to children's health and their capacity to learn. These findings highlight the urgent need for systemic improvements in both educational quality and infrastructure to support holistic early childhood development.

During the tea break and other intervals throughout the summit, attendees had the opportunity to visit the book fair organized by Ethiopia Reads. The event featured a range of invited authors, including the experienced children's book author and renowned children's TV show producer, Asres Bekelo. In addition, writers and publishers like Open Hearts Big Dreams showcased their works at the exhibition set up there, contributing to the dynamic and engaging atmosphere focused on promoting literacy and children's literature.

A presentation continued by **Dr. Laurie Curtis**, Early Literacy/ Dyslexia Program Manager, Kansas State Department of Education, about oral language and storytelling as the foundation of learning. During her presentation, several important points were raised and discussed in detail. These included theoretical models for reading, as well as the multiple factors associated with difficulties in literacy learning. The presentation also addressed key topics such as dyslexia and developmental language disorder, highlighting their impact on literacy development.

Emphasis was placed on the importance of early intervention in addressing these challenges. Additionally, the contribution of storytelling to literacy development was explored. Overall, the presentation covered a broad range of ideas and provided valuable insights into the complexities of literacy acquisition and support strategies.

Following an experience sharing was done by **Mr. Amanuel shimeles**, Project Manager at iCog launching of Digital Story Books App: Mr. Amanuel presented iCog's commitment to democratizing technology by making it accessible to all, particularly through empowering youth. He outlined a collaborative project with



Ethiopia Reads aimed at enhancing children's literacy through the development of five interactive, animated storybooks translated into four Ethiopian languages Amharic, Afaan Oromo, Somali, and Tigrigna. These storybooks are designed to promote reading engagement, foster a love for stories, and expand access to quality reading materials. The project incorporates interactive games and voice-over audio to create a dynamic and immersive learning experience. A key component involved the development of a Terms of Reference (TOR) for hiring a story development agency to ensure the creation of high-quality, open-source children's content. Looking ahead, the project plans to integrate AI technology through the Curiosity Reader platform, which will offer a personalized and interactive learning environment for children. Each presentation during the summit was followed by participant discussions, fostering further engagement and knowledge sharing.

After a lunch break another experience was shared by **Mr. Altaye Ayele** about **National Reading Network**.

During the summit, Mr. Altaye Ayele provided an overview of the Ethiopia National Reading Network, which was established in September 2024 with twelve founding organizations, including the Ministry of Education, Abrehot Library, Spotlight PLC, and World Vision. The network's primary objectives include supporting the development of a national early grade reading policy framework, identifying challenges and opportunities related to reading, and promoting a strong reading culture. Additionally, the network seeks to enhance coordination among member organizations to avoid duplication of efforts and to support the Ministry of Education in creating a dedicated reading section within its structure. It also aims to encourage the inclusion of reading courses in teacher education programs and to mobilize resources for the effective implementation of reading initiatives.



The organizational structure of the network was also outlined. It is led by the Network Members' General Meeting, followed by a management committee chaired by the Ministry of Education. A technical team, headed by Dr. Berhanu Bogale from Spotlight PLC, oversees the network's activities. The network's annual activity plans include organizing national meetings and workshops, assessing the current state of early grade reading in Ethiopia, collecting international experiences on reading skill development, facilitating experience-sharing visits among member organizations, and leading discussions on both international practices and local reading skill challenges.

These activities are geared toward supporting the formulation and implementation of a comprehensive national reading policy.

In the final presentation of day one, **Mr. Amha** highlighted the significant impact of crises on education, emphasizing the disruption of learning processes, loss of foundational skill development, and long-term cognitive and social consequences due to limited access to education and nutrition. He underscored the psychosocial toll on affected children and the necessity of structured, supportive learning environments. Stressing the importance of continuity in learning, he noted that participation in Early Childhood Education (ECE) reduces school dropout rates.



Mr. Amha shared that 102 member organizations and 47 implementing partners, supported by 41 donors, are involved in the 2024 humanitarian education response, which has reached 1.35 million children—48% girls, 25,000 with disabilities, and 9% internally displaced—mirroring 2023's outreach. This represents 13% of the 10.58 million people in need and 45% of the 2024 target population. Approximately USD 43 million has been allocated for these efforts, with the top three interventions being the distribution of teaching and learning materials (712,000 children), school feeding (381,000), and capacity building for education personnel in emergency contexts (99,000).

In the final session of day one, the third experience-sharing presentation focused on the Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) for internally displaced persons (IDPs) and was delivered by **Dr. Alemayehu Hailu**. Dr. Alemayehu began by briefly introducing



the vision, mission, and key programs of the Luminous Fund. He then provided context for the initiative, explaining that since late 2020, inter-community conflict in the Konso Zone of the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region (SNNPR) has displaced an estimated 118,000 individuals. Currently, over 80,500 IDPs remain in Konso, with thousands of children out of school due to the disruption of their education.

Dr. Alemayehu noted that prolonged drought in recent years has further intensified local tensions and created additional barriers to education. In response, the Luminos Fund conducted a study

that revealed severe learning loss, high levels of trauma among children, and significant economic decline within the affected communities. Based on these findings, the organization designed a tailored Accelerated Learning Program for the Tigray region, targeting nearly 6,000 IDP students each academic year since the previous year.

To implement the program effectively, government teachers were trained on the ALP approach, and support was provided to condense the primary school curriculum. Key components of the program include Activity-Based Learning (ABL), trauma healing, Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), and the provision of school meals.

The second day of the event was also dedicated to insightful presentations and experience sharing sessions. Day two of the summit commenced in a similar manner to the first day, beginning with registration and networking, followed by a welcoming address delivered by the Master of Ceremonies (MC). The MC then provided a brief recap of the discussions and sessions from day one. The day's agenda continued with a presentation by **Dr. Alula Pankhurst** from Young Lives Ethiopia, focusing on the critical role of parental engagement in children's learning and its long-term impact on academic outcomes.



Dr. Alula highlighted the ongoing challenges Ethiopia faces in achieving equitable and quality education, emphasizing that parental involvement plays a crucial role in addressing these gaps. He presented evidence showing that children who have access to early learning opportunities perform significantly better through to the completion of secondary education. This underscores the importance of engaging parents, particularly in the early stages of learning and literacy development. Furthermore, Dr. Alula pointed to significant disparities in children's reading skills, which are influenced by rural-urban divides, economic status, and the educational background of caregivers. These inequalities further reinforce the need for active parental support in children's education, particularly in fostering reading habits and early learning skills.

The next presentation was delivered by **Asst. Professor Dereje Gebre** and focused on the role of folktales in the education system. In his presentation, Asst. Professor Dereje emphasized the untapped potential and rich educational value embedded within traditional folktales. He acknowledged that his written work on the subject was

only a preliminary exploration and that the full merits of incorporating folktales into education remain to be thoroughly examined, discussed, field-tested, and validated. His intention, he stated, was to inspire and motivate those who are willing and able to take practical steps toward integrating folktales into pedagogical practices.



Asst. Professor Dereje highlighted that folktales are not merely stories of the past but are vessels of human values and cultural understanding. He urged educators and stakeholders to delve into these narratives to uncover and internalize essential human values. Once these values are identified and carefully selected, they should be presented to children in a manner that is both engaging and accessible. He called on those who are deeply invested in the well-being and education of children to embrace this approach. Quoting the proverb, “Show a child the right way; in his later years he will not stray,” he underscored the lasting impact of instilling values at an early age and the power of culturally rooted storytelling in shaping children's moral and intellectual development.

Experience sharing presentation was made by **Mrs. Samrawit Araya** about balancing culture and meaning in children's Books. The first experience-sharing session of the second day was presented by Ms. Samrawit, who discussed the importance of balancing culture and meaning in children's books. She highlighted various techniques for making stories engaging, realistic, and meaningful, emphasizing the need to incorporate cultural identity effectively into storytelling. Mrs. Samrawit also addressed how cultural values can be conveyed through actions rather than direct explanations, thereby creating a more immersive and impactful narrative experience for young readers.



Another significant experience of the day was shared by **Ethiopian Press Agency's** Children's Magazine called **Bilatenat Magazine**, a publication dedicated to producing monthly magazines for children. The presenter explained that each issue features a variety of engaging content, including children's stories, scientific topics, and diverse writings and experiences.

These contributions are thoughtfully curated to benefit young readers, aiming to both educate and inspire them. The magazine serves as a valuable resource for fostering creativity, curiosity, and motivation among children.

Mrs. Woyinshet, from Addis Ababa Mayor's Office - ECD Program Office delivered the final presentation, focusing on **Early Childhood Development (ECD) Program Components**. She emphasized that investing in early childhood lays the foundation for raising healthy, productive, ethical, and responsible citizens. She highlighted that decades of research clearly demonstrate the lasting impact of early life experiences on a child's long-term health, academic success, and overall life outcomes. Furthermore, findings from neuroscience provide compelling evidence that early childhood represents a critical window of opportunity to influence brain development and function—an essential factor in enabling children to reach their full potential.

Mrs. Woyinshet also discussed the benefits of prioritizing early childhood development, including the importance of parental coaching, support services, and accessible daycare for children aged 7 months to 3 years. Additional points included the expansion of playgrounds and the strategic three-year goal to enhance ECD services. She concluded by underscoring the need for effective coordination among the sectors responsible for implementation.

A panel discussion was held before the conclusion of the day. The discussion featured representatives from the French Embassy, Addis Guzo, and the Goethe-Institute. **Ms. Helina Tadesse** provided an in-depth overview of Addis Guzo, highlighting that it is the only NGO in Ethiopia that provides wheelchairs specifically for children. She has also noted that the organization successfully hosted the country's first wheelchair basketball tournament, where all participants were wheelchair users. Furthermore, children involved in the program are classified based on their type of disability, and are encouraged to read books tailored to their specific needs and capabilities.



Ms. Mierina, the French Language Program Officer, French Embassy, expressed gratitude to Ethiopia Reads for their ongoing efforts. The representative outlined the primary goal of their project, which is to promote the French language. This includes the translation of various children's books, novels, and other literary works. They also

discussed the translation techniques employed throughout the project to ensure quality and accessibility.

Finally, **Mr. Yonas Tarekegn**, Head of Information and Library Services, the *Goethe-*



Institute /German Cultural Institute/, spoke about several initiatives aimed at cultivating reading habits among children. These included training programs, book donations, and the organization of reading festivals. These festivals have become an annual tradition over the past four years, involving multiple schools and key stakeholders. In

conclusion, all three organizations shared insights into their best practices, implementation strategies, and future plans, making for a rich and collaborative discussion.

A recognition program was also held to honor various organizations and individuals for their outstanding contributions. Such as, **Mr. Tesfaye Adal** was recognized for his efforts in expanding children's and youth reading practices and habits for more than 50 years by selling variety of books and lending books to readers in his small book corner. **Beminet Printing Company** was also awarded for its significant contribution to promoting reading habits and skills across the country through the Ethiopia Reads projects. Recognition was also given to **Ye Ethiopia Lijoch Media** (which is the only kids channel in Ethiopia currently) and the **World Bank Group** for their valuable support and successful efforts in funding and collaboratively implementing a book support project for children and schools affected by conflict. The **Ministry of Finance** (MoF) and the organization **National Archives and Library Agency /NALA/** were similarly acknowledged for their roles. Finally, **Mrs. Yezina Worku** was also honored for her contributions. Finally the program was closed by the MC looking forward for the next summit program of year 2026.