DIJBAR
www.daagu.org
Volume-4 Issue-1

Impact of COVID-19 on Democratic Election and Development of Ethiopia

Sileshi Fentahun Alem

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to address the major impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the sixth general election and democratic development of Ethiopia. The data were drawn from pertinent publications as well as official websites of organizations and synthesized in thematic content analysis. As a major finding, COVID-19 less impacted the overall election process and credibility. Yet, restrictions on major democratic rights, such as freedom of movement and assembly; court system closure; and women's and children's domestic violence were severe impacts of COVID-19 during the lockdown period. Moreover, in human capital development, about 26 million children, 77% of whom are primary school students are affected by school closures; and 1.6–2.4million jobs were lost. Thus, the paper concluded that, though radical opponent political parties understated the credibility of the election by stating election postponement as the main argument, Ethiopia held a relatively democratic election after passing a decision of election postponement owing to the pandemic. So far, human capital and the infant economy were severely impacted by the pandemic, since the vast attention of the government was relied upon on COVID-19 response measures. Thus, to cope with an unforeseen crisis like COVID-19, the government should work on technological advancement to easily handle periodic elections, education, health and economic systems.

Keywords: COVID-19, Democratic Election, Election Postponement, Development

Citation: Impact of COVID-19 on Democratic Election and Development of Ethiopia , Daagu International Journal of Basic & Applied Research-DIJBAR. Volume.4, Issue-1, pp (16-31)

Corresponding Author: Sileshi Fentahun Alem

Email: sileshifentahun2007@gmail.com

Received: 12-03-2022

Accepted: 05-06-2022

Published: 30-06-2022

OPEN ACCESS

PhD Candidate in Political Economy and Governance at Amhara Leadership Academy, Bahir Dar, Ethiopia

1. INTRODUCTION

The outbreak and spread of COVID-19 impacted democratic election of Countries. General elections and referendums in 2020 were placed in a high dilemma on holding or postponing periodic elections by fear of technical difficulties, low voter turnout and legitimacy concerns (Lindsay, 2020). Besides, about 70 countries and districts postponed predetermined election schedules between February 21 and August 31, 2020 (Asplund, 2020).

COVID-19 was emerged in Ethiopia when the country was under political cross-roads and the ruling Prosperity Party made efforts to reconfigure the ethnic based Ethiopian Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). The sixth general election came into dilemma after the first case was recorded on 13 March 2020.

Socio-economic development of Ethiopia was also victimized by the pandemic. About $1.64 billion was shifted for COVID-19 multi-sector response. Whereas, National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) requested 1.1 billion ETB ($30 million) extra budgets from the country's insufficient budget (Abdu, 2021). The health, education and public sectors were also challenged by the pandemic.

Thus, this paper aims to discuss the impact of COVID-19 on the democratic election and development of Ethiopia. It is expected to contribute to the efforts of democratization and governance system of the country by discussing the major issues of democratic election, human capital development and economic governance of the country along with the pandemic impacts. Therefore, the paper is expected to critically synthesize the main arguments in the area and provide apparent answers to the following questions. What is the impact of COVID-19 on the sixth general election of Ethiopia? How COVID-19 impacts the democratic development of Ethiopia?

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Secondary data were drawn from published journal articles, reports and newspapers from pertinent websites. Official websites of the national and international organizations were also used as sources of evidence. The data was qualitatively synthesized using a thematic content analysis approach based on the major themes of impacts of COVID-19 on democratic election and the democratic development of Ethiopia.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Impacts on Democratic Election

3.1.1 Overview of Election and COVID-19 in Ethiopia

After EPRDF took the political thorn, Ethiopia held five less uncompetitive general elections in 1995, 2000, 2005, 2010 and 2015. It resulted in three years of public protests, which began immediately after the 2015 election. Almost close to thirty years, Ethiopia has been under electoral authoritarianism through ethnic-based political parties. To change this worst scenario, the so-called reformist government led by Abiy Ahmed tried to open up political and civic space which was salivated Ethiopians to hold their first democratic election. The sixth general election for the Federal Parliament and State Councils, considered as a litmus test for the ruling Posterity Party. Later, it was held on June 21, 2021, after twice postponement owing to the outbreak of COVID-19, political and logistic troubles (Zemelak, Yonatan, Beza, & Berihun, 2021).

- **Efforts of NEBE to Held Election Amid the Pandemic**

After intense institutional reform, the board made election assessments and forwarded three assumptions about its potential impact on the election. Primarily, COVID-19 might increase social tension and economic hardship, which could boost the risk of electoral violence; subsequently it would necessitate the use of new measures and standards as part of election operations. Finally, fear of it might impact the level of participation of citizens. Likewise, infrastructures of on-line voter registration, postal

voting, electronic voting etc. were unavailable (National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE), 2020)

Consequently, NEBE put two scenarios as electoral response measures to the pandemic. In scenario one, the board must hold elections without implementing special measures; at the second scenario, COVID-19 would continue to be present and NEBE would organize elections under restrictions. In both scenarios' election activities, time and budget would be impacted. In scenario one, the total additional budget needed to organize elections was 139,349,918 ETB ($4,098,527) with 10 months required for preparations. Conversely, conducting election under the second scenario would require an additional budget of 2,512,926,536 ETB ($73, 909,604) and a total of 13 months. The assessment contributes to evidence based decision-making to the government regarding with the fate of the election.

3.1.2 Election Postponement: a Debatable Political Agenda

The outbreak of COVID-19 hampered democratic election events across the globe. It created dilemmas for state authorities by which both holding and postponing elections. Postponing, might perceive the government as continued oppressively; while holding elections could undermine electoral legitimacy.

Holding an election during the pandemic faced technical glitches, low voters turnout and legitimacy challenges. Dominican Republic & North Macedonia faced low voter turnout. In Poland 2020 presidential election, mail-in voting results delays in receiving ballots. Yet, release of misinformation by unsuccessful parties about the virus affects election credibility (Lindsay, 2020).

Postponing elections also caused reputational, political, financial and legal risks. Postponing without immediately putting the new election date worsens the democratic process. For instance, Election in Chad had been postponed five times since 2015 and again postponed due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Somalia has not

conducted a direct popular vote since 1969 and the pandemic also affects the wish of Somalia's democratic election (Asplund, 2020).

In the case of Ethiopia, COVID-19 emerged when the country was under political turning point. After three years public protest, Abiy came in to power in 2018 and made a political reform on electoral Board and promised to undertake credible election (Ayele, 2021). However, NEBE declared suspension long-awaited August 2020 general election postponement with prime rationale of public health risk of COVID-19.

Election postponement posed a constitutional dilemma, since the Constitution does not provide clear direction on how to exercise authority after postponement once the term of the current Parliament is completed in early October 2020. On April 30, 2020, the parliaments endorsed the resolution of rescheduling the sixth general election and hold the elections 9 to 12 months after health authorities determine it is safe. In the meantime, Parliament, State Councils, Federal and State executives continued governing the country (Zemelak, Yonatan, Beza, & Berihun, 2021).

Ethiopian lawyers and politicians across the globe were invited and debated on the legitimacy of the current government beyond its constitutionally specified term. Here, Constitutional Commission of Inquiry (CCI) proposed four exit mechanisms including caretaker government, declaration of state of emergency (SoE), constitutional amendment, and constitutional interpretation. Professionals made intense discussion and came up with their justification, which is the first time in Ethiopia's history. After intense discussions, the parliament decided on interpretation of the Constitution interpretation option (Mengie, 2021). However, the decision is yet the slightest tricky response to the crisis at hand, given the limitations of the other possible exit mechanisms which polarized politics in the country.

- **Pros and Cons of Election Postponement and Constitutional Interpretation**

There were intense arguments on election postponement, constitutional interpretation and legitimacy of the government. The main opposition parties widely accepted the emergency order and advised the government to stop the spread of the virus by warning the government do not use the emergency decree for repression (International Crisis Group, 2020).

As proponents of Election postponement argued, it gave an opportunity for the government to strengthen multi-party democracy and national solidarity. It also prevented smaller parties from election campaign challenges under COVID-19 restrictions. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) able to reach greater number of voters (IRI and NDI, 2021). Thus, postponing elections can be a reasonable option for democracy advancement in Ethiopia.

On the reverse, some political parties believed election postponement was driven by the ruling party by the fear of losing voice in the vote and have more time to suppress opposition activities (Østebø, Terje, & Kjetil, 2021). Specially, Tigray Regional State opposed indefinite election postponement and illegitimacy of executive and legislative branches of the government. Later unilateral regional electoral commission was established and held a regional vote on September 2020; even if the House of Federation rejected election results as no legal effect (Mengie, 2021; IRI and NDI, 2021). Afterward the election, the Federal Government imposed sanctions of withholding Federal grants and personal protective equipment. It seems how public health was used as an instrument for power struggling among politicians.

3.1.3 Implications on Election Credibility

The sixth general election can be evaluated its credibility in line with effects of COVID-19.

3.1.3.1 Implications on Electoral Observers Engagement

Owing to the pandemic travel restrictions and security issues, international election observers' like the Limited Election Observation Mission for Ethiopia could not

physically deploy observers on the Election Day and forced to engage in remote observation by using regional experts from Ethiopia (IRI and NDI, 2021). However, NEBE filled the gap by CSOs where the largest independent citizen observer effort made by CSOs Coalition which deployed 3,000 observers from 175 CSOs and cover about 10% of the polling stations. Besides, NEBE accredited 169 CSOs for voter education and 46 local CSOs to observe the election with deployment of 44,560 Election Day (National Election Board of Ethiopia, 2021). It was taken as a major success since the general election was inclusive of the actors of democracy.

3.1.3.2 Implications of COVID-19 on Election Process and Results

The impacts of the pandemic on election can be discussed at various election stages.

Candidate Registration: To conduct COVID-19 friendly candidate registration, NEBE tried to improve the law of signature submission process; and parliamentary candidates were not required to collect signature. Candidate registration time originally scheduled from February 15 to 28 was extended to March 4 on the appeal of the political parties. When the registration began, 9,505 candidates from 46 political parties were registered in 674 constituency offices across the country (IRI and NDI, 2021). The chairwoman of the board also assured the registration process was successful (National Election Board of Ethiopia, 2021). Thus, measures taken by the NEBE reduced the impacts of COVID-19; and almost no appeal was indexed on the impact of the pandemic on the registration process.

Voters Education: The activities of CSOs mostly concentrated in Addis Ababa and large urban centers. Voter's face to face education meetings were limited to 50 individuals per session, caused by the pandemic protective measures. Voter education via radio and TV were relatively few due to its high cost (IRI and NDI, 2021). Hence, the pandemic hampered one of the activities of the electoral process.

Election Results: Election Day was largely peaceful, with the only limited adherence to COVID-19 protocols for public safety. Official statements of Chairwoman of the

Electoral Board as well as the Africa Union Election observation preliminary reports assured that overall pre-election and Election Day processes were credible except for some logistic, security, and COVID-19 protocol challenges (Africa Union , 2021). However, Chatham House (2021) criticized the credibility of the election as imperfect, and does not fortify Ethiopia's transition, since 18% of House of Peoples Representative seats in the parliament are not included in the first round of voting due to COVID-19 election postponement driven` conflicts in Tigray.

Voters Turnout: NEBE planned to engage 50 million voters, establish 50,000 polling stations and dispatch 250,000 election officials. However, 38,234,910 (76.469%) voters were registered, 40,365 (80.73%) polling stations opened and 152,700 (61.08%) officials were deployed (National Election Board of Ethiopia, 2021). Budget shift to protective measures and inconsistencies put as a reason for the pitiable achievement of each target. But the board estimated voter turnout was high (90%). Thus, since the election was carried out under pandemic and security problems, it is possible to argue that it was relatively credible.

3.2 Impacts on Democratic Development

3.2.1 Impacts on Human Capital Development

COVID-19 adversely impacted the governance of human capital with respect to the health of citizens and educational advancement. Conversely, the pandemic had silver lings for digital technology and research opportunity.

Impacts on Health: Poor health care service created fertile ground for the spread of COVID-19. The health system could not cope with a large-scale crisis; it's promptness to deliver routine health services was rated at 55% of the requirements in 2018 (EPHI, 2018). In 2016, only 2 % of clinics had oxygen delivery devices, and which would be hard for COVID-19 chronic treatments. Besides, Ethiopia has a meager health care workforce with a population density of around 0.96/1000, which is 5 times below the minimum threshold of 4.45 per 1000 set by the WHO (Africa

Union , 2021). Until 17 September 2020, 1,311 health care workers were infected by the pandemic (Alemu, 2021). Thus, for Ethiopia having a limited number of health services and professionals, the impact of the pandemic is too serious.

COVID-19 also impacted psychological health of citizens. The disruption of social institutions which is unique features for Ethiopians, such as *edir*, *ekub*, *mahiber*, mourning, wedding and worship led to social crisis of depression and anxiety (Girma, 2020). Reproductive health services, especially pregnant women, were challenged to get prenatal health care services owing to the priorities of medical resources to prevent the pandemic (UN Women Ethiopia, 2020). Besides, gender based violence including rape and domestic violence were raised by about 25% during the lockdown period.

Health cannot be separated from political issues, whether in a pandemic or not. In Amhara, Oromia and Tigray Regional States, the government's COVID-19 response was subject to politicization and securitization (Østebø, Terje, & Kjetil, 2021). As the political opposition increased, the government authorities and the public paid less attention to the pandemic mitigating protocols.

Impacts on Education: COVID-19 resulted in school closures across the world; and about 89% of the world's student population had been disrupted. Schools in Ethiopia were shut down on 16 March 2020 and affected about 26 million children (77% of whom are primary school pupils). Poor technological infrastructure and design of the education system magnify the problem, mainly for those children live in rural areas (UNDP, 2020). It also created risks of abuse like early marriage and child labor. The table below illustrates the number of children influenced by the pandemic.

Table 1. The number of children affected by the pandemic crisis

Level	Male	Female	Total

Pre-primary	1,676,156	1,546,097	3,222,252
Primary	10,654,351	9,392,006	20,046,357
Secondary	1,526,653	1,293,482	2,820,135
Grand Total	13,857,160	12,231,585	26,088,744

Source: Extracted from UNDP (2020).

School closures also resulted in a cut in school feeding programs and affected children's nutritional status. It is estimated that in Addis Ababa, approximately 560,000 primary school students no longer receive their meals due to the pandemic.

Impacts on Governance system: The government took the exceptional step of instituting remote working for Federal and Regional institutions. For instance, in Prime Minister Office and in Ministry of Education 64% of employees out of 289; 87% of employees out of 1544 were forced to work at home respectively (UNDP, 2020). The shifts to remote working raises a major challenge of ensuring effective service delivery in a situation when there are no standard operational procedures and protocols for this type and scale of operation.

Imperative Silver Linings of COVID-19: People benefited from its difficulty; created research opportunities, technological transformation, reading culture and family discussion time (Girma, 2020). Scientific journals welcomed researchers to do more on COVID-19. It also restricts physical contact and gives the chance for digital technologies of video-conferencing and telemedicine. Reading culture chiefly literate people got a chance to read more. Most families get the chance for discussion time with their families and able to know the behavior of their children and intervention mechanisms.

3.2.2 Impacts on Economic Development

3.2.2.1 Escalated Electoral Cost

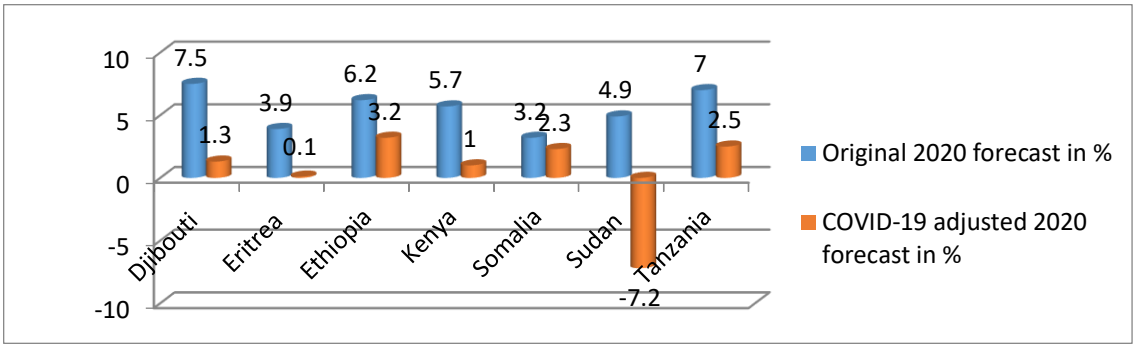
The emergence of the pandemic pushed the election process and needed to mobilize additional resources to combat its spread. Countries carried out elections amid the pandemic financed additional budget for safety procedures. South Korea's April elections cost an extra $16 million; Indonesia and Ukraine, have also budgeted tens of millions of additional dollars for protective measures (Lindsay, 2020). In Ethiopia, before the pandemic strike, NEBE demanded the House of Peoples Representatives 3.7 billion ETB and approved only 2.5 billion ETB. However, after the postponement of the elections, the Board demanded additional 1.1 billion ETB (0.23% of the country's budget for 2020/2021) budget to manage the election process (Abdu, 2021). It shows that how the pandemic created a budget burden on the poor economy of Ethiopia.

3.2.2.2 Holing Back Economic Efficiency

Economic growth of countries was challenged by the pandemic. Agricultural exporter countries like Ethiopia and Kenya affected by COVID-19. Besides, compared with the 2020 growth scenario in Africa, between 5 and 29 million people have been pushed below the $1.90 per day extreme poverty line. In developing countries, extreme poverty rose to 35% (UNCTAD, 2020). In Ethiopia in 2020/21, 31 million people were estimated to live below the poverty line as compared with 2019/2020 of 26 million people (Alemayehou, 2020).

In East Africa, the growth forecast of the IMF and World Bank indicated that all countries in the table below experienced slowdown GDP growth in 2020. Ethiopia's GDP fall from 6.20% of original 2020 forecast to 3.20% COVID-19 adjusted forecast.

Figure 1 Adjusted growth forecasts in East Africa with COVID-19



Source: (Africa Union , 2020) adopted from IMF & World Bank

Likewise, in Ethiopia, $1.6 billion (1.6 % of GDP) was required for pandemic response and an extra $3 billion needed to reverse its effect at the end of 2020 (The Africa Report, 2020). It also victimized the labor market where 10% to 15% lost of employment (1.6-2.4 million jobs) mostly temporary and unskilled labor in urban areas (UNDP, 2020). The hospitality sector accounts for 8% of the total employment also collapsed by travel bans.

The impact of the COVID-19 seemed broader than the health impacts. It created three critical economic hurdles, the burden of external and domestic debt (30% and 27% of GDP respectively), foreign currency misery and slowdown in remittances. Besides, Ethiopian Airlines, the biggest foreign exchange company contributed over 5% of Ethiopian GDP in 2019 lost over $550 million revenue between January and April 2020 (Alemayehou, 2020). Thus, the government forced to adjust fiscal and monetary policies and supported the business sector with VAT refunds to businesses. National Bank of Ethiopia also accessed 15 billion ETB liquidity facilities for private banks to support businesses, tax debt forgiveness for 3,099 taxpayers as well as for all dues up to Ethiopian Fiscal Year 2014-15 and tax exemption for importation of products. Thus, the pandemic challenged the infant economy of Ethiopia.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

After the alleged reformist government took the political thorn, Ethiopians were salivated to carry out the sixth general democratic election. Yet, the election was

officially postponed owing to the chief rationale of COVID-19 Outbreak; which later contributed to discrepancy among opponent political parties and the ruling party. However, the inclusive participation of high skilled legal experts at the consultation session on the outlet of legitimacy problems created a new democratic culture in the country. Besides, postponement allowed enough time for preparation for NEBE, political parties and increased democratic engagement of CSOs. Thus, it is feasible to argue and conclude that the outbreak of COVID-19 less impacted democratic election since election postponement was made by taking expert advises from Ministry of Health, Ethiopian Public Health Institute and NEBE.

However, human capital development and economic governance were negatively impacted. The economic sector was sluggish down due to the COVID-19 outbreak, lockdown, restrictions and response measures. Thus, the government should work to advance technology based institutional capacity buildings on democratic, public and economic institutions. Specific initiatives like online voter education, election campaign, online voter registration and voting, video-conferencing; online education, telemedicine, e-commerce and related technologies shall be taken into consideration to cope up unforeseen crisis like COVID-19.

5. REFERENCES

Abdu, B. (2021, March 13). *The Reporter Ethiopia*. Retrieved Oct 15, 2021, from Re porter Ethiopia:https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/article/election-officers-payment-costs-nebe-close 2 billion birr

Africa Union . (2020, July 27). *News: Africa Union*. Retrieved Nov 15,2021, from A U Web site:https://au.int/en/document/20200727/impact-covid 19outbreak governance peace and-security-horn Africa

Africa Union.(2021, June 23). *Press Releases: Africa Union* . Retrieved September 15, 2021, from Africa Union Web Site :

https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20210623/preliminary-statement-african-union-election-observation-mission-21-june-2021

Alemayehou, M. (2020, Jun 10). *Center for Strategic and Internatioal Studies.* Retrieved Oc 18, 2021, from Center for Strategic and International Studies web site:https://www.csis.org/analysis/ethiopia-battles-pandemic-and-its-economic-consequences

Alemu, H. H. (2021). Risk of COVID-19 Infection and Associated Factors Among Healthcare Workers: A Cross-Sectional Study at Eka Kotebe Treatment Center in Ethiopia. *International Journal of General Medicine* , 1763-1770.

Asplund, T. J. (2020). What happens after elections are postponed? Responses to postponing elections during COVID-19 vary by regime type. *Election Law Journal: Rules, Politics, and Policy 19, no. 3 (2020)* , 2-3.

Ayele, Z. A. (2021). COVID-19 in Ethiopia : A Year in Review. *Verfassungsblog: On Matters Constitutional* , 1.

Chatham House. (2021, June 17). *Expert Comment: Chatham House, The Royal Institute of*
International Affairs. Retrieved oct. 16, 2021, from Chatham House,web site:https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/06/imperfect-elections-do-not-fortify-ethiopias-transition

EPHI. (2018). *Services availability and readiness assessment (SARA).* Addis Ababa: EPHI.

Girma, W. W. (2020). Challenges and Silver Linings of COVID-19 in Ethiopia-Short Review . *Journal of Multidisciplinary Healthcare* , 919-920.

International IDEA. (2020, March 26). *Publications: International IDEA.* Retrieved December 12, 2021, from International IDEA Web Site : https://doi.org/10.31752/idea.2020.11

IRI and NDI. (2021, June 9). *What We Do: International Republican Institute (IRI) and*
National Democratic Institute(NDI). Retrieved December 02, 2021, website:https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/leome_reportof_the_june_21_elections_final_final.pdf

International Crisis Group. (2020, April 15). *Commentary: International Crisis Group.*
Retrieved Jaunuary 07, 2022, from International Crisis Group Web Site:https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/ethiopia/managing-politics-ethiopias-covid-19

Lindsay, M. (2020). How Countries are Holding Elections During the Pandemic. *Council On Foreign Relations* , 4-8.

Mengie. (2021). COVID-19 and elections in Ethiopia: exploring constitutional interpretation by the House of the Federation as an exit strategy. *Law Democracy and Development* , 67.

National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE). (2020, June 23). *National Election Board of*
Ethiopia. Retrieved Sept 25, 2021, from NEBE Web site:https://nebe.org.et/sites/default/files/2021-03/NEBE-assessment-report-to-CCI english.pdf

National Election Board of Ethiopia. (2021, July 17). Retrieved December 10, 2021, from NEBE web site :https://nebe.org.et/sites/default/files/Final%20Report%20English.pdf

Østebø, M., Terje, Ø., & Kjetil, T. (2021). Health and politics in pandemic times: COVID-19 responses in Ethiopia. *Health Policy and Planning* , 1-5.

The Africa Report . (2020, May 25). *AFCON: the Africa report* . Retrieved January 12, 2022, from The Africa report web site: https://www.theafricareport.com/28418/ethiopia-indefinite-postponement-of-polls-raising-political-tempers/

UN Women Ethiopia. (2020, June 20). Retrieved Oct 12, 2021, from UN Women Eth iopia web site:https://africa.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20Africa/Attachments/Publications/2020/POLICY BRIEF_EVAWG%20COVID_Ethiopia.pdf

UNCTAD. (2020, Nov 03). Retrieved Dec.10, 2021, from UNCTAD web site: https://unctad.org/system/files/official document/ldcr202

UNDP. (2020, June 11). *UNDP Ethiopia.* Retrieved December 05, 2021,from UNDP Ethiopia Website: https://www.et.undp.org/content/ethiopia/en/home/library/un-socioeconomic-impact-of-covid-19-in-ethiopia.html?

Zemelak, A., Yonatan, F., Beza, D., & Berihun, A. (2021, May 18). *Lex-Atlas: Covid-19*. Retrieved Oct 20, 2021, from Lex-Atlas: Covid-19 website: https://lexatlas-c19.org/covid-19-and-the-sixth-general-election-in-ethiopia/

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank Professor Kassahun Birhanu for his valuable comments on the draft of the manuscript.