BOOK REVIEW

Tekeste Negash,

The Crisis of Ethiopian Education: Some Implication for Nation-Building: Uppsala, Department of Education - Uppsala University, 1990. pp. 115.

Reviewer: Haile Gabriel Dagne

In 12 pages the author outlines the historical development of Ethiopian Education in order to support his thesis that the present education crisis has its roots:

a) in historical misconception about the role of education in society,
b) in the curriculum that was irrelevant and inappropriate,
c) in the mistaken endeavour of the Ethiopian Government to expand education well beyond its financial limits.

In the second chapter the book assesses thoroughly, "the Evaluative Research on the General Education System of Ethiopia (Ergese)". The author took time to critically look into that voluminous study launched in 1983 but made available to very few people after 1986. This is the only critical analysis of Ergese I know of so far. Most of the materials the author uses to support his thesis on the state of education and its crisis is drawn from this report of ERGESE.

The intentions of the author are noble in that he wanted to initiate debate on reform of the sector by questioning, as he claims, some "hitherto unassailable assumptions" (12)*. The study raises serious issues, as we shall see later. However, as the author himself stated, "...neither the questions it raises nor its conclusions are new" (ix).

And yet, the questions the book raises are pertinent, and need to be seriously considered. These include: "How serious is the crisis of Education?" "What are the social and political implications of the crisis?" "How does an education such as the one received in Ethiopian schools facilitate development?" etc. (xi).

NATURE OF THE CRISIS

The central issue of the crisis lies, according to the author, in overcrowding and in irrelevant curriculum.

"Overcrowded individual classes and doubling of subjects, I believe, are fundamental causes for the alarming decline of quality of education in Ethiopia to-day" (51) and consequently, "Teacher student communication is virtually impossible..." and

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* Numbers in parenthesis refer to page numbers in the book under review.

"... a school year is a depressing experience" (51). Finally, pupils end up with "fragmented" knowledge and join the army of unemployed, where the "climate of hopelessness" reign. And he concludes by observing that it is very hard to say that Ethiopia has a functioning secondary "education"(48).

The author has no good words for the curriculum which he, in general terms, condemns as irrelevant and inappropriate. Major criteria for relevancy is the objective of national education which, he believes, should be "the transmission of political and cultural values that enhance the continued existence of the nation or state"(54). As such "the cultivation of Ethiopian nationalism and patriotism deserve priority..." for the ultimate goal of producing "homogenous ruling elite" and "united population"(89). The pre-revolution objective, in the above sense, was to produce citizens conscious of their historical heritage, while in post-revolution period the general objective was to inculcate a socialist personality.

The author believes that the curriculum in pre-revolution period was dominated by Western influence and that of the post-revolution followed the East European model. From this, he concludes that "Ethiopian curriculum has a strikingly colonial character"(69). Certainly, one can trace those influences which the Ethiopian side adopted without imposition, probably ignorantly. Nevertheless, it is far fetched to label this as "colonial", since colonial implies certain direct imposition from outside, against the will of the recipient.

That the formal education is not contributing to nation-building is supported by his analysis of history text and personal observation of instruction at Entoto and Menelik II secondary Schools. The author dismisses grade 9 history text on Ethiopia as "... incorrect, irrelevant and fragmented" with "virtually no relevance for nation-building", which can even "produce negative result" (59-60). Equally, history lessons of grade 10 on Ethiopian state and society received "... worse treatment" (56). In grades 11-12 World history is taught based on texts copied from the Russian author A.Z. Manfred and, no Ethiopian history is offered(67).

The author concludes that "secondary students study only two chapters of Ethiopian history" in four years. The two chapters hardly provide "knowledge, national pride, patriotism or historical perspective"(66).

Nevertheless, we cannot go along with the author's dangerous and pessimistic conclusion that the failure of formal education made the school population unpatriotic. He goes even too far to state incorrectly, "the university student, who from the mid 1960's assumed the role of the only organized opposition, began campaigning for a clean break with the country's history and tradition. The university students boundless hatred of their country and its society and, therefore, their determination to dictate a socialist ideology, lacked the most minimum knowledge of the dynamics of social change" (8-9). The above bold statement mixes up protest or revolt against certain practices conceived as unjust, with unpatriotic feeling. The opposite can be argued: The university students voiced opposition or opted for socialist

ideology not because of hatred of the country but because of their love and deep concern for the country and its people. Those who followed student demonstrations of both pre-revolution and post-revolution period can testify to the above.

CAUSES OF THE CRISIS

The author dwelt at length on the causes of the crisis in education. He gave two main reasons:

a) One of the causes is seen in the policy of the state, in the past decades "... to expand education well beyond its financial limits" (7), not accompanied by comparable expansion of economic sector.

True he is right to believe that Ethiopia has followed a policy of rapid expansion, particularly since the Addis Ababa Conference on African Education(7). In spite of fierce competition with other African states, the conference's decision was not the cause, but it was used to justify the expansion which was forced on the country by the urbanization process, and by the fast growing population of the cities and road-side-towns, where the pressure for more schools was irresistable.

In all cases, as the author argued, the expansion was and is beyond the financial limits that ultimately led to overcrowding, poor supply of materials and made, particularly high schools, unmanageable. The suggestion of the author to limit general education to the meagre financial limits of the state will not be accepted specially by urban dwellers.

b) The other cause of the crisis in Education is, what the author calls, "hitherto unassailable assumptions" or "misconception: to take education as a precondition for development" (84). It is wrong to perceive education as, "magical formula" for development, even as "... essential in terms of human investment for economic and social development". This misconception, he argues, "pays little attention to the role of economic growth for education" (85) and it led to unlimited expansion of schools. The author clearly favours the "... primacy of economic growth" (84). He reasons out that "... the economy of a given nation has to reach a certain stage of growth before investment in human capital can begin to make national economic sense" (85). The contrary is in fact true as confirmed by studies of The World Bank.

A World Bank expert group, based on several studies (Wadi I. Haddad et al., Education and Development, 1990 (The World Bank, Washington D.C. p. 3) came to conclusion that education is essential for development. "There is now a persuasive body of theoretical and empirical evidence to show that investment in formal education and training of the labour force plays a crucial role in economic development.... The result of these studies suggest that, both in developed and developing countries, educational investment has been one of the most important factors contributing to economic growth, that expenditures on education contribute positively to labour productivity, that the economic pay off to spending on education from both private and public standpoint is high, in absolute terms and compared to the investment; and that increased education of parents - especially mothers - has an important

impact on child health, and reduced fertility at all levels of economic development".

The World Bank study further affirms that "the single best measure of education or training's economic impact is the additional productivity of workers and farmers with more education over those with less" (Haddad, et.al.,p.4) "A survey for the World Bank of eighteen studies which measure the relationship in low-income countries between farmers' education and their agricultural efficiency (as measured by crop production) concludes that if a farmer had completed four years of elementary education, his productivity was, on the average, 8.7 percent higher than that of a farmer with no education ..." (Ibid). The studies confirm that "the highest pay off to education in these lower-income countries... is at the primary level"... "... as countries industrialize the pay off from lower education level tends to fall relative to the pay off from higher education level".

If Ethiopia is to limit education to the needs of the economy, differentiation has to be made between general education and professional education or training. The latter can not exist without certain socio-economic establishments and their needs; while general education, primary education in our case, is a precondition for development.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE EDUCATION CRISIS

The author attempts to draw far reaching implications concerning the education crisis in Ethiopia and its society. To illustrate the implications he chose three areas:

a) the growth of incompetence in running the affairs of the state,
b) the continued growth of ethnic, regional and class conflicts, and
c) the progressive growth of state authoritarianism.

For the sake of brevity we deal only with his first point. Here he expects the education system to produce "highly motivated and qualified civil servants and productive members..." (73). He stresses, however, that the education sector is far from being in a position to meet these expectations.

The consequence is a "range of incompetence" in running the affairs of the state. As a proof, he cities, what he calls, the poor leadership in handling the education sector.

The education bureaucracy demonstrated its incompetence by implementing indiscriminately imported curriculum which produced "a youth that hated its past...." Moreover, it was "... unable to show in clear terms the limits of uncontrolled expansion" (74). He complains further that "the land reform of 1975 would probably have looked different had there been a bureaucratic machinery acquainted with the complexities of land reform and with Ethiopia's landowning system"(75).

The causes of all these and other incompetencies lie in education that "... continues to implement an imported (neo-colonial) curriculum where Ethiopia and its society occupy peripheral positions"(75).

The correlation between the incompetencies mentioned above and the crisis in formal education is not convincingly presented. The bureaucracies mentioned are staffed and led in fact by people trained in post secondary education at home and abroad since the 1950's. International experts from UNESCO and the World Bank, who have close contacts with this country, testify that the Ethiopian bureaucracy, inspite of all its vices, is one of the best in Sub-Sahara Africa.

RECOMMENDATIONS: A REFORM MODEL

To resolve the education crisis the author suggests a "reform model". To prepare the ground for his reform he proposes to set up "a small national committee"(92) that would commission studies and act as a research council and further recommends a nation wide "comprehensive discussion from below"(92) where "all aspects of the educational system are widely and openly discussed".

The reform model is to be guided by "clear preference for quality" which includes relevance and appropriateness of curriculum and equitable distribution (96). There is no quarrel with the above proposal as long as there is a balance between quality and expansion of education.

As to the structure of the proposed reform the author suggests separating formal education from non-formal.

a) Formal education's objective is narrowed down "to the inculcation of values..." (90). However, it is wrong to limit instruction to "inculcation of values" alone. It also has to transmit knowledge, particularly of the sciences and some fundamental skills as a basis for further training. Besides, education should not attempt to inculcate but should help the young to critically look at and appreciate his culture, develop a sense of social service, tolerance and understanding for other cultures.

Surprisingly enough, the author recommends raising the age of entry from seven to ten years. This stems from his suggestion to make eight years of schooling terminal for the "greatest majority of the students" (98) in order to increase expansion and allow equitable distribution. Besides, by raising the age of entry to 10 years, "graduating students would be old enough to join the world of labor"(97).

The author completely ignores the negative side of his proposal, namely that raising the age of entry to 10 years would move the child away from the formative stage, and delaying his education would hamper the extent of the development of his capacities. The earlier the child is exposed to education the better, and there is much truth in the Ethiopian church tradition that suggests 4 years, 4 months and 4 days as the best age of entry.

b) Non-formal Education

As to the content and structure of the non-formal education the author writes very little and states only that it "... would include every kind of skill and training of varying duration" (89). This system is to expand particularly in the rural areas (99) and "... embrace the greatest majority of students" (98), as such it should expand at the expense of formal education and "most of the resources of the post primary education ought to be devoted to informal education."(98). Non-formal education (what the author calls wrongly informal) is to be administered strictly separately from formal system at a separate premises and run by a "Department of Informal Education"(90).

The problem with the above is the link between primary and non-formal education. Universal primary education should be targeted for the rural population, to be followed or supplemented by a non-formal system. Otherwise, "skill training of varying duration" cannot have depth and continuity without the foundation of primary education, which is essential for sustainable development in all fields.

In conclusion, I believe, this book is a useful contribution to generate discussion on education in Ethiopia, particularly now, when Ethiopia is again on the verge of radical change. The role of Education in nation-building, I presume, will be soon a hot issue among the public at large. Educators

should react to the challenges of the author, especially to his desire to push "the frontiers of discussion from awareness of crisis into a strategy for its resolution."

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