Needs Assessment Practices in Curriculum Planning for Primary Schools in Ethiopia: The Past and Present

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Abstract: The main purpose of the study is to examine the reasons why low attention has been given to the needs assessment component of curriculum planning process for Ethiopian primary schools since the middle of 1970s and its effects on the implementation and outcomes of learning at schools. A case study method is employed to conduct the study at the Central/ Federal level to find out the attention given in the planning process using nine curriculum experts selected through snowball and purposive sampling techniques from the former Institute for Curriculum Development and Research (ICDR) and the current Curriculum Development and Implementation Core Process Directorate (CDICPD) respectively. Data were collected through interview and document analysis. Narrative qualitative data analysis was employed and the analysis results showed that low-level attention was given to needs assessment since it was assumed that the curriculum planning experts knew what should be taught in addition to shortage of trained human resource, lack of financial support and time. The curriculum planning was done by ‘listing down subject matter contents’. This in turn contributed to problems of implementation and attaining the expected learning outcomes. It was not possible to meet the needs of the learner and the pressing demands of the society. The results implied that maximum possible attention should be given to the needs assessment component for any curriculum planning activity for the primary level education in order to make the curriculum relevant and appropriate to the needs of the society and the learner and feasible to carry out the planned curriculum.

Keywords: anticipated needs, felt needs, minimum learning competencies, needs assessment, needs assessment data, needs assessment tools

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**Background of the Study**

In spite of the availability of the objectives, the process and the situation analysis models as potential alternatives for curriculum planning at all school levels, the Ethiopian practice and documents show that the objectives model of curriculum planning has been in use since the beginning of curriculum development at home in the late 1950s and 1960s (Lemma, 1996). As a result, the curricula have been planned with openly stated general educational objectives that indicate the expected end results (knowledge, skills and values) upon the completion of every program or subject taught/offered. Even the recently introduced competence-based curriculum planning practice starts with the setting of the objectives for the syllabi and listing down the Minimum Learning Competences (MLC) as indicators of the learning outcomes for every unit and subunits in the planned subjects' syllabi. The competencies incorporated in the syllabi indicate the expected learning outcomes in a detailed manner (MoE, 2002). Furthermore, all school teachers plan their annual and daily lesson plans writing the objectives/expected end results ahead of time. All these practically show that the curriculum planning model remained as the objective model where needs assessment should have been one of the determining components in the planning process.

Curriculum planning process that is well-thought out with the objectives model demands needs assessment results and making multiple decisions concerning the objectives, which serve as indicators of end results of a particular subject or course of study, the selection and organization of contents and learning experiences, the decision on the communication media and the teaching learning resources to achieve the intended objectives (Tyler, 1949; McNeil, 1996; Marsh and Willis, 2007). Hilda Taba (1962), one of the earliest proponents of the model, identified the inductive activities of the objectives model and proposed seven specific steps in a hierarchic order. Her proposed model as a variety of the objectives model begins with needs assessment/
Need assessment is the first activity and is an obligatory step for the subsequent activities in curriculum planning process model. Theoretical arguments in curriculum literature have shown that no curriculum planning activity becomes productive if needs assessment is not done well and considered carefully. Unfortunately, there are no needs assessment reports on the needs and capacities of the society, the nature, abilities, interests and attitudes of the learner, the teacher, other parallel conditions and issues that need attention in the curriculum planning process for the primary schools. Such a practice seems to have been a missing component in Ethiopian curriculum planning practices since the early 1970s. This made the implementation of the curriculum at schools and getting the needed students’ profile difficult ( Lemma, 1996, 2015). Although such incomplete practices were common for decades, there is no research conducted on why needs assessment has not been conducted for the curriculum planning process and what effects it has in providing primary education in the country.

The author of this article has been in the education sector for a long time and participated in some of the curriculum planning activities, especially in the teacher education programs where no need assessment reports were presented to any of the curriculum planning
task forces. Thus, it seems to be an issue of priority to conduct a study on needs assessment and open up an area of discussion and attention by all concerned bodies in the planning of either a new or revision of the working curriculum.

Statement of the Problem

Needs assessment/diagnosis of needs as the fundamental component of the objectives model in curriculum planning process has been conceived as a process of identifying the what is and what ought to be and collecting data about the school system, the learner, the teacher, the community (society), and the parallel systems-national and international (Nicholls and Nicholls, 1972; Pratt, 1980; Hawes, 1979). Conducting needs assessment or diagnosis of needs is a precondition for any curriculum planning process in all varieties of the objectives model (McNeil, 1996). Hence, curriculum planning for all types of schools and educational institutions at all levels and purposes makes needs assessment a compulsory task.

Theories and practices show that the major sources of data for the needs assessment depend on the nature of the curriculum to be developed (Pratt, 1980; McNeil, 1996). Normally, the curriculum planning for schools of any level use school teachers, students, school directors, supervisors, the community and their agencies, the employers, parents, philosophers, politically influential individuals and pressure groups such as committees within government offices, teacher organizations, members of school boards, school administrators, religious or political groups, commentators and writers with special interests in education. Public representatives, community agencies, interest groups, frontier/leading thinkers, social experts (sociologists, psychologists, and anthropologists), labor organizations, taxpayers, etc. as possible sources of data for the curriculum planning process (Nichols and Nichols, 1972; Pratt, 1980; Ornstein and Hunkins, 2009).
Interviews with parents, administration of questionnaire on interests, recreational choice and problems, personal and social relations, reading habits, work experiences, etc. of the learner; administration of tests, analysis of student records, etc. serve as tools of data collection. Both vertical and cross-sectional studies help planners know about the learners (Pratt, 1980; Tanner and Tanner, 1980). In addition to this, subject specialists can help in providing information on what should be included in the curriculum (Tyler, 1949; McNeil, 1996; Marsh and Willis, 2007). Under all conditions, needs assessment is taken by curriculum scholars as an important means to plan the curriculum and it is believed that the needs assessment data show the demands of the society, the needs, interests, abilities, attitudes and developmental tasks of learner, and the capacity of the society to support the education system in terms of physical, material and financial means (Nicholls and Nicholls, 1972; Pratt, 1980; Wiles and Bondi, 2007).

In the same way, document analyses on written documents containing data about the learner and the specific tasks commonly accomplished or to be accomplished are the other tools for data collection. Ultimately, the analyses of data secured from different sources serve to identify priority areas as well as capacities and to set the possible educational objectives (expected end results/competences) in the curriculum planning process of the specific level and type of education.

Practically, curriculum planning for schools of any level needs consulting the appropriate sources through the established mechanisms to generate data and set priorities. However, in the last few decades, the absence of evidence on the outstanding needs of the society (both felt and anticipated social, economic, political, cultural, moral, etc. needs) and the needs, interests, abilities and developmental tasks of the learner, the qualities of the teachers in terms of their education and training, commitment, aspirations and support to the teacher, and considering the capacity of the society to support the schools with the required resources led to the poor implementation of the school curriculum and ultimately to poor quality education (Lemma,
In addition to this, the pre-1991 education system had failed to combine theory with practice and providing relevant education (TGE, 1994a). Lemma (2015) conducted a study on curriculum planning process for the primary schools in Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional State (SNNPRS) and found out that there was no needs assessment reports at the region when the primary school curriculum planning was done at the Federal level (Asefa, 2006) and it significantly hindered the school teachers to make it relevant and responsive to the different social groups in the Regional State.

Both theories and practical experiences indicate that curriculum planning without needs assessment reports would lead nowhere and those publicly expected results could not be achieved. The supply of educational material and teachers to schools becomes difficult. The learner would not be recognized as the major client of the instructional process. Though it has been important in the curriculum planning process, there are no sufficient evidences about the needs of the Ethiopian society, the nature of the learner, the education and training of the teacher, the schools’ facilities and parallel systems for the curriculum planners. In other words, a needs assessment report is the predominantly missing element in the history of curriculum planning in the country (since 1970s) (Lemma, 1996; 2015). The focus is given to the transfer of the contents of the subject matter in the attempts to develop the learners’ personality.

The practice of selecting the objectives model but planning the curriculum without needs assessment report is limited to writing objectives or competencies on the will of the planners and/or what they feel as important. This in turn forces the curriculum planners to list down educational objectives, select contents and activities, resources and assessment mechanism without any consideration to the learner, the teacher, the society and the ideas of other social groups on the school subject and the nature of human learning. Such an activity
makes the curriculum planning process to go out of the basic principles of the objectives model (Davies, 1976; Marsh and Willis, 2007).

Shiferaw (2010) conducted a research on curriculum planning in Oromia Regional State and reported that there was no needs assessment done about the society and the nature and abilities of the learners when writing the textbooks for the primary schools. He stated that he was not able to see why it happened although it was a serious problem for the text book writers to get information about who the school children were in the schools of the regional state. Ketema and his associates (2011) conducted a study on primary school curriculum planning practice in Addis Ababa Education Bureau and found out that the needs assessment was not done at city government level for the syllabi were sent to the bureau from the Federal Government. The group further reported that the practice of deriving objectives for each subject syllabus was left to the planners as they were thought to be knowledgeable about the subject and what should be taught at primary schools. Instead of deriving the objectives on the basis of the needs assessment results and prioritized areas of interest, curriculum planners and school teachers were observed listing down the educational/instructional objectives from the subjects and contents respectively. The roles of needs assessment component of the curriculum planning was either ignored or underplayed in planning the primary school curriculum education.

Furthermore, although there were a lot of researches on access, equality, equity, relevance and efficiency, which necessitated the declaration of the Education and Training Policy of Ethiopia (TGE.1994a), there was no research report either on the need for needs assessment or the needs assessment report as a fundamental source of data and a prerequisite of curriculum planning process and its development. Thus, it seems timely to conduct research on the issue and make it draw the attention of all concerned stakeholders, especially policy makers, curriculum planners and researchers.
Objectives of the Study

The main objective of the study was to investigate why low attention was given to needs assessment practice in Ethiopian primary school curriculum planning and to identify the possible effects of the omission in the provision of primary education in the country. In other words, the study addressed the following research questions.

- Why low attention is given to needs assessment component in curriculum planning for primary schools in Ethiopia (since the middle of 1970s);
- The possible effects of the absence of needs assessment report on the curriculum planning process and its implementation; and
- Tasks to be done to make needs assessment a prerequisite and an essential element to improve the curriculum planning process for the primary schools in the country.

Scope of the Study

The study is delimited to the investigation of the low attention given to needs assessment and related issues of the curriculum planning process for the primary schools of Ethiopia since the middle of the 1970s. It is also delimited to the school subjects’ syllabi development and other curricular materials production at the Ministry of Education level and it excludes the regional states’ views as their involvement is limited largely to the implementation and evaluation of the planned curriculum with little differences in both the pre-and post-1991 periods.
Significance of the Study

The results of the study would help:

- The Federal Ministry of Education to give the necessary attention and coordinate the Regional States’ Education Bureaus and other institutions as stakeholders to push for and participate in conducting needs assessment and supply the results to the primary school curriculum planners and make the curriculum to be based on concrete evidences and to be more relevant;
- Learners to get relevant and quality education that addresses their needs at different age levels and to respond to their actual life problems at their school times and later in their life; and
- All interested researchers and institutions to use the findings and start to conduct researches in the area.

Operational Definition of Terms

Curriculum is a set or packages of different materials in which objectives and contents of education for students of all types of schools are defined, the corresponding teaching methods and materials are described and the evaluation mechanisms are stated.

Curriculum planning is a process of translating the general educational objectives into curriculum documents/ materials such as syllabus, students’ textbooks, teachers’ guides and manuals.

Curriculum validation workshop is a workshop where curriculum workers and invited stakeholders participate in reviewing the drafted syllabi for the grades.
Needs assessment refers to the collection of data about the school system, the learner, the society, the teacher, and the parallel systems—national and international.

Primary level is a level of education that comprises grades 1-8 in the Ethiopian education system.

Syllabus is an outline of a specific subject for a specific grade indicating the objectives, the contents and time allotment in periods, the method of teaching, the instructional resources to be used and the evaluation mechanisms to be employed in checking the expected results at the end.

Review of Related Literature

Practices in most countries of the world indicate that needs assessment serves as a starting point for curriculum planning and revisions. For instance, experiences in Kenya indicate that a national needs assessment study was conducted by the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) in 2016 to consider the national needs and international trends (Opertti, et al., 2017). The document shows that:

KICD undertook several international benchmarking visits to South Korea, Canada, China, and the Netherlands, collaborated with universities, Ministries of Education, the Teacher Service Commission, Teacher Unions, and employers, among other stakeholders, to carry out the national needs assessment study that helped to identify critical issues that needed to be addressed through the curriculum reforms, while enhancing stakeholder participation. There was also reassurance that the planned changes had been informed by both local needs and global trends. The national needs assessment study revealed that
the majority of Kenyans perceived education as a powerful tool to reverse the current dire social and economic challenges the country faces, such as high rates of unemployment and underemployment. Most Kenyans felt that there was a need to adopt a competency-based approach (CBA) that would promote application rather than mere acquisition of knowledge. Kenyans also expressed the desire to have a curriculum that empowers learners with 21st century skills. Based on this feedback, KICD proposed to adopt a competency-based curriculum approach in the reforms (Kabita and Ji, 2017, p.7).

A report on the comprehensive needs assessment in the State of Colorado, USA (Colorado Department of Education, 2008), indicates how diverse and important need assessment is as follows:

…at a minimum, needs assessments should address: test score results in the aggregate and for subgroups, dropout rates, student mobility, attendance rates, and graduation rates. Curriculum and instruction issues should also be examined, including alignment with Colorado Model Content Standards and assessment frameworks. Professional development needs should also be assessed including teacher qualifications, the nature of professional development, and planning time for teachers. Family and community involvement should be explored and should involve communication with parents about student achievement, their involvement in decisions, supports provided to families, and/or business partnerships. School and district organizations provide contextual information that is important for framing needs. Vision, mission, decision-making structures, central office support, and budgetary issues are some contextual factors to consider. The comprehensive needs assessment included stakeholders that represent all parts of the system. Superintendents, central office staff, principals, teachers, paraprofessionals, school office staff, parents/guardians, community members, and students all had important information about the system (p.4).
The above idea reflects that most of the curriculum related activities cannot be done without thorough needs assessment results. The document further reported that the comprehensive needs assessment resulted in the development of goals and action plans. It is after the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data is completed that goals should be identified, and action plans should emerge from those goals. Performance targets and strategies for meeting those performance targets can be clearly articulated with action steps. It can be a powerful resource allocation tool. Results from the comprehensive needs assessments are useful tools for prioritizing how resources will be used (p.5).

Similar needs assessment study was conducted in 2011 on a K-12 Environmental Education Needs Assessment for the Hampton Roads, Virginia region. The objectives of the needs assessment were to identify gaps in existing educational programs in the Virginia Hampton Roads study region; determine informational needs of K-12 teachers and desired format; and incorporate information and findings into area and partner planning efforts to better meet the needs of students and teachers in the study region (McGuire, 2012, p.2).

The survey results showed that for the elementary and middle school grade levels, the top four response rates by subject area were life science, earth science, physical science and environmental science in that order of priority. It helped in the identification of priority areas.

A needs assessment was conducted in Tanzania on the needs of science education by Hamilton, and his colleagues in 2010 with the main goal to investigate the status of science, mathematics and technology education in Tanzania for both the primary and secondary schools (Hamilton, et al., 2010, p.5). To achieve the goal, specific objectives were formulated to guide the study so as to establish the current and desired status of science education in Tanzanian education system; to establish the extent of the needs for establishing centers of
excellence and strategies to be used; to identify priorities of reform in science education and development strategies and interventions that will link science to job creation and career skills; to identify causes of performance problems in science subjects or courses at various levels of education and to establish possible solutions and growth opportunities in mathematics, science, technology education and employment. In the study, it is reported that 79 primary school teachers (including school heads) participated in the study. The sample was composed of 33 women and 46 men. The result showed that the quality of teaching is inadequate to meet the learning needs of students at all levels in several respects. First, many primary school teachers lack the minimum academic qualifications generally and in their subject matters, in mathematics and science to perform competently in the classroom. Second, teachers at both the primary and the secondary school levels are not well trained in the use of appropriate pedagogies. Whereas most teachers surveyed do know and report applying some context-based approaches. Student performance in mathematics and science reflect neither thorough subject-matter knowledge nor adequate knowledge/application of the competency based approaches that are the basis of the science and mathematics curricula (Hamilton, et al., 2010, p.30). The analyses of the needs assessment team showed that the current competency-based science curricula do emphasize scientific inquiry via exploration and experimentation. These curricula were designed to develop students’ capacity for developing competencies, or the capacity to perform real tasks versus simply developing knowledge and cognitive skills (Hamilton, et al., 2010, p.38).
The Research Setting

In Ethiopian modern education history, it was after the expulsion of the Italian invaders and the restoration of the central government in the early 1940s and the further expansion period that the primary and secondary schools began to use national curriculum (Edessa, 1994). It was in the American—orientation (1950s-1974) that the first Ethiopian self-constructed school curriculum development began with the help of American advisers. It was accomplished with the establishment of the Division for Curriculum and Material Production (Ayalew, 1964; Edessa, 1994). After the eruption of the social revolution in 1974, there came changes in the political and ideological landscape of the country and the education system (Abebe 1991). In both the Provisional Government of Ethiopia (Dergue period) and later the People’s Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (PDRE), the Marxist-Leninist ideology was adopted as a guide with centralized unitary form of government at the early stage and a limited administrative autonomy for few regions after 1987, but with no attempt to localize the curriculum planning practices.

It was later after the overthrow of the military government by the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Forces (EPRDF) in May 1991 (Edessa, 1994; Aregawi, 2008) that both the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (1991-1995) and later the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) led by the EPRDF were guided by the revolutionary democracy as a political ideology (Aregawi, 2008). The Education and Training Policy and the Education Sector Development Programs (ESDPs) and other documents appreciate decentralization and empowering of the regional governments. Regional states were made to take the responsibility of the curriculum planning for the primary schools (UNESCO, 2013/14). But instead of supporting the regional states and city administrations, the Federal Ministry of Education took most of the curriculum planning related tasks. In both periods, that is, 1974-1991 and after, the positions held by both central
governments with regard to the curriculum were more alike than different. The idea of revolutionary democracy was shared by the two forces in their attempt to solve the problems of the country in their respective periods.

Research Method

A case study was conducted to investigate and describe why the curriculum planning practice for the level, especially the syllabi development, was done with little or no needs assessment reports in the specified time. The method was selected for it provides a chance to get in-depth information (Creswell, 2003) from those knowledgeable individuals who worked in curriculum development and government officials who were actively involved either in planning and/or guiding groups when the school syllabi were prepared and finalized for schools’ consumption both in the recent past and at present.

Sources of Data

Both primary and secondary sources of data were used to collect data on what was done in the area of the study. The primary sources of data were the curriculum developers who were engaged in curriculum planning at the Ministry of Education in both pre-and post-1991. They were the ones who were assigned as curriculum committee members, panel members, and heads of the Institute for Curriculum Development and Research (ICDR) before, during the Transition Period (1991-1995) and after, the Academic Subjects’ Curriculum Planning Team Coordinator (ASCPTC), the Curriculum Development and Implementation Core Process Directorate (CDICPD) Directors and members of the Core Process at the Federal Ministry of Education.

Secondary sources of data were documents written on Ethiopian education in general and curriculum planning in particular in pre-and post-1991. The specific documents included the curriculum planning process guidelines, the planned curriculum documents and reports,
post-1991 documents such as the Transition Period Charter, the Education and Training Policy, and the Education Sector Development Programs (ESDP), as well as the Education Conference Proceedings.

**Samples and Sampling Procedures**

The population of the study included those who were engaged in curriculum planning process before and after 1991 Ethiopia at the central or Federal Ministry of Education. Those sample informants who were involved in curriculum development process in pre-1991 were selected using snow ball sampling technique. The informants on post-1991 curriculum planning process were selected using purposive sampling technique to select the director of the directorate. Five of the respondents were selected from the former ICDR from those who served as panel members, the Academic Subjects' Curriculum Planning Team Coordinator and two ICDR heads. They were all selected using snow ball sampling technique. Currently, they are now out of the Federal Ministry of Education or the curriculum development area. Those key informants from the Federal Ministry of Education were one former director (currently working in other directorate) and one currently working as an acting director of the Curriculum Development and Implementation Core Process Directorate (CDICPD). They were selected using purposive sampling technique. These were persons who were involved in heading the directorate on curriculum matters. Two other subject area curriculum experts of the CDICPD were selected using availability sampling technique from those who were in office at the time of data collection.

**Instruments of Data Collection**

Interviews and document analysis were used as tools to collect the required data. The interview was the major data collection instrument and it was used to collect the data through the face-to-face contacts made with the interviewees. As a matter of practice, interview as data
collection tool provides opportunities to conduct an in-depth investigation and helps to extend further questions on the basis of responses of the respondent (Creswell, 2003; Berg, 2009). Best (2003) also writes that interview is an instrument that gives a chance to the interviewee to explain more explicitly what he/she knows and feels on the issue. Therefore, semi-structured interview items were constructed and used to collect data from the interviewees.

Thus, self-constructed interview items were used to collect data from both the pre-1991 curriculum planning panel members and the former ICDR heads and academic subjects’ curriculum planning team coordinator and panel members as well as from those who were working in CDICPD as directors and experts.

Document Analysis

The other instrument used in this study was document analysis. Those available and accessible documents were used to collect data. The contents of the documents were reviewed and collected as they were found being relevant to the study. These were planned curricula and reports to international organizations.

Data Collection Procedures

The data collection was made by the researcher after getting permission from the appropriate authority of the department and the consent of the selected respondents. Before making use of the items, all the interview items were reviewed by colleagues who had sufficient knowledge on curriculum planning processes and skills in curriculum research. It was after the incorporation of those constructive comments and improvements were made that the interview items were used. All the interview items were prepared in English and were used for all the interviewees were with high level of academic qualifications and who taught at least in secondary schools or colleges and/or universities.
The copies of the interview items were given to each interviewee to read and follow the sequence of the interview as he/she was interviewed. This was done to minimize possible misunderstanding or omissions. It worked out well. After each interview, the notes taken from the interview were given to the respective interviewee to check them and verify for their correct recordings. As most of the ICDR respondents were those who were engaged in the curriculum planning tasks before 1991 and just after the newly introduced curriculum planning work for the schools in the country, they were interviewed first for their views were important as guides to all other data collection activities.

The CDICPD professionals were interviewed to find out what changes were made with regard to needs assessment practice in curriculum planning; if there was any and why the needs assessment practices were not given due emphasis at the Federal Ministry of Education in planning the new curriculum planning, or revision purposes, if it continued as it was before. Thus, the data from the CDICPD were collected just after the ICDR members were interviewed. Other documents were read and checked as they were secured from the relevant sources.

Methods of Data Analysis

The data collected from the former ICDR heads and members and the data from the CDICPD informants were analyzed using narrative approach. The data collected from the ICDR group were presented and analyzed first for their information has been used as a reference in the analysis of the data from currently functioning body at the Federal Ministry of Education. In the presentation and analysis of the interview data, codes were given to the respondents to make the respondents in a safe position from any possible risk that might arise as a result of the research report. The information collected from the documents was
used to supplement or to triangulate the data collected through the interview in the analysis and interpretation as it was appropriate.

Analysis, Discussion and Interpretation of Data

Interviews were conducted with the former ICDR panel members and later the heads of the institute, the academic subjects’ curriculum planning team coordinator and post-1991 panel members of the ICDR, on why and how the planning was done without needs assessment data for the primary schools before and just after 1991. Their responses in general showed that the curriculum planning was accomplished without thoroughly documented needs assessment data. Some of the reasons given by the ICDR respondents are presented as follows:

Respondent 1, a panel member, and a former head of the ICDR, who was one of those who framed the Education and Training Policy, responded to the question - was there a tradition of consulting any needs assessment data while preparing the primary school curriculum before 1991 and after the change - saying:

Though there were no specific needs assessment reports in planning the curriculum either before 1991 or after, in post 1991, the planners did their best to consult the national documents such as the ETP, strategies and the earlier research reports. The planning process was done after consulting reports of the Education Sector Review (ESR) of (1972) and the Evaluative Research on General Education System of Ethiopia (ERGESE) of (1989) and other accessible documents. The two documents were consulted for their findings were thought to be all-inclusive and reflecting the major problems of Ethiopian primary level education have had and the demands of the society. As most of the curricula planning activities were done in rush there was no time to follow the steps that should be accomplished one after the other (Respondent 1)
As can be seen from the above given response, the curriculum planning body had no well documented up-to-date evidence or information about the nature of the school system (the schools’ demand in terms of admission, attendance, examination, promotion, community involvement in curriculum implementation, school policy decision, etc.); the society’s most cherished values (the molding of self-reliant or dependent, change-oriented/radical, or conservative/loyalist, elitist or vocational/practical, etc. citizens); the nature and ability of the learners, their lasting needs, attitudes towards learning and future aspirations; and addressing the crucial needs and demands of the society and enabling the learner to involve in the major social, economic, cultural, political, environmental activities and solve problems of life. This could allow the curriculum planners to collect data about the abilities, readiness and commitments of the teachers and to carry out analysis on parallel systems that provide opportunities to get education from outside of the school systems both at home and abroad (Tyler, 1949; Taba, 1962; Pratt, 1980). These are some of the data what the curriculum planning practice omitted in the last few decades in the pre- and post-1991 Ethiopian education in general and the school curriculum planning process in particular.

Furthermore, it was reported that in the post-1991 Ethiopia, curriculum planners were made to consult two research reports - the ESR and ERGESE, which were done in early 1970s and 1980’s respectively along with the Transition Period Charter, the Constitution, the Education and Training Policy and the Education Sector Strategy (TGE, 1994b) and other documents. It is also indicated that the task forces consisting of representatives of the regional states and the ICDR panel members in each subject area were made to refer to the Education and Training Policy. It seems that the Ministry of Education and the task forces organized to do the task assumed that the questions of the earlier times and demands in the education practices were not addressed until the middle of the 1990s. The other point
reflected in their responses was the time given in both periods was too short to conduct needs assessment and set priorities.

It may be appropriate at this point to consider that the major problems of those earlier times might have extended to the 1990s, though it is hard to take those earlier practices on one hand and the felt and anticipated needs of the society, its capacity to support schools in terms of different resources, on the other. The education and professional training, the commitment of the school teachers for sure are different in the later radically changing political, social and economic conditions of the country and the rapidly spreading changes around the world.

Similarly, the response given by Respondent 2, who worked as a team leader for the planning of the academic subjects at the ICDR reported that

The team in the academic subjects’ area consulted the African Science Education documents to get views about primary level education in Science Education. As far as my knowledge of the curriculum planning practice is concerned and the long years of my involvement in the curriculum planning before and just after the education reform in post-1991, there were no needs assessment reports at the central level in the transition period (1991-1995) and after at the federal level or on any of the regions. The reason was time shortage and absence of resources such as trained manpower and finance (Respondent 2).

As can be seen from the response, the reasons for not conducting need assessment were the time constraint, absence of trained manpower and financial resources. In addition to this, the curriculum experts had learned the tradition of planning curriculum for the level taking their own experiences of teaching the subjects as teachers and later as curriculum planners. Of course, their experiences and
suggestion could be one of the sources of information, but this may not be comprehensive and reliable.

One of the former ICDR panel member also shares the idea that there was no needs assessment report and the reasons for not doing it were mainly, “Time and financial constraints and considering the former research reports as sufficient gaps that have to be addressed in both times” (Respondents 3). The other ICDR respondent said that “not only time, finance and other resources, I would say that there was no tradition of considering needs assessment report as a prerequisite for the curriculum planning process by the groups” (Respondent 4).

The above responses of those who were close to the practice of the periods and actively participated in the planning process at the MoE, in the ICDR indicate that the curriculum planners relied much on the reports of earlier research findings of the Ethiopian Education as their major references in the planning process, but not on timely collected needs assessment reports. Both of the respondents agreed on the time and financial constraints, butRespondent 4 added the absence of an established tradition of consulting needs assessment report in curriculum planning encouraged the planners to do business as usual and to continue the practice.

As mentioned before, the two documents (ESR and ERGESE) were well-recognized as major tasks accomplished on Ethiopian education in early 1970s and 1980s. Fortunately, the documents have long lists of facts and ideas about the major areas of Ethiopian education. Many of the things were changed in the late 1970s. The political and the socio-economic conditions of the country in the 1990s were totally different from the preceding period. Therefore, relying too much on what was reported might have dictated the curriculum planners to lose sight of the existing conditions of the country and the global demands for diversification of the education practice and accommodation of differences.
Thus, the planning of the primary schools’ curricula in both the pre-and post-1991 Ethiopia was done by relying more on the past facts than on considering the prevailing conditions. One of the members of CDICP responded to the question saying that “There has been too much inclination to adopt those pre-1974 values that were most appreciated to be part of the curriculum in the post- 1991 in a changed condition of the country”. As can be seen from the response, many unforeseen conditions and issues influenced the curriculum planners to plan the curriculum without needs assessment reports. This in turn made the curriculum implementation very difficult and it had its negative effects on quality and relevance.

Even though needs assessment report was reviewed by curriculum scholars (Taba, 1962; Nicholls and Nicholls, 1972; and Pratt, 1980), as means to get data about the needs, interests, and capacities of the learner, the needs and capacity of the society to support the education system in terms of physical, material and financial means, the teachers, etc., were not considered in the planning of the primary school curriculum at the level of Ministry of Education in both the pre and post-1991 Ethiopia.

Curriculum scholars and practitioners agree that planning a curriculum without needs assessment reports would make it unfeasible. It affects the allocation of time, supply of material resources and teachers to the schools. This encourages the education sector authorities to defend their failures by saying repeatedly that the policy, or the curriculum, or the guidelines and regulations are good, but the problem lies on the implementation. Similarly, the learner and learning as a process would not be recognized. Effective implementation would be unlikely because of the limitations of the resources- material, financial, environmental, and the like factors.

As most curriculum practitioners agree if it is done without assessment of prerequisites, the attainment of the desired changes in the behavior of the learner would be very difficult. Planning a curriculum without
needs assessment report becomes writing educational objectives, which the curriculum planners feel at one point in time. It would be inappropriate to the maturity level of the learner and cannot be attainable with the available resources. It makes curriculum planning listing down contents of a discipline or knowledge-based. This makes the school curriculum contribute less to solving practical life problems. It becomes uneconomical and elitist. Even though referring to needs assessment report has been an outstanding and visible prerequisite in curriculum planning process when the objective model is used, it has been an over sighted element in Ethiopian primary schools’ curriculum planning process in the past few decades. The respondent who was asked, “What must be done to improve the curriculum planning process rely on needs assessment report?” said that:

The Federal Ministry of Education and the Education Bureaus of the Regional States with all the concerned bodies have to take time and work closely on making needs assessment as the important condition for curriculum planning process and the revisions that have to be made at any time in the implementation process (Respondent 2).

As can be seen from the response, the Ministry of Education and the Regional Education Bureaus with other bodies should coordinate their efforts to conduct the needs assessment activities to do the planning and revisions processes. The current practice is that the Ministry of Education invites participants from the regional states and the two city administrations (Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa) to the curriculum planning, and/or curriculum revision workshops. The participants who come from the regional states and the two city administrations are made to participate in the curriculum validation workshops (Respondents 7). As has been listed down on the cover pages of the subject syllabi of the primary school subjects, the representations of the regional states are not included.
Though it was a limited incident in the curriculum planning practice, at the initial years of post-1991 Ethiopian education reform, few of the underserved regional states (Afar, Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambella, and Ethiopian Somali Regional States) had neither a well-educated nor trained personnel to represent each subject area. As a result, it was common to get the same people to appear in the workshops for the different subjects (Respondent 3). The informant further mentioned that some of these regional states had represented the Ministry of Education to act on behalf of the states in the workshops and preparing textbooks for the schools. The other states used to send their representatives and participated in the curriculum workshops. This was a common practice that they represented the subjects they taught or may teach but quite a large number of the participants had no knowledge and experience on curriculum planning process (Respondent 7). The respondents further elaborated that the workshop participants had no concrete evidences on their own regional states or city administrations, about the learners, teachers, the society and many more issues, which the curriculum planning task demands. They use to discuss what was drafted at the center focusing on contents, activities, resources and assessment mechanisms without any consideration to the needs assessment results of various sources and priorities being identified and set. None of the participating regions and city administrations came with any alternatives of their own to the workshops. They were there to listen and approve the syllabi in a given time.

Furthermore, as raised before, the documents (the syllabi) were made to focus on contents of the subjects and their logical structures leading to the mastery of the subject matters of each area. This goes with what McNeil, (1996), identified it as subject-based curriculum planning, which mainly focuses on the subject matter content knowledge. It gives little or no considerations to the nature of the learner, human learning, the teacher, the society and feasibilities for its accomplishment. Such a planning activity makes the curriculum planning process very mechanical and makes the process out of the basic principles of
planning a curriculum following the objectives model (Lemma, 2015). This ultimately leads nowhere, but to the absorption of the subject matter contents and preparing the learner for examinations. Such a practice would make the primary school curriculum to deviate from what the current Education and Training Policy of the country advocates. It reads:

Developing the physical and mental potential and problem solving capacity of individuals by education and in particular by providing basic education for all; bringing up citizen who can take care and utilize resources wisely…; cultivate the cognitive, creative, productive and appreciative potential of citizens…; bringing up citizens who differentiate harmful practices from useful ones, who seek and stand for truth, appreciate aesthetics and show positive attitude toward the development and dissemination of science and technology in society; bringing up citizens who respect human rights, stand for the well-being of people, as well as for justice, and peace endowed with democratic culture and discipline (TGE, 1994a).

In other words, it aims at developing those citizens who are well developed physically, mentally, socially, emotionally, etc. and make use of resources wisely, who respect human rights, stand for the well-being of people, etc. However, in the absence of information about the learner, the society, the teacher and other important sources, it becomes difficult to think about achieving those objectives. Thus, one can conclude that all the syllabi were prepared without needs assessment data and lists of priorities that were made on the bases of such data ahead of time. It is thought that the objectives for each subject syllabus were derived from the general objectives of Education and Training Policy.

Though the detailed data on any of those important provisions and target groups should come from the fields to formulate the policy, the
actual practice in the curriculum planning activities organized by the Ministry of Education showed that course/subject syllabus objectives worked out by the subject specialists from their knowledge of the subject as they were taught at higher education institutions and schools.

Contrary to the demands of the objectives model, it is a common practice in Ethiopian primary schools to derive objectives from subject matter contents rather than deriving contents on the basis of the stated objectives in the syllabi. This is the practice of most school teachers - to write down lesson objectives from the contents of students’ textbooks they are going to teach. This may or may not coincide to the expected behavioral development of the student in pre-identified direction. It meets no clearly stated education purpose for the level and affects the quality of education. Thus, if the curriculum for the primary school does not fully rely on needs assessment reports, how can the curriculum address the various needs of the society and the learner? It was said by one of the interviewees from the ICDR that some of the curriculum planners tried to read and learn from what was done by some earlier panel members and curriculum workshop participants.

The researcher had the opportunity to be attached to the Social Sciences Panel (Geography team) of the ICDR for a semester for internship training to fulfill the requirement for a graduate program in Curriculum and Instruction in early 1990s. The Panel had no needs assessment reports about the demands and capacities of the society, the learner, the teacher and the concrete conditions of the schools in the country. They had no plan to conduct any needs assessment by then and that tradition continued until now.

The other problem observed in the curriculum planning processes both in the immediate past (1974-1991) and after was that the education reforms gave more attention to the ideas of foreign advisors and donors who were representing the financial sources and those who were working in the panels as consultants respectively. At all times in
our modern education history in general and the curriculum planning process in particular, one would say that it is a common phenomenon to list down subject matter contents from each discipline and activities for curriculum planning with no clear evidences on the ‘why, whom, what, where, when, how, and how much’ questions of curriculum planning. The subject-based curriculum planning dominates the education system and that is why the school curriculum tried to create elitist type of people with less capacity to materialize their knowledge under concrete life conditions.

The Major Findings

The Provisional Military Government of Socialist Ethiopia, later the People’s Democratic Republic of Ethiopia in the 1970s and 1980s respectively and after 1991, the Transitional Government of Ethiopia and the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Ministry of Education have given little or no attention to the needs assessment component in developing the primary school curriculum. It was done based on the assumption by the parties involved that the subject specialists in the panels knew what needed to be taught. They relied on what were included in the reports of the ESR and ERGEESE, which were conducted for different purposes and context during 1970s and 1980s in the country.

In addition to this, lack of resources such as trained human resource, finance and time to conduct needs assessment made the curriculum planners to focus on selecting contents from the disciplines. The unique features of the two periods’ curriculum planning processes were that most of the curricula planning activities were made in hurry. As a result, the curricula for the primary schools was prepared with limited information, which definitely had negative effect on the curriculum implementation of the level and the achievement of the expected end results of the programs in their respective periods.
The general public and stakeholders were not in a position to know about what was practiced in the curriculum planning process and they were not communicated through the appropriate ways except observing the products and complaining about the poor quality of education.

Conclusion

The syllabi developments and revisions on the primary school curriculum have not been made on the basis of needs assessment reports, but relying on the suggestions/thoughts of the subject specialists who were planning the curriculum. In addition, lack of resources such as trained human resource, finance and time made the Ministry of Education and its curriculum planners to focus on felt and anticipated needs and selecting contents from the disciplines. The practice has been exerting its negative effects on the curriculum implementation and its outcomes. It has contributed its part in the deterioration of the quality of education at the level. The general public has not been informed about the practice.

References


