BOOK REVIEW AND COMMENTS

(Teshome Yizengaw (2007). <u>The Ethiopian Higher Education: Creating Space for Reform</u>. Addis Ababa: St Mary's UC Printing Press, ISBN 978-99944-999-4-5, 263 pages 22 tables and 8 figures; Birr 60)

Reviewed by
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A. Introduction

The Ethiopian Higher Education (hereafter the book) is a well researched, informative, and easily readable book. It describes the overall situation of the higher education system in terms of its achievements, failures, weaknesses and challenges. It tries to promote the idea that higher education plays a significant role in national development, and in poverty reduction. The target audience seems to be donors and NGOs but also policy/decision makers, researchers and all others interested in higher education in Ethiopia may benefit from the book. The amount of space provided for discussing the donor issue is vast. The author's experience as a former Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Education is reflected throughout the book. However, the book falls short in a number of areas, which will be pointed out in my "evaluative comments" section.

B. The Content

For the benefit of those who have not read the book, it might be appropriate to provide a synopsis of the book. The book has an "Introduction" (2.5 pages), and chapters titled "General overview" (41 pages), "Major challenges of the Ethiopian higher education sector" (100 pages), and "Systems reform

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to meet challenges: Suggestions" (20 pages). It also has a list of 69
references, and two annexes which total 69 pages.
The "Introduction" mainly introduces the book and describes the method of
study. It clearly states that the data are collected from various secondary
sources, a questionnaire survey conducted in five universities and tapped
into own experience as the Deputy Minister and Head of Higher Education
Department of the Ministry of Education.

The 'General overview" chapter presents the advantages of higher education
to the individual, the society and the country at large. It also describes the
structure of the educational system in Ethiopia. Furthermore, it points out
that the higher education participation rate of Ethiopia (1.5%) is much lower
than most developing countries and sub-Sahara African countries average.
Efforts made to increase enrollments and to establish new institutions are
spelt out. Moreover, the encouraging developments in private provision of
higher education are also discussed. Key elements of the Education and
Training Policy (1994), Higher Education Proclamation (2003) and other
relevant strategy .documents are presented. The author states that the
MoE's (1997) study titled "Future Direction of Higher Education in Ethiopia"
identified the major challenges and problems of the sector, which include" (a)
Lack of clarity in vision and mission; (b) Problems of quality and relevance of
programs of studies and research; (c) Lack of clear program and institutional
evaluation mechanisms; (d) Financial and resource constraints; (e) Lack of
alternative ventures in resource mobilization in addition to the public purse;
(f) Inefficiency in resource utilization; and (g) poor quality and commitment of
the leadership of the sector at all levels '(p.35). Ten years later, the problems
are almost' the same and the author's and HESO's study (MOE 2004) also
deal with these issues.

The chapter on the "Major challenges" is the longest and perhaps the most
substantive one. It discusses policies and strategies on the ground,
governance and leadership at various levels (MOE to universities), access
and equity including cost sharing and affirmative action, quality and
relevance, institutional efficiency, the status of research and community

service, and resource mobilization issues. Regarding each issue, the prevailing situation, the Ministry's stand and what needs to be done are presented, supported by data from the Ministry's files, the annual Educational Abstracts, and the author's survey results. In some places, it sounds like the Ministry's performance report (e.g., pp. 11-113,120-122).

The final chapter contains basically suggestions to improve the functioning of the higher education system in Ethiopia. The need for good governance, understanding of policies and, strategies, careful planning, the continuation of expansion of access, quality improvement, encouragement of the private sector, and resource generation and mobilization are underlined.

C. Evaluative Comments

In this section, I will deal with the main strengths and shortcomings of the book. However, some preliminary observations are in order.
1. Though it has serious limitations, the book is a major contribution to the literature on higher education in Ethiopia.
2. The data provided in the book are useful for deeper understanding of the situation.
3. The book presents some superfluous data on internal operational issues. Issues particularly related to donors (including the 54 page long annex regarding Government/donor relations in the preparation and implementation of the education sector development programs of Ethiopia).
4. The book needs thorough technical, language and academic books' editing. The reviewer will not dwell on these issues (e.g. placement of the acknowledgments unit, lack of references for some tables on pages 22 & 23, for example, and arguments concerning too specific details).
5. My comments follow the sequential order of the issues/topics treated in the book.

Quite a large portion of the book and most of the arguments in the book are based on the findings of questionnaire sent to 8 universities. In fact,   only 5 of these universities responded. Addis Ababa, Haramaya and Mekele universities, which account for 47% of the national regular enrollments did not respond (MOE, 2006: Teshome, 2007:21). Though it is mentioned that the findings based on the questionnaire are only indicative, many issues are supported by the opinions of students and university leadership. We are not told how the respondents were selected and what the sample size was. (It is to be noted that the sample size and return rate is about 50%).

The author tells us that higher education (and its expansion) will bring about socio-economic development, reduction in poverty, political stability and peace in Ethiopia. I wish and would like to believe it. But the hard fact is that it is one of the many variables such as "correct policies and strategies of development", good governance development of industries and technologies, good culture of discussion and tolerance, prevalence of peace and stability, availability of key natural resources, and committed and competent human resources which contribute to socio-economic development. We agree that Ethiopia falls close to the bottom on UNDP's human development indicator (rank of 170 out of 177 countries, UNDP, 2006).

It is indicated that "students who follow a three-year technical and vocational education and training program are also eligible to enter higher education institutions, and possibly continue for a degree level training basically as advanced standing students. The actual implementation of such provisions have not yet been clearly outlined and supported with working procedures and guidelines. So many stakeholders in the TVET sector, including the students are not very clear and knowledgeable about the modalities and mechanisms of realizing the opportunities "(p.11). The author is right to point out that clear policy, rules, guidelines, criteria, and procedures (not outlines) have not been worked out in the past 13 years, since the issuance of the Education and Training Policy. However, he shies away from pinpointing the primary actor/s responsible bodies for this failure.

It is unfortunate that the author did not adequately indicate that the Ministry is the policy maker, the administrator, the police, and the judge regarding educational issues in the country. I do not have any problem with the Ministry issuing policies and guidelines and making some supervision. However, it is unfair when it makes all the decisions "through the incompetent leadership" that the author strongly and repeatedly indicates.

It is stated that "private higher education institutions are also suffering from...the poor quality of teaching and learning in many of these institutions. In addition to the quality of students entering these institutions, which are largely low scoring students who could not join public institutions, the method of teaching and the quality of the teaching staff are generally poor in many institutions contributing to poor quality provisions" (p.29-30). However, these conclusions are not adequately substantiated by empirical data.

I agree that the Higher Education Proclamation (HEP) is a landmark and an important policy document concerning higher education in Ethiopia. It provides for some administrative and financial autonomy, states the objectives of higher education, introduces cost sharing and provides for block grant budgeting. Not only this but it also specifies the duties and responsibilities of the Boards and the institutions, specifies the rights and duties of the academic staff and students, specifies the duties & responsibilities of presidents & senates, and establishes Higher Education Relevance and Quality Assurance Agency (HERQA) and Ethiopian Higher Education Strategy Center (HESC). However, it falls short in a number of areas relevant to the democratization of the institutions. This includes, inter-alia, the Board membership, the selection of the presidents, the roles of the senates, and clarity of concepts such as "academic freedom" and "institutional autonomy".

One of the weaknesses of the book is that it does not review any of the major policy documents (e.g. Higher Education Proclamation) and does not question the ways that the education ministers and vice ministers(though political posts), university board members, and the university presidents are

selected and appointed. One would expect some criteria, procedures and responsible body to nominate and select these leaders. I do not want to be too personal, but the readers should be aware that in the past 30 years, an army colonel, a lawyer, a typing/business teacher, a soil scientist and a physician have been ministers and/or vice-ministers of education. These individuals could be smart and competent in their fields of study, but I really doubt if they were versed in educational issues before their appointment. It is also doubtful whether or not these people even comprehend the complexity of the Ethiopian educational systems. It must have taken them years to learn about education, educational systems and the vast and complex problems of the system.

There are several biased and flawed sentences and ideas throughout the book. The following sample quotations will illustrate the point:
   a. "The preparatory program in secondary school is considered negative as it influences the input in higher education institutions. If the preparatory program has deficiency, it is largely the result of the consequences of the higher education itself, as it is the one either producing or not producing the necessary number of teachers in the required quality...The negative opinion on preparatory and duration of study may also be related to the mere desire to keep the status quo" (p.47).
   b. "Whenever a given policy or strategy is implemented it will have challenges that will start from resentment or resistance, lack of conducive environment and support (p.48).
   c. "The Ministry of Education leads the whole education system including the higher education sector. The requisite capacity and organizational set up to lead and guide the sector....have much to be desired. The leadership provided in the last decade or so in terms of effective support and guidance to the sector has not yielded transformation" (p.51).
   d. 'The Boards of universities have not been successful in leading the sector..., many Boards have not been meeting regularly, in some cases for over a year... In many cases the boards were focusing on

trivial issues rather than leading the universities in strategic issues..." (55-57).

e. 'The Senate, mainly concerned with academic affairs, is made accountable to the president. Such arrangement has both positive and negative aspects. Making the Senate accountable to the president is a new paradigm challenging the status quo. The traditional system where the senate is above the president would have ensured collective wisdom and responsibility and decision making. On the other hand it stifles the authority and executive duties of the president" (p.60).

f. 'To alleviate these problems and bring about productive change and reform (if not transformation) there may be a need to try expatriates in different capacities. In the last five years, there has been a strong desire towards having expatriate leaders and managers for higher education institutions in Ethiopia to bring in modern management culture. This desire emanates from the poor leadership and management of most institutions" (p.61).

g. 'The other options may be to employ high level and experienced expatriates and assigning them as presidents and vice-presidents, as well as deans in the Ethiopian institutions. This entails putting expatriates in full control of the leadership and management positions" (p.62).

h. To date, HERQA ...has not become fully operational due to insufficient number of highly qualified experts and has not undertaken its mandated responsibilities fully due to lack of clarity of purpose, appropriate leadership and other internal institutional setup shortcomings" (p.83). "Currently the Agency is focusing on employing recent graduates and sometimes incompetent and uncommitted personnel" (p.84).

i. "Quality assurance and enhancement is largely in the hands of each faculty member and there are no institutional mechanisms, emphasizing the need for institutional mechanisms to be put in place to assure and enhance quality and relevance" (p.86).

j. 'The lack of proper leadership and poor human resources and facilities (by HESC & HERQA) could be the major bottlenecks to their effective delivery. Lack of clarity of missions and focus are also limitations of the agencies"(p.91). [Strengthening the organizations] with its organizational capacity and also revisiting its leadership and management towards putting in place more visionary people who have a track record of walking the talk rather than making superficial noises" (p.93)

k. "Although there were attempts to upgrade curricula of most programs in the last few years, there is still a big resistance to change by many faculty and institutions. When one looks into most curricular review workshops, it becomes obvious that these workshops are like baptizing what is already known and not to accept any change or new ideas, particularly by the vocal senior faculty" (p.97).

l. "Faculty needs to enjoy academic freedom and autonomy, as rights and duties, while being fully responsible and accountable to students and society. Academic faculty has to be able to speak out and write on ethical, cultural and social issues independently, and in full awareness of their responsibilities" (p.108).

m. "According to the survey, other important factors affecting faculty retention in the institutions include lack of academic freedom, lack of respect for academic staff, political interference and disturbance, poor research incentives and further training, poor infrastructural facilities of towns where universities are established, and strong competition from private and non-governmental organizations" (p.110).

I would like to comment on the above and related accusations, blaming, assertions, defensiveness and allegations in general terms. Mainly they focus on the incompetence of leadership at the Ministry, Boards and Universities; resistance to changes by many faculty members and institutions: institutional autonomy and academic freedom; Senates being accountable to the presidents; lack of commitment and ownership; selection and appointment of expatriates in leadership and management positions; problems related to HERQA and HESO; and problems of retention of staff.

At the outset, it is highly relevant to point out that the major characteristics of academia include research, debate, discussions and publication of findings. These findings help policy/decision makers in making the appropriate decisions. We have not developed such a culture and the distrust between the researchers and decision makers seems to continue (Habtamu Wondimu, 2000). This should change, and the two parties need to listen to each other if the education sector is going to develop better. One would expect several research papers, conferences and proceedings to make a serious decision like making most Bachelor of Arts or Science Degree Programs three years (particularly in education) rather than four years. Where are the studies, the options, and the proposals? What were the justifications, pros and cons? No mention was made in the book about such serious issues that affect the nation in the long run. It is to be noted that the author of the book had been one of the top officials of the Ministry of Education for about eight years.

The criteria and the procedure used to assess the competence and commitment of the leadership (the Minister to the Deans) are not specified. In the first place, on what criteria and selection procedure were they appointed as Minister, V.C Minister, Board member, University president, HERQA or HESC Head, or Dean? What were their tasks? Did they have the relevant training and experience for the post? Were they selected from several candidates? Since this is a serious issue and mentioned several times in the book, I would like to make some remarks, based on at least the AAU experience.

It should be understood that principles for good and effective governance of higher education institutions include clear rights and responsibilities, meritocratic selection and appointments, academic freedom and autonomy, shared governance, peer review, financial stability, accountability and close cooperation with the major stakeholders (Pretoria University, 2005: Habtamu Wondimu, 2006). The tools for good governance are competent Boards, senates, academic commissions, elections of deans and chairs, clear and mutually agreed rules and regulations including charters and legislations.

It is to be recalled that the AAU Senate formed a "President Search Committee" in February 2001 to screen and nominate candidates for the highest post of the University. The criteria stipulated that the candidates are to be exceptionally competent, have high managerial skills, have capacity in mobilizing resources, and be a distinguished scholar in teaching and research (AAU President Search Committee, 2001). In the past twenty years, how many of the leaders fulfilled these criteria and went through such a screening? Only two to my knowledge!

It might be unfair to assess individuals in leadership posts on a yardstick they did not measure up to in the first place, and perhaps did not apply for.

Quite a bit has been said about resistance to change and wanting to maintain the status quo' (Please refer to the quotations above). I have no argument that some people would resist change, while others grab it. The point is why do some resist and what needs to be done to bring about genuine changes? People usually resist changes when they are insecure, have misunderstandings (lack of clear communication), something (resources, post), or when they had negative experiences in the past, due to ignorance or when they have not participated in the processes/decisions. Involving the stakeholders, instilling hope, clear communication and provision of adequate information, credible leaders being in higher posts, dialogue and discussion, and provision of some incentives tend to help in managing changes, I am not aware of the major efforts made to bring about what the author called "transformational changes" in the Ethiopian higher education system. Studies conducted in most of the public higher education institutions in Ethiopia show that the academic staff and students are not even aware of the main elements (contents) of the Higher Education Proclamation or the Education Sector Development programs (FSS, 2007 forthcoming). There is no discussion and effort to persuade the staff that this or that way of doing things is better. Of course, the one who is trying to sell the idea must be convinced in the first place and should not do it for the sake of pleasing those above him/her (or the status quo).

A critical point that the Higher Education Proclamation and the author of the book seem to miss is the understanding and explication of the concepts of academic freedom and institutional autonomy. Autonomy usually refers to the degree of independence of an institution in self regulation, administration and carrying out its affairs without outside (government or its agents) interference and control. It further refers to the abilities of universities to decide about programs and curricula, students' admission, methods of teaching and students' assessment, employment and promotion of teachers, conducting research, and internal management of financial and other resources. Autonomy entails accountability where the institutions have to justify their actions and inactions to the government, the community and the society at large concerning the usage of public money and other resources, and issues. Academic freedom refers to the scholar's (individually or collectively) freedom to pursue truth in his teaching and research activities without fear of punishment. It is the right to teach, write and disseminate without any interference (of course subject to accepted professional principles and standards) from others and without any censorship (UNESCO, 1991). Limitations do exist regarding advocacy of violence, war, or hatred based on ethnicity, religion, or other social groupings. The concepts and principles of academic freedom and autonomy are vague and/or ill-treated both in the proclamation and in the book. Referring to the UNESCO (1997) Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel, the Dar-es Salaam Declaration on Academic Freedom and Social Responsibility of Academics and other international instruments would have helped in clarifying the concepts.

Making the senates and academic commissions serve as advisory bodies is not justifiable in the Ethiopian context. We have already indicated that presidents are not appointed through search processes or based on competence and fulfilling the criteria. Do we really expect that vice-presidents, deans and officers appointed by the president (i.e., senate members) will raise views and serious issues in opposition to what the president says? Do we expect debates and thorough discussions in these bodies? I believe that we are ill-advising the Ethiopian Government

(including the Parliament which issued the Higher Education Proclamation), which seems to have been seriously investing in higher education at least in the past five or six years. Perhaps, the lack of commitment and ownership also emanates from such policies and practices.

One should be advised that not only individual instructors (as stated by the author of the book) but also department curriculum committees and staff meetings, academic commissions, graduate councils, curriculum and standard standing committees and the Senates assure qualities. Usually, approvals of programs go through these bodies.

I believe that the author really went too far when he proposed that the universities presidents, vice presidents, and deans be expatriates with "full control of the leadership and management positions". The point reminded me of the recent racist article and a book about the low IQ of Ethiopians (Please refer to Damtew Teferra, 2006; Demissie and Tilahun, 2007 and Girma Berhanu, 2007 for the critique).   A person who had played a major role in the leadership of the educational system a person who is aware of the ways leaders are selected and appointed, and a person who had perhaps heard of top notch Ethiopian academics working in many countries and international organizations proposed (though as an option) such a racist idea. The author briefly touches upon brain drain and Diaspora issues and suggests that Diaspora 'needs to be utilized effectively" (p.142). In another place, he states that "Without education and training students in ways that make them employable or job creating within their own country, young professionals, experts, scientists and technologists will not stay home once they graduate" (p.93). I would like to point out that the main causes for brain drain (migration of scientists and professionals to another country) are low wages, poor living conditions, and political instability of many countries (Habtamu Wondimu, 2006; David Shinn, 2002; Seyoum Teferra, 2000). Estimates are that there are more Ethiopian mathematicians, economists, etc. (with PhD degrees) outside of Ethiopia than there are in Ethiopia today! The majority of them are in the USA and other Western countries with good jobs, many of them in leadership posts. They did not leave Ethiopia because

of incompetence, lack of expertise, or lack of leadership skills. There is no data to prove what the author of the book implied.

As has also been stated by the author, the academic staff is not satisfied with the salary, incentives, and the working environment in the Ethiopia higher education institutions. Due to the dissatisfaction and the need to support themselves and their families economically, many quit, moonlight and perhaps resist some changes.

I do not have serious problems with the last chapter which is full of many ambitious recommendations such as:

- Putting competent, committed and visionary leaders in all leadership and management posts (In the Boards, the Ministry itself, Universities, etc.);
- Establishment of a Ministry or Commission of Higher Education, Science and Technology;
- Granting and practicing true institutional autonomy to Universities; .
- Continuing the expansion of higher education to reach a target of 12-15% participation rate in the next 10-15 years;
- Widening access and implementing affirmative actions to increase enrolment and completion of females, persons with disabilities, and students from disadvantaged regions;
- Encouraging the private sector in various ways, such as provision of land and financial support;
- Revisiting the curricula, teaching methods and textbooks being used;
- -Putting better mechanisms of staff attraction and retention in place, including better salary and incentives.

Many of the recommendations forwarded by the author could be of some help in improving the condition of higher education system in Ethiopia.

Despite the major weaknesses mentioned above, the book is worth reading and can be of some help for decision making and for further research. Libraries and researchers should have it.

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