# Contextualizing Vocational Training for School Dropout Youth in Rural Ethiopia

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**Abstract**: This study aimed at examining the possibility of tailored-made vocational skills training for disadvantaged school dropout youth in rural areas of Ethiopia based on a project implemented in North Shewa. A case study with embedded mixed design was used. Data were collected from project officers, vocational trainers, deans of two TVET colleges, project advisory committee members both at zone and district levels, current trainees, previous graduates, workshops of the training colleges and worksites of the graduates as well as project documents. Individual and group interviews, observation and document review were used to collect the data. The quantitative data emerged from ratings done during interviews with graduates and from document analysis. The study revealed, among others, that contextualizing the youth vocational training program along curriculum and training pedagogy as well as through devising training-to-work transition and in-service (post-graduation) support worked well with disadvantaged school dropout youth in the rural areas. Such impacts as competence, hope and purpose on the part of the program participants have been documented. Based on this, lessons to be drawn from the project-based initiative are identified with implications for the way forward.

**Keywords**: vocational training; school dropout, inclusion; and curriculum contextualization

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## Introduction

Vocational education and training (VET) include programs that are designed for learners to acquire the knowledge, skills and competencies specific to a particular occupation, trade, or class of occupations or trades (UNESCO, 2012).VET provides critical access to the knowledge and ideas that young people require to become productive members of their communities, but also to live fuller lives. Governments see vocational education and training programs as essential for enhancing economic competitiveness and for contributing to social inclusion, poverty reduction and sustainable development (UNESCO, 2006). For Moodie and Wheelahan (2016), VET is considered to be a source of economic sustainability for a nation, a basis of social stability and a hope for people whose livelihood and well-being threatened by various factors. Therefore, there is a general understanding that VET plays essential role in personal advancement of the youth as well as in the sustainable development of a nation. Cognizant of this, the global sustainable development goal (SDG) included two important and explicit VET-related targets into its Education 2030 goal (i.e., Goal 4). These are (a) Target 4.3: *by 2030 ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university* and (b) Target 4.4: *by 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent work and entrepreneurship* (UNESCO, 2015). While acknowledging the purpose of VET as improving the productive capacity of citizens, these targets endorse the human rights view of VET (McGrath, 2011) by clearly articulating *citizens should enjoy the right to equitable access to quality skills training*. This points to the obligation of governments to ensure that VET is not only available but also accessible to all citizens in need. The extent to which this is being realized, the strategies being applied and how well the youth is really enjoying the opportunity needs to be among the agenda for research on VET.

*Overview of theoretical conceptions of VET*

There are at least two common views of VET: the human capital view and the human development view. The first one refers to *education and training as investment on human capital* which mainly focuses on the purpose to increase productivity and income. This is based on the human capital theory which assumes that human labour can be treated as a commodity and its concern is economic growth. Education and training of the workforce is seen as an investment that will lead to economic returns both to the individual and to society as a whole. Thus, increased educational expenditure and increased participation in education (and training) is believed to lead to improved economic productivity and economic growth (OpenLearn (2020), Dhaoui, 2013)). On the other hand, the human development view, acknowledges the place of human rights (as well as justice and inclusion) in development and transcends the human capital perspective to include well-being of the program participants as outcome of development (Thapa, and Singh, 2019 and Zancajo and Valiente, 2019). For HDRO Outreach (2020), human development approach is about expanding the richness of human life, rather than simply the richness of the economy in which human beings live. This approach is primarily concerned with creating fair opportunities and choices for all people through (i) directly enhancing human abilities and (ii) creating condition for human development. According to this source, interventions concerned with education and training are constituted under 'enhanced human abilities' whereas inclusive environment (e.g., participation, security and sustainability) are constituted under 'conditions for human development.' This means that every endeavor towards economic progress should be humanly just and inclusive. Therefore, the human development approach criticizes the human capital view of education/training and development for lack of a normative basis for considering issues such as inequality and marginalization. For Cockerill

(2014:13) the capabilities[1] approach (which is the subject of human development):

> provides a broader approach than education driven primarily by economic productivity sometimes prevalent in education today. The latter [i.e., the capabilities approach], although it can promote instrumental skills development for some, or even many, to seek increased GDP, inevitably can leave behind the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in society, and does not always nurture personal fulfilment or sustain democratic societies.

On the other hand, choices in life and the freedom to do so are central to the human development approach. For Sen (1992, 2006) this has much to do with the participants' empowerment, and, ultimately, freedom. In this conception, the outcome of being skilled is improved choice, hope and purpose, all of which, according to Tikly (2013), Zancajo and Valiente (2019) and Sen (1992), are freedom - because, as these writers argue, they are connected to removal of all sources of 'unfreedom' (such as poverty, tyranny, social deprivation and marginalization). In this frame, and within disadvantaged community settings, VET can be conceived as an act of helping the youth to transit to actors within their context. Accordingly, the thoughts in this work are informed by the human development conception of vocational education and training.

[1] According to Moodie and Wheelahan (2016) capabilities are not just an individual attribute: they include the resources available to a person and their personal, social and environmental circumstances that make it possible for them to realize what they reasonably value. Amartia Sen, the developer of the capability approach, contend that it is the realization of human capabilities and well-being rather than the pursuit of wealth that should underpin development (Sen, 1992) – thus, human-centered development.

*Vocational Education and Training for Disadvantaged Youth - Issues of Accessibility*

There is a variety of ways people define the youth (Leonardos, 1999), the UN takes the 'youth' for statistical purpose as *those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years* (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2013). For practical purposes, the current study takes this definition. Then, a very important question to ask in line with the objective of this sub-section is this: who are the disadvantaged youth? Leonardos (1999:10; citing Corvalan, 1984) defined the category 'disadvantaged youth' in the developing countries as:

> … Socially and economically disadvantaged young persons who have either never entered schools or have dropped out early in their lives, do not possess a qualified and relatively permanent occupation and have not had access to educational and training opportunities.

Access to school and completion, relatively reliable employment and opportunity for further training are said to be important markers of the level of dis/advantage of the youth according to the definition given here. This definition should not imply, however, that the category of disadvantaged youth is one and the same. By its very nature, disadvantage is further compounded by intersections with other attributes such as sex, place of residence (rural/urban), dis/ability, ethno-linguistic background and early life experiences to mention but a few. A very devastating aspect of youth disadvantage is that the negative experiences they have had such as dropping out of school or recurrent unemployment somehow shapes their behavior – resulting in negative attitudes towards life, lowered self-expectations, powerlessness and weak self-esteem. Thus, the kind of VET targeting such youth should include not only equipping with technical skills of an occupation or a trade but also a healing process from such self-

perception. Here comes the human development conception of VET for disadvantaged youth.

VET can be formal or non-formal in its mode of organization. According to Leonardos (1999), in 'formal training' all training courses are held in state or private (but state-certified) institutions and are regulated by state guidelines whereas in the 'non-formal training' it takes place without being subject to state guidelines and provides skills-upgrading for those who wish to extend their competencies. This writer further depicts that vocational training, in its nonformal form, upgrades the skills, helps in capacity building, expands livelihood opportunities for the underprivileged, unreached informal sector workers and plays a key role in the national development. Given the definition of disadvantaged youth stated above, this researcher implies that VET for the disadvantage youth, whom the formal training excludes, takes the form of non-formal organization. Nevertheless, it can benefit through close partnership with the formal system.

In a situation where there are multiple layers of disadvantage (e.g., disadvantages due to sex, socio-economic stratum, dis/ability, place of residence [such as rural residents], and many others), VET plays a very a critical role. As described above, VET is the source of economic inclusion (UNESCO, 2006), tool towards improved choices, hope and purposes (Tikly, 2013) and ultimately VET helps realize freedom through youth empowerment (Sen, 1992, 2006). Therefore, there is no doubt as such regarding the value of or contribution of VET to improvement in the life situation of the disadvantaged youth. However, helping realize these outcomes of VET is not easy, particularly in countries with poor performing economy such as Ethiopia. This triggers several questions with regard to vocational training for vulnerable and disadvantaged youth groups including: What does it require nations to make vocational training available to all? What conditions determine the acceptability of the available vocational training to all men and women? How can the adaptability or relevance of vocational training opportunities be ensured? These and related questions assume that a

mere availability of vocational training opportunity is not enough. It should be something that can be accessed by those who need it (e.g., in terms of direct and/or opportunity cost). It should also be something the potential program participants can see its value (e.g., in terms of personal development and enhanced employability) and be customized to the needs of the participants.

During the current neoliberal era, privatization is one of the core strategies used to make VET widely available to citizens (Savage, 2017). Yet, how far this fits the situation of disadvantaged groups from the point of view of affordability and quality is open to question. Studies (e.g., Wheelehan and Moodie, 2016) indicated that privatization of vocational training programs, which is believed to increase availability, weakens access especially for vulnerable groups. On the other hand, pockets of workable efforts were documented from around the world in terms of adapting VET to the situation of marginalized groups. For instance, a report of an experimental study conducted in Australia revealed that customizing vocational education programs to cultural, family life and community context of Aboriginal students improves their completion rate (Gwynne, *et al*; 2019). These two studies indicate that within the perspectives of the SDG, vocational programs need to be not only available but also accessible, acceptable and adaptable (to use Tomasevski's (2003) terms) for/to the situation of the disadvantaged and vulnerable groups. This calls for some kind of interventions to make sure the inclusion of the various disadvantaged groups in the country. The non-formal approach is obviously one way.

*Vocational Education and Training in Ethiopia*

Even though Ethiopia started some kind of VET in the early 1940s (Eden, 2012; Ayele, 2010), it has always been constrained by various factors. For instance, skilled workers (and their trades) were used to be relegated status of an outcast and despised (MoE 1984; Birhanu and Deneke, 1995); majority of the students continued to opt for academic streams rather than the vocational one (Girma, 1982; MoE 1984); the

vocational and comprehensive secondary schools introduced at various times were under resourced and were not in a position to build the necessary competences on the part of their graduates (Ayele, 2010). During the 17 years of the socialist system in Ethiopia (1974-2019) efforts were made to inculcate work attitudes and desirable work habits among the school children right from their early days in school through such mechanisms as the 'labor education' (Birhanu and Deneke, 1995), which was also referred to as 'education for work.' As a result, agriculture, home economics, and handicraft were part of the subjects in the then primary school curriculum. However, the 'labor education' program in both primary and secondary schools were not implemented successfully due to several factors including shortage of resources, lack of qualified teachers, weak connection of schools with other public sectors (e.g., agriculture sector) and, most importantly, attitude problems among the community which considered the program as exploitation of the learners' labor (Birhanu and Deneke, 1995). Reports also indicated that several vocational training schools/colleges were initiated during this period (MoE, 2017), though still they were said to have inherited most of the existed problems mentioned above.

During the post-1991 period school curricula have been almost de-vocationalized (MoE, 2017). In primary school those vocational self-standing subjects (i.e., agriculture, home economics, and handicraft) are said to be integrated into environmental education, though practically they are almost excluded. In the secondary schools the curriculum has come to be almost theoretical (MoE, 2017). Nevertheless, the post-1991 Ethiopian government introduced a national TVET strategy in 2002 (which was revised in 2008) with the principal objective to create and develop a comprehensive, integrated, outcome-based and decentralized TVET system in the country. Based on this, the post 1991 TVET institutions provide campus-based skill trainings without residence. Practically, entry is fixed to at least completion of Grade 10 (then end of general education) and students who fail to go for university-preparatory program were supposed to join the TVET (MoE, 2008). Program areas for TVET are known nationally.

There are more than 20 technical and vocational occupation fields with over 170 trades (Ayele, 2010). The levels of training in the formal TVET centers ranged from three to five; which the trainees go through upon successfully passing the external competency assessments, based on the national occupational standards. While it seems that Ethiopia is doing well in general terms (e.g., in terms of expansion of TVET institutes from 48 in 2001 to 460 in 2008), it is appropriate to ask how inclusive the system is particularly with reference to the SDG targets mentioned earlier. It is also important to question the fate of early school dropouts in the current VET system of the country.

*The Problem*

Dropping out of school is both a cause and consequence of poverty in rural areas of Ethiopia. The dropout youth often cannot afford the (direct and opportunity) cost of schooling and hence drop out prior to completion of at least the general education. Because they do not achieve a gainful level of literacy, they lead a desperate life under abject poverty. As Moodie and Wheelahan (2016) state, in any society there can be a vulnerable group of children who do not complete schooling (well), who risk not being included in or even being marginalized from the society. Such children do not have the means for smooth transition to work. In Ethiopia, some of such youth make their living on daily labor which they engage in at the next urban/sub-urban center - that only helps them maintain a hand-to-mouth kind of life. Others just roam around without any significant economic engagement. These are considered to be social problems, sitting on roadsides; locals often derogatorily refer to them as *duriyes* (to mean hoodlum) or *Sirafet* (i.e., jobless, with some bad connotation). Paradoxical enough, each community has certain resources such as land, rivers, forests and many more which can be converted into capabilities if put in the care of informed minds and trained hands. While vocational training is believed to be a very essential means to convert this situation to opportunities, such training programs need to be not only accessible but also relevant to the context of the youth. The present study was

planned to examine lessons to be drawn regarding contextualization of vocational training to disadvantaged rural youth based on experiences of a project implemented by Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), a resident charity organization, in the North Shewa Zone. It attempted to address the following basic issues:

- The place given to vocational training for school dropout youth in rural Ethiopia in the national 'TVET strategy'
- From the project implemented, how feasible tailored-made vocational training is for disadvantaged school dropout youths in rural areas of Ethiopia, and
- Lessons to be drawn from the approach the particular project adapted for the mainstream TVET

*Objectives of the Study*

- Examine the national TVET strategy (2008) for inclusion of vocational education and training for early school dropout youth in rural Ethiopia, and
- Assess the relevance of contextualizing vocational education to the situation of school dropout youth in rural areas along curriculum, training pedagogy and training to work transition.

*Overview of the particular project*

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), which is a resident charity organization or local NGO, conducted needs analysis and learned that youth unemployment is rampant in North Shewa Zone; and youth in rural areas of the Zone who had not completed general education, were unable to attend the existing TVET programs (ESD, 2016). This was because they were not able to fulfill the admission criteria and poverty. Therefore, a need for a short-term, tailor made, market-oriented vocational skills and entrepreneurship training which depended on local capacity was identified. Based on that, the project (named Tesfa Youth Vocational Skills Training Project) was planned. The plan was to reach 400 youth (aged 18-29 years) in a period of 36

months and in three districts (namely, Angolelana Tera; Siyadeberna Wayu and Tarma Ber). Each round of training was to take place for 160 to 300 hours depending on the nature of the vocational field.

Implementation strategy:

- Active participation of stakeholders: project advisory committees composed of relevant offices (bureaus) were set up both at Zonal and District levels;
- Connection to governments' formal structure such as the various grass root offices; linkage to micro finance offices and private sectors; and connection to locally available (youth job creation) credit facilities (e.g., the revolving fund scheme);
- Three TVET colleges were approached and partnerships formalized through signing memorandum of understanding. Basic facilities fulfilled at the workshops of the colleges, trainers drawn from the colleges were oriented and curricula (composed of theory, entrepreneurship, and life skills) were customized for short-term training with 70% - 80% practical component.
- Arrangement was made with local entrepreneurs. Based on that, the entrepreneurs were to serve as master trainers during the off-campus cooperative training.
- Fields of training were determined taking into account the market (and ecological) situation and the interest of the trainees. If a minimum of five trainees opt to receive training in a vocation; the classes were to be organized.
- As a mechanism to boost accountability, up on completion of the training, the graduates take competence assessment test (composed of theory and practice) set at zonal level with due reference to the national occupational standard. The trainers are well informed of that.

In general, the VET is a non-formal one which was designed to closely benefit from the formal VET program run by the government. Once the

training completed there was transition as well as follow up support. The graduates were given tool kits for their transition; those who formed associations were also connected to local credit schemes. The project allocates 4,000 - 6,000 Birr per graduate which they could pool together and use as guarantor to benefit from the local credit schemes. The line government offices at the districts provided technical support when the graduates started their own business. The project also made follow-up and provided support to make sure the self-reliance of the graduates.

## Methods and Materials

The major purpose of this study is to examine the possibility for customized vocational training for school dropout youth in rural Ethiopia by taking the case of the youth vocational training initiative that is implemented in three districts of North Shewa (described above). A case study method with embedded mixed design method (with qualitative as dominant one, i.e., QUAL-Quan) is used. The study is a case study because it depends on a VET project for disadvantaged rural youth as a case for investigation. According to Schoch (2020), case study research involves a detailed and intensive analysis of a particular event, situation, organization, or social unit. A case, writes Schoch (citing Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, 2004) has defined space and time. In the present case the project as a whole (with its time-boundedness and known space) is taken as a case for investigation. The study has also adopted the embedded mixed design because such a design allows the researcher to collect and analyze both types of data at the same time, but within a larger quantitative or qualitative design (George, 2021). That means one type of data (quantitative or qualitative) is secondary to the other. In the present case qualitative design is used as dominant method because the purpose is to develop understanding of the contextualization approach the project applied to make the VET relevant to the situation of the disadvantaged youth groups. Nevertheless, an attempt is made to

quantified some aspects of the data so as to benefit from the details that doing so would provide.

- *Sources of data*: generally, the project implementers, graduates work sites, training sites and project documents were taken to be the principal sources of data. More specifically, these included project officers; vocational trainers; deans of two TVET colleges, project advisory committee members both at zone and district level, current trainees, previous graduates, workshops of the training colleges and worksites of the graduates as well as project documents. Position (or role) in connection to the implementation of project and availability were the principal reasons in the purposive sampling of the sources of data as described in the subsequent paragraphs.
- *Instruments of data collection*: these included interview guides, document analysis themes and observation.
    - Interview guides were used with project officers (two at head office and two at site level); one vocational trainer taken from each of the three colleges (Chacha, Deneba and Debresina); deans of two of the colleges (the third one was not around); project advisory committee members (two at the zones and three to five at each of the three districts), a group of six current trainees, four groups of 6-10 members of previous graduates already started their own business in dairy production, tailoring and tire repair and two unemployed graduates of the vocational training program. Deans and project officers were taken because their positions put them at forefront of the project implementation. The remaining participants were included based on availability during the fieldwork period. Separate interview guides were used with each. In general, seven individual interviews and nine group interviews were conducted. Detailed field notes were taken during the data collection. While the individual interviews lasted from 40 to 60 minutes, the group

interviews lasted from 60 to 90 minutes. The researcher conducted the interviews.

- Observation: visits were made to workshops of two of the TVET colleges (because Workshop of the third TVET College [i.e., Chacha TVET] was closed during the visit). Similarly, visits were made to work stations of three groups of graduates who have already started work, namely that of tire repair and dairy farm (both in Debresina) and plastering site (in Deneba). The visits had three thematic areas of focus: (1) current activity, (2) meanings the graduates attach to what they are doing and (3) their outstanding concerns. These work stations were selected for observation because they were the most accessible during the rainy season when the field visit took place.
- Document review: this was conducted to get a thorough understanding of the very purpose of the project and to examine how the design of the project tried to address the situation of the particular group of marginalized youth. Hence, project master proposal and log frame as well as annual and quarterly narrative reports were reviewed. Some of the information gained from these sources were used to augment the responses of the project officers.
- Instrument for quantitative data collection: quantitative data were used to further enrich two important results obtained through interview: adequacy of the training the graduates received and the employment status of the graduates. Where the first one emerged in the interview process whereby the graduates rated their training along five components of the training[2](Table 1 in this report),

[2] (1) The theoretical knowledge/study; (2) The technical/ skills component; (3) The internship component; (4) The business planning skills component and (5) The life skills training component.

the second one used follow-up data on the whereabout of the graduates which the project office organized (Table 2 in this report). Therefore, there was no separate instrument developed for the quantitative data collection.

- *Methods of data analysis* - thematic approach was the dominant method of data analysis applied in this study. Three major themes were identified from review of theoretical literature on effective VET program (e.g., Leonardos, 1999; Nyen, Skålholt & Tønder, 2015; and Thapa and Singh, 2019) and by also relating to the objectives of the study. These were 'the place accorded vocational training for school dropouts in the national TVET strategy; relevance of the vocational training the project applied and effectiveness of the vocational training.' Then important issues found from reading and re-reading of the fieldnotes taken during the interviews, field observation and from document analysis were categorized under those major themes as found relevant. Next, four sub-themes were derived under the third major theme (i.e., effectiveness of the VET) from further reading of the fieldnotes. These were 'initial challenges, what worked well with regard to contextualization, graduates' views of the adequacy of their training and status of employment of the graduates.' Once the major themes and sub-themes known both semantic analysis (analyzing the explicit content of the data) and latent analysis (reading into the subtext and assumptions underlying the data) were used to understand the phenomenon. The quantitative data were obtained particularly on the last two sub-themes: graduates' views of the adequacy of their training and status of employment of the graduates. Arithmetic means and percentages were used to summarize and analyze the quantitative data. The results were used to enrich findings from the qualitative analysis.

## Results

This sub-section is organized into three major themes: the place the national TVET strategy accorded vocational training for school dropouts, relevance of the project-based vocational training, and its effectiveness (or how well it worked against its purpose).

*The Place accorded to vocational training for school dropouts in the national TVET strategy*

Ethiopia has formulated a national TVET strategy back in 2002 and revised it in 2008 (MoE, 2008). The overall objective of the national TVET strategy is stated to *create a competent, motivated, adaptable and innovative workforce in Ethiopia contributing to poverty reduction and economic development through facilitating demand-driven, high quality TVET.* (MoE, 2008). Under this umbrella, the strategy outlined about 12 objectives to be achieved through implementation of the national TVET strategy. One of the major questions in connection to the very purpose of the present study is *whether the national TVET strategy has any provision regarding vocational training for disadvantaged youth groups in general and those of the poor rural youth in particular.* In this section, attempt has been made to locate whether such provisions are there and to identify where gaps prevail.

Two of the twelve objectives of the national TVET strategy specifically target provision of skills training to rural people, women and persons with special needs. These are:

- Empower women and rural people through skills development, and
- Ensure equal access of women and people with special needs to TVET

The strategy recognizes the empowering function of skills training for disadvantaged groups observed from one of the objectives, though that

is not reflected in the overall objectives of the TVET. It targets creating access for women and people with special needs. What about rural people? Rural areas in Ethiopia need special attention if they have to get equal access to skills training and benefit from its empowering function. The above objectives talk about 'creating access.' Is creating access enough for some disadvantaged groups to benefit from an education and training program? Practically not! Availability and the right to equal access alone cannot make disadvantaged youth benefit from the available vocational training opportunity because there are multiplicities of barriers. It is understood that vocational education needs to address the particular needs of rural areas, where much of the informal economy is located. Unfortunately, this remains to be a major gap in vocational education understanding and practice (Wheelahan and Moodie, 2016). As will be presented below, even if there are some relevant elements of the program delivery included into the national strategy, explicit statements on how to address the situation of school dropout in rural Ethiopia are missing. Very little has been said even about how to make the formal TVET provision inclusive.

The national strategy takes multiple organizations as stakeholders to implement the TVET program including Civil Society Organizations, Non-governmental Organizations and various public associations representing people living in rural areas. This can be taken as a positive step in the sense that the very purpose of the founding of such organizations is generally to support the disadvantaged groups in society. Therefore, if well thought on, the fact that the strategy recognizes these organizations can be taken as a promising opportunity.

Other components of the strategy which can be taken as promising opportunities to address the skills training needs of youth school dropouts in rural areas (and other disadvantaged groups) included the following:

- Decentralized approach with due attention to the centrally prepared occupational standard,
- Flexibility in program delivery whereby the program providers (i.e., TVET institutes and colleges) are mandated to relate their approach to the regional/local context of the labor market,
- Modularization of the curriculum where there can be possibility for a kind of credit accumulation so that disadvantaged youth can receive the training for sometimes and dropout only to continue from where s/he stopped when her/his situation allows,
- Attention to local capacity in program delivery: for instance, recognition of the traditional apprenticeship training approach; local crafts persons; local natural resources; etc. as assets in determination of program area and modalities of delivery, and
- Recognition of the formal, non-formal and informal training delivery approaches and the connection of the latter two with the formal approach. In particular, development of relevant non-formal TVET programs as priority to increase TVET offers for target groups in rural areas and for skills upgrading ... (MoE, 2008:34)

- A close look at each of these components reveal that there are possibilities to devise mechanisms to address skills training needs of disadvantaged youth in rural areas if any organization wish so. This does not mean there are explicit statements to train these groups. In fact, several challenges can be deduced from the national TVET strategy which are likely to limit the possibility of vocational training for school dropout and disadvantaged youth in rural Ethiopia. Here are a few of them,
- The strategy assumes that the formal TVET is limited to completion of general education (MoE, 2008: 50). So, it is not difficult to imagine how those who quit school before that are excluded particularly in a situation where the government limits its role to the formal one. Nowhere in the strategy has the term 'school dropout youth' been mentioned.

- The strategy reads, *More attention will be given to international standard in the design of occupational standard* (MoE, 2008:27). International standards may help during this era of globalization. However, localization should attract equal attention for most of the school dropouts, particularly those who attend the non-formal and practice the informal TVET need more on what works in their context rather than global competitiveness.
- Strengthening private TVET in the medium and long term is said to be strategy to improve availability according to the national strategy. The public TVETs are assumed to gradually leave space for the non-public ones, as the essence of the strategy indicates. No mention was made of the focus of the public TVET, particularly in terms of targeting those who cannot afford to pay for private providers. And no other alternatives have been explicitly stated in the national TVET strategy regarding this.

In general, the national TVET strategy has some elements which can be taken as opportunities to create access to vocational training for disadvantaged groups in general and school dropout youth in rural areas in particular. However, it is very difficult to claim that the strategy has adequately addressed the needs of disadvantaged rural youth who have dropped out of schools prior to completion of general education. Where early school dropout is a reality in Ethiopia, particularly in rural areas, this can be taken as a major omission or drawback of the strategy.

Based on this, it is proper to ask whether (and how) what the particular implementing 'organization (i.e. ECD)' have tried-out using the particular vocational training project related to the National TVET Strategy and to the human development approach underscored as theoretical assumption of this study. While detailed evidence will be presented later, a few brief indicators are outlined here.

The project targets disadvantaged youth in selected rural areas. While being rural has been said to be an important area of focus to promote

access to vocational training according to the national TVET strategy, it has not been connected to economic disadvantage. Besides, nothing has been mentioned in the national strategy regarding school dropout youth who roam in rural areas without, as Vegas and Petrow (2008) noted, any useful carryover from their few years of schooling to the rural economic life. So, the project by addressing both of these has attempted to demonstrate how to fill policy gaps in TVET provision. By devising an inclusive approach for marginalized school dropout rural youth, the project is said to be well-fit to the human development approach. It is not only based on market but also on the very interest of the trainees and, particularly, the impact of vocational training in the empowerment of the youth and resilience of the local community. With its compensatory approach, the project worked in favor of those who lost both in education and in access to gainful vocational training. Depending on local capacity through utilization of local structure, training resources, local entrepreneurs and ecological opportunities; the project again aligned with the idea of capabilities approach. The trainers had to adapt the training content as well as the language of presentation to the local context, which again make the vocational training relevant and meaningful to the disadvantaged school dropouts. The following section will present this in more detail.

*Relevance of the particular vocational training*

Relevance of education and training can be taken as one of the very common concerns because it relates to what the education and/or training does to the target groups it is intended for. For instance, Makuvaza and Hapanyengwi (2017, citing Abbott, 2014), write relevance is rooted in the role of education or training to individuals and/or to community. It is connected to peoples' (or community's) needs that are [either] directly applicable to the personal aspirations, interests, or cultural experiences of students/trainees and [or] connected to real world issues, problems, and contexts. Therefore, an important question to be asked in appraising a vocational training

program is whether it is related to the needs, aspirations and concerns of the target groups (or community) it is intended for.

In the effort to appraise the relevance of the particular vocational training, one of the questions raised was *what is interesting and special about the vocational skills training project which make it locally relevant*. Regarding this, several attributes of the project were mentioned by the respondents: *it embraced those with very low education* (ZPACm-1, ADPACm-1)[3] which the formal TVET program excludes, *it targeted youth groups who did not as such had attractive options in life (*TVETD1, ZPACm-1*)* that means who have no means to get back to school or to start own business*,* and *the vocation the youth acquired is what they can use immediately (*ADPACm-1, TVETD2*)*. These representative citations from the respondents clearly communicate that the relevance of the particular vocational training lies in its target group: the impoverished youth in rural areas who could not advance in their education and their needs. Other respondents see the relevance of the particular vocational training in terms of the changes they could see on the youth the project targeted: *The youth who were on road sides with no hope and who were rather considered as social problems themselves have now started to talk about work, about credit, about market connection, etc.*(TDPACm-2, POS2,); *The vocational training graduates have started to rely on themselves* (SDPACm-3) and *I could see hope on youth who were said to be social problems earlier* (TVETD1). Therefore, developing a sense of purpose, and self-reliance are among the essential outcomes the participants of the study witnessed as they consider the relevance of the project.

Similarly, from the group interview conducted at SiyadeberenaWayu District (SDPACm) the following indicators of the relevance of the project were extracted:

[3]Note that abbreviations representing the respondents were used in all the in-text citations. Please refer to Annex 1 for the abbreviations and what they stand for.

- The project embraced the poor most youth who have problems even to satisfy their basic needs;
- The project is aligned well with the revolving fund scheme which the Government allotted for youth job creation - the training is short-term, there is collateral saving and the graduates provided with startup tool kits;
- The project addresses youth group whom the formal TVET could not embrace. There are youth who are qualified for admission yet could not attend the TVET because they cannot afford, particularly the opportunity cost involved against the long-term training program with very rigid schedule, and
- The youth attended the kind of vocational training they actually needed.

From this, it is possible to note that the project is a good example of bridging the national policy gap which, as stated above, tended to overlook the school dropout. The project does so by opening up vocational training opportunities for every literate youth who is interested to receive the training and who wish to start work thereafter. This again amplifies the relevance of the vocational training scheme from policy perspectives.

In general, the interview responses mentioned above and many other not mentioned here indicate that the project is very relevant to the needs of the target youth as well as to the situation of the locality. As described earlier, it is also relevant to the national TVET strategy. In fact, it should be underscored that relevance of the training, while very essential, is not enough if the purpose is to see change in the lives of the youth. The matter requires the resilience of the youth to do their level best, their effort to learn further on-the-job and the institutional supports available locally. Some of these issues shall be examined further in the subsequent sections.

*How well the customized vocational training worked?*

This question refers to the effectiveness of the project in accomplishing its espoused purposes. As presented earlier, the particular vocational training project aimed at creating access to vocational training for disadvantaged school dropout youth, make sure that they receive employable skills; and ensure safe transition to work. Effectiveness of the project is determined by how well it realize (or delivers) these intentions.

- *Initial challenge*

The respondents indicated that getting youth for such training was initially not an easy exercise at some of the project implementation sites. For instance, interview participants from AngolelanaTera District (ADPACm) reported a difficulty to get an adequate number of young people who would be willing to join the vocational training during the first half term of the project cycle. This seems very paradoxical in a situation where youth unemployment is such a rampant one. Among the reasons the various respondents identified for this state of affairs were:

- *General youth hopelessness on vocational training programs.* The respondents underscored that the youth who attended the formal TVET after completion of Grade 10 could not get employed. Several responses were received regarding how the project could overcome this: *our children attended TVET only to become day laborers or shoe shiners* (ADPACm-2, SDPACm1)*; what is the meaning of training where those who graduated can do nothing with the skills acquired? (SDPACm1);the colleges often teach theory without adequate practice (TDPACm3, ADPACm3).* So, the respondents tended to attribute the general youth hopelessness on vocational training to ill training process and weak state of employment.

- *For some others vocational training is costly due to the opportunity cost of attending such training.* Most youth live on what they earn on a daily basis. Hence, going for vocational training means compromising their livelihood. The respondents clearly articulated that: *the formal TVET is rigid both in time and content'*(VTGA1, ZPACm-2), *the formal TVET does not allow learning with earning* (CVT3, SDPACm-2), *attending even the public TVET which is theoretically free is very costly for a rural poor who had to work every day to get the next meal* (SDPACm-2, ZPACm-2) and *dropouts prior to completion of grade 10 are not qualified for the formal TVET*' (ZPACm-2). The deprived youth think more about what they get today to make sure that they get bread for themselves (and perhaps for their dependents). In fact, where they are not sure of getting any employment as a result of the vocational training, they may not have the courage to pay (or to commit their time) for it.

Obviously, these are very significant challenges. So, what has the project done to overcome or reduce the impacts of these challenges on its implementation? Here are some mechanisms reported to have been applied (POS1, POS2 and POH):

- Using the project steering committee to convince the youth that this is a different type of training meant specifically to support the youth acquire employable skills;
- Reduce the number of beneficiaries per group (or per vocation) to as low as five individuals or applicants. So, if five candidates choose an identified vocation, the training was to be provided for the particular group;
- Strictly attending to the training approach so that the youth could feel a sense of competence (or being able to do something) - i.e., develop the 'I could do it!' attitude as they progress through the training. For this, the practical component of the training was highly emphasized. and

- Flexibly determining the training time jointly with the trainees (without significantly jeopardizing the project plan) so that the trainees could commit themselves to the schedule. Besides, making individual level coaching part of the training particularly by connecting with practicing entrepreneurs.

The information from the project office reveals that the number of girls registering to join the training is improving from time to time, though still some more effort is needed to further improve the situation at AngolelanaTera, one of the target districts.

- *What worked well?*

Four essential actions taken as part of the project implementation process shall be underscored in this part of the report to examine how effective the vocational training was. These are curriculum adaptation (or contextualization), adaptation of the training pedagogy, transition support (i.e., from training to work) and on-the-job follow up support.

- *Curriculum adaptation (or contextualization):* because the trainees, the duration of the training as well as the purpose of the training is different; it was not possible to use the mainstream curricula of the TVET colleges as they were. As mentioned earlier, the trainees were school dropouts - some of them were only literate (can read and write) and others were close to completion of the general education. There were even a few who completed grade 10, yet could not attend the formal TVET due to pressing living conditions. Therefore, a training curriculum that can be used by all of this was needed. At the same time the duration of the training is very limited (often not more than three months) for the trainees may not afford training of longer duration. So, a compressed curriculum, and at the same time not theoretically loaded, was needed. The purpose of the training is also immediate one: the youth needed a kind of training that liberate them from daily labor and help them transit

to 'skilled workers.' At the same time, as mentioned elsewhere in this report, the rural economy is very much limited in terms of attracting employment in public sectors. Hence, the focus was on how to empower the youth to create their own job or, to the worst, to be employed with individual entrepreneurs (ESD, 2019). Therefore, to respond to all these needs the trainers who were experienced in handling such training and who were very well familiar with the locality were involved in the adaptation of the curriculum. Analysis of the tasks in each of the trades (or occupations) as needed in the local market; discussion with key stakeholders and gradual tryout and improvement was used to do the adaptation (ESD, 2018). Therefore, the vocational training focused only on the needed skills with major attention to practical training. Besides, very customized business development and life skills were prepared as part of the training curricula. As observed during the field visit, the training materials were prepared in the mother tongue of the trainees so that any problem of comprehension may be taken care of.

- Reports from the vocational training graduates attest that the curriculum is very attractive and focused on what they precisely needed. Here are some of the opinions of the program graduates: *no time was wasted on theory (*VTGS1*); every theoretical discussion in classroom was what we could practice immediately (*VTGT3*); we learned the skills that we needed (*VTGA2, VTGT3*); no lesson on the skills were just studied in classroom without trying it out in practice (*VTGS3*)*. These responses can somehow demonstrate the efforts made to customize the curriculum to the needs of the target youth. Similar adaptation was made regarding the teaching-learning process as discussed below.

- *Adaptation of the training pedagogy*: using the adapted curriculum, the training process was skill-focused whereby, as mentioned earlier, the theory is learned in the context of practice. As studies attested (e.g., MoE, 2017) the practical component is one of the major problem areas in TVET program

implementation in Ethiopia. Material inputs for the mainstream TVET are often in short supply and even when the materials are available, the training is theory dominated, mainly because the trainers are not well versed in the skills (MoE, 2017). Internship programs, which are said to be very essential components in the mainstream TVET were not very effective mainly because companies were not as cooperative as expected (Birhanu & Deneke, 1995); MoE,2017). As learned from the first annual report, the project overcame these and similar challenges by furnishing the workshops of the selected TVET colleges; orienting the trainers, and making strong linkages with practicing entrepreneurs (ESD, 2019). In the teaching-learning process *participatory methods were used* (TVETD1); *the instructors knew what they are supposed to do very well* (TVETD2, POS1); *the instructors were very enthusiastic because the process made them deal with practical issue* (TVETD1, TVETD2); and *the theory-practice gap is very well bridged* (TVETD1, POS1). Therefore, it can be concluded that the pedagogical approach the project applied in the vocational training was a learning experience both for the TVET colleges and for the instructors. The members of the project advisory committee who were said to be among the key stakeholders of the project expressed their opinions regarding the pedagogical success of the project in the following words: *this project taught us where the problem lies in our mainstream TVET system* (ADPACm-2); *the trainees have gotten what they really needed* (VT1); and *one thing the training made sure was that the trainees could do what they were trained to do* (TVETD2).

- The entrepreneurs' engagement model whereby selected local entrepreneurs actively involved in the enactment of the project made the apprenticeship component very successful. *The trainees learned from the entrepreneurs not only the skills the trades involved but also the lives of the entrepreneurs* (POS2); and what it means to be part of this trade.

- *Training to work transition support*: the project supported the graduates for safe transition from training to work through such mechanisms as provision of startup toolkits, saving of collateral fund (which is required as guarantor to get credit from the government's revolving fund scheme), and lobby works to connect the graduates (their associations) to line offices in the districts. The graduates as well as the project officers believed that this scheme has immensely helped most of the graduates to start business immediately. *Most of the graduates of the vocational training could get organized as soon as they complete the training* (POS1); *talking to the concerned district officers was not difficult* (VTGA1,VTGT1); *the graduates could get transition stage advice from the district officers without much difficulty* (VTGS2, VTGT3, VTGA2) and *the credit scheme which is often difficult to access was possible for most of the associations though still there is much to be improved in the process* (VTGA1, VTGT2, POS2). This is relevant in the sense that it is not enough to train and graduate the disadvantaged youth. It is equally essential to create situation in which they can transit to work, an aspect of what supporters of the human development approach refer to as 'creating condition for human development' (HDRO Outreach, 2020) – to overcome the 'deficit' in their social and economic capital and to look into the assets they can mobilize.
- *Follow up support after graduation***:** thanks to the connection already established with relevant government offices in the districts (such as education, women affairs and economic development offices), the experts from such offices were very helpful in providing technical supports to the vocational training graduates ones they started their planned businesses. The project office continuously traces the whereabouts and status of the graduates of its vocational training project. For instance, graduates of the project organized for diary production at Siyadebrena Wayu District reported that experts from the District Agriculture office visit them regularly and provided them with

technical advices (e.g., VTGS8). The same situation was reported by diary graduates from Tarmaber District (e.g., VTGT4). So, such supervisory support would help the graduates in improving their productivity and promotes learning along the way.

- *How do the graduates see the adequacy of the vocational training?*

The graduates' judgments of the adequacy of their vocational preparation can be taken as a proxy indicator of the effectiveness of the training because it has much to do with the graduates' confidence in their competences. Hence, this was one of the topics for discussion with the graduates. The general result is that the graduates do not have problem with their training. For instance, VTGS2 (a construction finishing graduate interviewed from SiyadeberanWayu District) reported:

> I dropped out from grade six and started working as day laborer because I could not get enough parental support for my schooling. I worked as day laborer for four years. I used to do every kind of manual work available, mostly in construction areas. I had the intention to learn 'construction finishing' skills. When the project came to our area, I have gotten the opportunity for the training. I am now skilled and am very well satisfied with the training. My earning has also significantly improved.

Similarly, VTGT4 (a tailoring graduate who took part in the group interview from Tarmaber District) responded:

> Frankly speaking, the vocational training is a very good one. I am confident that I can do stitching much better than those who graduated from TVET who took about two to three years mostly

studying the theory. This is a different training because it teaches 'how to do.' In fact, it opened up my eyes.

This graduate, whose idea was shared by other graduates, has clearly communicated his high level of satisfaction with the vocational training he has taken.

Besides, attempts have been made to get the graduates' judgment of their training using a rating on a five-point scale as they talk about the adequacy of the various aspects of their training: the theoretical study, the technical training, the internship experience/attachments, business planning and the life skills components. This rating took place during the course of the interviews. Twenty-five of the study participants conducted the rating along the five aspects of their training curriculum. The result is summarized as in Table 3:

***Table 1: Graduates' rating of their vocational training***

| How adequate are the following components of your training? | Ex | VG | G | S | P | Total | Mean |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. The theoretical knowledge/study | 4 | 12 | 6 | 3 | | 25 | 3.68 |
| 2. The technical/ skills component | 9 | 9 | 7 | | | 25 | 4.08 |
| 3. The internship component | 9 | 10 | 6 | | | 25 | 4.12 |
| 4. The business planning skills component | 1 | 5 | 10 | 9 | | 25 | 2.92 |
| 5. The life skills training component | | 3 | 8 | 11 | 3 | 25 | 2.52 |

*Note: Ex: Excellent (5); VG: Very Good (4); G: Good (3); S: Satisfactory (2) and P: Poor (1)*

The result presented here indicates that the graduates perceive that the training they received in the areas of both theoretical study and practical training (with mean scores of 3.68 and above out of 5) was adequate. The training in the areas of business planning and life skills was rated marginally below the theoretical mean i.e., 3 point out of 5. Generally speaking, this is not a bad result and fairly consistent with

the results of the interview reported above. However, compared to training in the theoretical and practical/technical skills areas, it seems that some of the graduates have reservation in the adequacy of the training they received in business planning and life skills.

- *Vocational training graduates' employment situation*

Due to the rural character of the project districts and as a result of limited capacity, employment in the public sector is limited in the project area. Besides, that is not the direction promoted in the current national youth development trend. The focus is more on creativity, entrepreneurship and self-employment. Hence, the vocational training encourages the trainees to look into the opportunities available at the locality (and within their reach). The project reported that about 39% of the graduates were organized into self-help groups and started working whereas about 36% of them are privately working. Here is a brief summary of the situation as reported by the project office:

***Table 2: Summary of the employment status of the graduates (during the first 18 months)***

| Indicators | AngolelanaTera (Chacha) | | | Siyadebrnawayu (Deneba) | | | Tarmaber (Debresina ) | | | Total | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| In self-help group | M | F | T | M | F | T | M | F | T | M | F | T |
| | 12 | | 12 | 4 | 10 | 14 | 35 | 15 | 50 | 51 | 25 | 76 (39) |
| Privately employed | 15 | | 15 | 24 | 4 | 28 | 28 | | 28 | 67 | 4 | 71 (37) |
| Not yet employed (getting organized) | 4 | | 4 | 5 | 5 | 10 | 8 | 7 | 15 | 17 | 12 | 29 (15) |
| Status not known | | | 0 | 5 | | 5 | 4 | 9 | 13 | 9 | 9 | 18 (9) |
| **Total** | | | | | | | | | | **144** | **50** | **194 (100)** |

*Source: extracted from the project reports (ESD, 2019); Note: Numbers in parentheses are percentages*

Graduates in the 'self-help group' are the ones who have already formed associations, gotten credit facilities and started doing their planned businesses. The privately employed ones are those doing business individually or hired by private entrepreneurs. For instance, most of the 'construction finishing' graduates were privately employed. Those who are not yet employed were recent graduates (by the time of the fieldwork) who were in the process of organizing themselves into associations (i.e., self-help groups). Such process included formal registration, getting shade (i.e., space for business), obtaining credit; and organizing their start-up business. Therefore, according to the project officers and the graduates themselves, these were by no means unemployed. The ones whose status not yet known were those not making any contact with the project office once they completed the vocational training. These might have already left the area to get better opportunity to make use of the skills acquired.

Discussions with the key stakeholders, the selected graduates as well as the project officers aligned with the situation reported here. The transformation in their earning due to the acquired skills is very spectacular for some of the graduates I talked to. For instance, those who have been just day laborers in construction sites earlier have now transited to plasterers or other finishing workers. The earnings for such graduates increased 2.5 folds (i.e., from about 100 Birr per day to about 250 Birr per day). Others of the same field who did not achieve that level of perfection (who need further experience) are working under senior finishing workers as skilled assistants and earning from 150 to 200 Birr per day. In other vocations such as diary or tailoring, the graduates have organized themselves into self-help associations (as presented above) and have reported that they are doing well (as also proved during site visits). They indicated that they are doing their work with very high optimism and the way they see life today is different from how it used to be before the training.

*Discussion*

The national TVET strategy has some useful elements which can be taken as opportunities to create access to vocational training for disadvantaged groups in general: (i) the objectives constitute empowering women and rural people through vocational training and a need to create access to TVET of people with special needs. In the first place, it is great that the strategy recognizes the empowering function of TVET. However, several questions could be asked regarding this assertion: what is contained into the strategy to realize this (e.g., to empower rural men and women)? Looking at the strategy document (MoE, 2008), one could realize that this is only a policy rhetoric. For instance, where early school dropout is a reality of rural Ethiopia (Roots Ethiopia, 2013), no mention of the phrase 'school dropout' was made in the national TVET strategy. This can be taken as a major omission or drawback of the national strategy. (ii) the implementation strategy constitutes such inclusive approaches as decentralization, flexibility, modularization, attention to local capacity and recognition of the non-formal and informal training modalities. All of this can be taken as policy opportunities that can be utilized to develop trainee-friendly vocational training programs customized to the situation of early school dropouts in rural Ethiopia. These strategies allow relating the program to the trainees. However, where completion of general education is the basic requirement to join TVET programs (MoE, 2008: 50); where focus to international standard in the design of 'occupational standards' is identified to be among the most important consideration (MoE, 2008:27) and where the medium and long term expansion strategy is towards strengthening private TVET; it is very difficult to claim that the TVET strategy adequately addressed the issue of customization of programs to trainees. Anyone looking at the requirements (e.g., completion of Grade 10, growing privatization of TVET, etc.) vis-à-vis the specific strategies (decentralization, modularization, etc.) can sense some kind of inconsistency if not contradiction.

The project depended on local capacity (e.g. local social structures, training resources, local entrepreneurs and ecological opportunities such as natural resources) to address the vocational training needs of school dropouts in the target rural areas. By so doing, it aligned with the idea of capabilities approach. As Wheelahan and Moodie (2016) argued, deep understandings of the contexts for which students are being prepared, engagement with local communities of interest, and negotiation over the outcomes are very essential to determine the focus of the curriculum and the pedagogical expectations. The approach the project adapted has helped it bridge the policy gap mentioned above (e.g., limiting entry to TVET to completion of Grade 10), and overcome much of the challenges in the conventional (or the formal) TVET such as the problem with cooperative training, shortage of resources and concerns over connection to market/job creation (Eden, 2010). This situation made the vocational training the project promoted very relevant to the situation of the particular youth group. Some of the outcomes which were identified to be achievements of the project including developing a sense of purpose, self-reliance and hope on the part of the school dropout youth in the rural area further substantiate the claim of relevance of the particular project-based vocational training. Hence, the conventional TVET programs can learn from the approach the project adapted.

Attracting the youth to the vocational training was a challenge at least initially. This is also an emerging problem in the formal TVET (ESD, 2019). The present study identified two possible reasons for this state of affairs: (i) youth hopelessness on vocational training programs because vocational certificates could not guarantee employment/job creation (e.g., due to the graduates' lack of adequate skills) and (ii) vocational training is costly due to the opportunity cost of attending such prolonged training. Hence, the project had to devise doable strategies to overcome these challenges and to improve the situation in due course of the project life cycle. Among the most useful strategies the project devised were awareness creation on the part of the youth through people they can listen to (e.g., the project steering committee),

relaxing the class size requirement (e.g., if a vocation is opted for by at least five person it would be opened) and utilizing flexible training time (e.g., through joint determination of training time with the trainees) so that the trainees can both earn and learn. Obviously, these are strategies meant to influence initial decisions of the potential candidates to join the training. The ultimate factor to attract potential trainees is the quality of the outcome, i.e., the competence of the graduates in the kind of vocation they were trained in.

Contextualization of the vocational training involved a continuum of events including adaptation of the curriculum, adaptation of the training pedagogy (i.e., the overall training approach), transition support (i.e., from training to work) and follow up support after graduation. One important question can be why such adaptation was needed. In the first place the trainees were different in terms of the level of formal education attained: ranging from those who were just literate (i.e., can only read and write) to a few who have completed Grade 10 and could not attend training programs because they could not afford the opportunity cost. So, a carefully crafted curriculum which focuses on the key skills was to be prepared. At the same time because the trainees cannot afford longer duration of training the curriculum had to be compressed enough to be completed in about three months. Therefore, the project followed the 'adaptation of the curriculum to the learner' approach (McNeil, 1991), without disregarding the basic performance standards expected to be achieved by the graduates. The other area of adaptation was the training pedagogy whereby the focus was the practical training component. Nothing was to be allotted instructional time where it cannot be put into practice and contribute to the required skill performance. The trainers had to adapt the training content as well as the language of presentation to the local context, which again made the vocational training relevant and meaningful to the disadvantaged school dropouts. In all this process the candidates' voices were centrally considered. As argued by Kanwar, Balasubramanian, & Carr (2019), involving the learner and their community in the development of the training foci can empower them

and give them a sense of ownership over their own development, which can be a transformative process. Another area of adaptation was making sure the responsiveness of the skill requirements of the 21st century. As UNESCO (2006) noted there is a growing need for new "soft" skills, such as communication, negotiation and team working, in addition to technical knowledge and abilities. By incorporating life skills into the curriculum, the project could address such timely needs. Closer collaboration between the training institute (i.e., TVET colleges) and the practicing entrepreneurs is said to be a crucial step in overcoming many of the barriers in the Ethiopian TVET system. Regarding this, results from various projects indicate that close collaboration and the establishment of an appropriate infrastructure between vocational schools and vocational work enterprises are preconditions for improving curricula and learning (Nyen &Tønder, 2015; Vibe, Frøseth, Hovdehaugen & Markussen, 2012). An aspect of the business development component is the transition support whereby the trainees were helped to create what they would like to do, with what to do and where to do whatever they were interested to do. This, according to Bakker and Akkerman (2019), is the corner stone of entrepreneurship. For these writers, if learners cannot connect what they learn in different settings, it is very likely that what they have learned in the educational/training settings remains passive. To form such connection, to develop creativity and to grow to a self-relaying entrepreneur; such supports are very essential.

The vocational training graduates hold a very positive view of the adequacy of the training they received, a result consistent with a study reported by Gwynne, *et al* (2019) earlier. Yet, some of the graduates have reservations regarding the adequacy of the training they received in business planning and life skills. This may be because these skills (i.e., business planning and life skills) are to be developed over time as they gain more and more practical experiences. Hopefully, both the transition and on-the-job (or post-graduation) supports would help the development of those soft skills. It was documented that the results of the vocational training are encouraging. For instance, about three-

fourth of the graduates of the vocational training have already started work either as members of a formally organized self-help group or privately employed. It was also noted that the daily earnings of the graduates immensely improved, sometimes an increase of about 2.5-fold was reported. Beyond that the emerging impacts of the project are being documented as growing competence to productive work, developing hope, and improving sense of purpose. These attributes have much to do with the idea of capabilities approach discussed earlier (Tikly, 2013) whereby the vocational training graduates transit to actors, and empowered to decide to pursue the lives they think they have reason to value. As Wheelahan and Moodie (2016) argued, one of the purposes of vocational training in a society is to widen access to education and work and to support social inclusion and mobility. This could be seen from the activities that took place by way of the particular project implementation.

## Conclusions and implications

The approach followed to go beyond the mainstream approach to contextualize vocational training to the situation of school dropout youth in rural Ethiopia was found to be very well successful as demonstrated through this study report. The continuum of steps followed in this process constituting understanding the needs of the target youth, adapting the curriculum, contextualizing the training pedagogy, arranging for transition phase support and putting in place mechanism for in-service (or post-graduation) support was found to be very relevant. Observation of the implementation of the contextualized program revealed that it really fits well with the situation of the deprived youth who were school dropouts, and some others who could not bear the cost of attending the formal ('mainstream') TVET. As an aspect of the emerging impacts of the project, it was documented that the youth who attended the program have become more purposeful, acquired competence (with the sense of 'I can do it') and developed the hope that would drive them forward. Over three-fourth of them already become employed (i.e., started working) someway with observably

improved income. Therefore, it can be concluded that the approach followed to contextualize vocational training to the situation of the deprived youth through the particular project approach is workable (and relevant). This implies that contextualizing vocational training to the situation of those whom the formal or mainstream TVET 'excludes' or fails to embrace is appropriate and relevant strategy within the sustainable human development framework.

In any country, change aspired to be observed at community level should be seen as cumulative one, and not only of a limited section, particularly when we consider the SDG targets which focus on equity and inclusion. Therefore, an important lesson to be learned from this study is that there are always population groups that may be excluded from the mainstream education and training programs/approaches (not necessarily intentionally, but often due to lack of critical look at the matter). Thus, it is very essential to profile the target population, study the opportunities provided in the policy rhetoric to address the needs of the various groups, see if there is any gap between rhetoric and reality, and consider what can be done in the real context of the candidates/their community. An important bedrock in this process is the local capacity (the assets) that can be mobilized. The mainstream TVET can also learn from the experiences of the project in the areas of practical training, particularly from the partners' involvement model the project applied. Understandably, there can be many such small projects tried out here and there in Ethiopia. The present study proved that such efforts worth documentation and dissemination at national level to approach some of the bottleneck problems of the Ethiopian VET system.

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## Annex 1

## Abbreviations used in the article

ADPACm: AngolelanaTera District Project Advisory Committee Member (Five persons designated as ADPACm-1, ADPACm-2, ADPACm-3, ADPACm-4, and ADPACm-5).

CVT: Current vocational trainees (seven persons designated as CVT1, CVT2, CVT3 ...)

LNGO: Local Non-governmental Organization; also known as resident charity organization.

POH: Project Officer from Head Office (two persons designated as POH1 and POH2)

POS: Project Officer at Site Office (two persons designated as POS1 and POS2)

SDPACm: Siya Debirna Wayu District Project Advisory Committee Member (four persons designated as SDPACm-1, SDPACm-2, SDPACm-3).

TDPACm: Tarmaber District Project Advisory Committee Member (three persons designated as TDPACm1, TDPACm-2, and TDPACm)

TVETD: Technical and Vocational Education and Training Deans (two persons designated as TVETD1 and TVETD2)

VT: vocational trainer (five persons designated as VT1, VT2, VT3, VT4 and VT5)

VTGA: vocational training graduate from AngolelanaTera District (six persons designated as VTGA1, VTGA2, VTGA3...)

VTGS: vocational training graduate from SiyaDebirnaWayu District (six persons designated as VTGS1, VTGS2, VTGS3...)

VTGT: vocational training graduate from Tarmaber District (13 persons designated as VTGT1, VTGT2, VTGT3...)

ZPACm: Zone Project Advisory Committee Member (three persons designated as ZPACm-1, ZPACm-2, ZPACm-3).