Misconceptions on Technical and Vocational Education and Training in Ethiopia

Teklehaimanot Haileselassie*

Introduction

The twenty first century is going to be the era of knowledge and skill on the one hand, and information and communication on the other. Know-how is going to be the most determinant factor of survival in the globalized world. Hence, training and life long training will essentially make differences among individuals as well as among groups of peoples and societies of human beings.

In order to see the future closely, however, it is important to have a retrospective glance and learn from the past. This paper, among other things, attempts to describe the views and attitudes that prevailed in the past regarding the process of acquiring and applying skills in many Ethiopian societies. These attitudes affected the development of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) to a great extent. The paper also tries to relate the effects of the background situations on the problems facing the TVET programmes currently.

To recognize these historically and socially entrenched ideas that have negatively affected the evolution of skills and trades in Ethiopia, it is crucial to consciously set a workable and effective plan of resolving these problems in an integrated manner with the overall national capacity building effort in progress.

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Social Foundation of Acquiring Practical Skills and Trades in Ethiopia

Ethiopia is one of the ancient civilizations in the world; some physical and social ubiquitous remains of history witness the fact. Even though much of its past needs to be researched, established and claimed, it can be said that Ethiopian civilization has contributed to the overall progress of humankind. After some period in history, however, practical and secular knowledge and skills seem to have been highly and "deliberately" neglected and discouraged in the society.

This unfortunate phenomenon is undoubtedly one important factor that contributed to the backwardness of the country in general.

The most important factor of development is the skill and knowledge of people. There was a time back in history when Ethiopians valued the skill of people and, as a result, the country was relatively an important centre of technology and arts of that time. The cultural and architectural remains unequivocally witness this fact. Art, music, sculpture, agriculture, literary work and commerce in Ethiopia were superior to those in the now developed countries of the world during that time.

However, there was an epoch when technology was defied and neglected – a period of dormancy and slumber followed by backwardness. Poverty replaced the golden times when coins were minted, ships traded with many countries, artisans freely exercised and produced goods, and architects designed and constructed wonderful monuments.

What caused such a degeneration needs to be seriously researched; the hunch, nevertheless, is that religion and the long struggle against external aggression may have greatly contributed for this uncomfortable slumber. The author will treat the effect of the former elsewhere.

In the rural society of the country craftsmen, artisans and manually skilled people were despised, insulted and discriminated against. They were even considered sinners and as such were assigned as low caste so much so that one cannot allow his daughter or son for marriage with a young person from those families. Hence, a blacksmith or goldsmith or silversmith was considered to be evil eyed and pejoratively called "BUDA" - a person who could secretly turn himself into a hyena or cause some body, whom he is jealous of, to be ill and to die. Similarly, other tradesmen concerned with pottery, leatherworks, weaving, and metalworks in general were looked down on. Even farming, on which the livelihood of almost all the people depended, was viewed as an inferior occupation by the ruling segment of the society.

Before the Second World War people involved in commercial activities did not have prestige. Trading in the past was an occupation left for those who had neither power nor land to use for their livelihood. In fact selling and buying were taboos in some localities. It was not until Empress Taitu intentionally opened a restaurant in the early twentieth century that some members of the nobility were initiated to buy food in a restaurant. Some products like milk in many Ethiopian communities were expected not to be sold at all. Moreover, promotion of own product or activity was not encouraged, because the social psychology that prevailed advocated rather for "modesty", and to praise or publicise one's own product or business was considered to be immoral. Such non-market orientation of the society made the subsistence system of production to linger for many years.

The two relatively higher status groups in the traditional society of Ethiopia were generally the fighters (though they were not regular soldiers) and the clergy, both of whom did not generally work. Both of them were not essentially promoters of production and creativity. Rather they undermined hard work and productivity and discouraged capital accumulation directly or indirectly.

Thus, livelihood compelled the peasants to work hard for survival but the *statue sque* discouraged skilled workers to creatively support them and ease their drudgery. Persecution of artisans and craftsmen discouraged effective evolution of apprenticeship in the culture and thereby diminished whatever technology was acquired in history.

As a result of all the above indicated traditions the Ethiopians slept for about a millennium and some centuries, as was eloquently expressed by Gibson, and lulled by religion as was elaborated by Brehane Meskel elsewhere.

One vivid example of the prejudices against those who work and produce and the admiration of the less productive segments of society in the past is the naming system of people in Ethiopia. It is very interesting to see a clear contrast between names of Ethiopians and those of many European countries where technical skills flourished.

Most Ethiopian names do not relate to manual skills or trades at all. Rather they aspire at two aspects of social relations, i.e., dominance or supremacy over others on the one hand and subservience and extreme humility and obedience to God or other divine bodies on the other hand.

Table 1: Examples of the First Category

Amharic Name	Synonym Oromifa Name	Synonym Tigrigna Name	Meaning in English
Getachew	Bulcha	Goitom	Boss or Master
Ashenafi	Mosisa	Seare	Winner
Belai	Olana	Lul	Supreme
Anbesie	Lencho	Anbesom	Lion
Negusie	Motuma	Neguse	Kingly
Gizachew	Moti	Gezai	Ruler
Merid	Cinquiso	Aradom	Thriller

These are only few examples and one can easily extend the list as long as he wishes.

Table 2: Some Common Name Examples of the Second Category

Amharic Name	Synonym Oromifa Name	Synonym Tigrigna Name	Meaning in English
Beamlak	Waqo	Naizghi	Belongs to good
Zemenfes	Ayana	Zemenfes	Sipiritual
Fekadu	Tolosa	Fikadu	God's will
Sitotaw	Bedhasa	Hiyabu	Good's Gift
Adnew	Fayisa	Adhane	God Saved Him
Gebre Micheal	Gebremichal	Gebremichael	Slave of T/Michael
Ametemariam	Ameteemariam	Ametemariam	Servant of Mary
Habteyohanes	Habteyohanes	Habteyohanes	Property of St. John

Both of the above categories of naming people completely differ from some European names where trade and skill have attained better status. Types of occupations, jobs and family names were common in such societies. The common and family names from two European countries listed below may indicate the societal value for work and respect for manual work.

Table 3: Names from Occupations and Jobs

German Name	Equivalent English Name
Bauer	Farmer
Fleischer	Butcher
Koch	Cook
Mueller	Miller
Schaefer	Shepherd
Schmidt or Schmitt	Smith
Schneider	Tailor
Schuster	Shoemaker
Weber	Weaver

None of such, or not even closely similar, names prevail in Ethiopia. It is unimaginable for an Ethiopian to call his son "Miller" or "Smith" or "Cook".

The need for this rather anecdotal overview is in order to create awareness and redress some of the current misconceptions of socio economic planners capacity builders and even pedagogists and trainers who seem to have some hangovers from the traditional background.

Background Overview of TVET in Ethiopia

After the golden age of arts and technology of the Axumite kingdom, when skills must have been highly regarded, technology seemed to have ceased evolution in Ethiopia for a long span of time. Inspite of the extensive history and ancient civilization of the country formal TVET is a recent phenomenon. As pointed out earlier this is because TVET was not considered a crucial element and a substructure of the nation's economic, social, and cultural development.

Despite the introduction of modern education (the first government school was opened in 1908) and the intention of the government to develop technical skills in the country, the subjects that students were taught in the schools were basically academic, because the primary and immediate objective of preparing educated Ethiopians was mainly for various clerical and administrative purposes. As a result, the cumulative effect of these factors became the major retarding force for technical education development.

The first Technical Vocational School was founded 43 years later after the establishment of modern schooling. In 1951, Addis Ababa Technical School was established to meet the growing demand for skilled technicians in industry. This was followed by the Addis Ababa Commercial School and Engineering College in 1952. Subsequently Ambo and Jimma Agricultural Schools as well as Bahr Dar Polytechnic Institute were established. From the fifties upto the seventies the technical schools used incentive mechanisms that helped them to admit high achieving students from different parts of the country. However, this situation, gradually deteriorated and its quality consequently was affected.

Upto the mid-nineties of the twentieth century there were only 17 government and non government TVET institutions offering training in a mere score of occupations. For example, in the 1995/96 academic year, there were only 2738 TVET students (out of whom only 725 graduated in that year), compared to 402753 enrollment in the second level academic education stream (MoE,1997). This means that 99.30% of the senior secondary level of education students were engaged in the academic sub-sector.

In line with the Education and Training Policy issue in 1994 twenty five Skill Development Centres were opened in 1997. The 1995 regulation for licensing and supervision of private educational institutions encouraged more private training providers to proliferate all over the country.

Moreover, a high power National TVET Capacity Building Task Force was established by the Prime Minister's Office to study the ways and means of enhancing the TVET. Accordingly, a strategy was set and implementation of an expanded, diversified and integrated TVET system started in 2001/2002 academic year when over 50,000 TVET trainees (including agriculture) were enrolled in 169 government and non government institutions, using new curriculum and modalities of training.

The Misconceptions on TVET

The main misconceptions on TVET could be categorized into three areas:

- The social outlook on trades and skills,
- The discriminatory practices of some educational planners and administrators, and
- The biased attitudes of educational and training institutions and students themselves

Social Outlook on Trades and Skills

This topic is adequately treated in sections 2 and 3 above. The impact of the culturally founded low status attributed to manual and other skills however has accrued into marginalization of TVET in the past and one may safely propose that it is the root cause for the other three major categories of misconceptions.

Some Misconceptions of Some Policy Administrators

These problems range from some macro policy makers at the Federal level to the technocracy in the offices of education. The biases are basically manifested by TVET programme administration practices of these respective bodies.

In the 2001/02 academic year the directives given to the regions on selection of students had some basic shortcomings. It stated that out of the general secondary school leavers after grade 10 National Examination the best ones would continue in the academic stream and those with lower results of the national examination may join the TVETs of one and two years of training (see the Table 4 below).

These directives resulted in an obvious unbalanced and anomalous condition of placement of students. Low grade students (in fact, "failures") categorically joined the TVET institutions that were established with massive investment in order to equip them with training materials and staff (including expatriate staff). Hence on the one hand more capital input was rightly made into the TVETs compared to the academic upper secondary schooling (i.e. 11-12 grades) while ironically enough the lower grade point student (or failures) were "by decision" supposed to join those TVET institutions. The negative effect was reported by different studies conducted by evaluation task forces and supervision teams. In such obscure procedures of selection the low pass rates discourage even the most motivated and enthusiastic candidates to join the training programme

(Esquieu 2002). It consequently influences their parents to develop wrong images about TVET.

Table 4: National Examination Grade Points Required for Academic and TVET students (1994 E.C)

Region	Minimum grade points Required for Admission by Programme	
	2 years TVET Training (10+2)	2 years Academic Educ. (11-12)
Addis Ababa	1.4	2.0
Amhara	0.2	2.0
Benishangul Gumuz	1.4	2.0
Dire Dawa	2.0	2.0
Harari	1.5	2.0
Oromia	1.5	2.0
Somale	0.2	2.0
Tigray	2.0	2.4

One can easily detect from the table that the regions have gone as low as total failures to admit for the 2 years TVET training but used no less than a pass grade for admission to the academic schools. A clear dichotomy of standards that made the TVET to be disadvantaged was set and applied in the 2001/02 academic year. Only two offices of Education (Dire Dawa and Tigrai) have set a minimum pass grade for admission to the 10+2 programme. Although it has made a requirement of pass grade in the national examination in order to join 10+2 TVET programme, Tigrai also has shown the disfavor for TVET by setting the admission for upper secondary school 0.4 points higher than that for the 10+2 TVET programme.

Modern concepts of TVET are in favour of integrated education and training system and assert that technical and vocational training must be arranged to be provided "within a frame work of open-ended and flexible structure in the context of life-long education" (UNESCO 1989); that is why dead-end streams should be avoided and the modular systems should always act as bridges between education

and training and the interface between education and work (Pair 1998). It is thus expected that an adequately flexible integration and linkage with education including higher education should exist (Briseid 2002, UNESCO 1993). This in practical terms means that a 10+3 student should know that she is being trained for a specific occupation but she should know at the same time that there are chances for her to upgrade her skill at the higher education level (UNESCO/ILO 2002). There should always prevail a continuum between initial training and further training (Pair 1988).

In countries where isolation and discrimination of TVET does not allow students for outward and upward mobility within the education system many factors could act as disincentives for good students to join TVET (Esquieu 2002, UNEVOC1993).

Attitudes of the Training Institutions and the Students

It was observed that even the TVETs (i.e. the directors and the staff) never complained about the clearly lop-sided system of recruitment (selection) and placement of low achievers into middle level TVET. In fact it indicates that they assumed as if it were a norm to admit the students with lower grades to TVET because they did not show any type of resistance. Rather, they took it for granted and comfortably accepted the 2001/02 placements. Thus, the basic misconceptions or wrong assumptions here are that:

- Low achievers could join and succeed in the technical training and not in the academic education.
- Technical training requires less knowledge than academic studies.
- Those who once join TVET training may not or cannot join further academic studies in their life career.

The above mentioned misconceptions are challenged by the Second International Congress on Technical and Vocational Education held in Seoul in 1999. The Congress stressed that all countries needed a coherent education policy and system of which TVET must be an

essential element. It further emphasized that TVETs must develop intimate interface with all other education sector "particularly schools and universities to facilitate seamless pathways for learners." Many countries have now increased the flexibility of their system by providing TVET graduates access and or opportunities to higher education without bridging courses.

There is a lot to do in the areas of promotion and creating awareness that joining TVET doesn't lower the status of a student and that he or she could equally prove competence in any training area of interest. This is because unproportionate majority opted for academic studies wherever the choice was given. On this matter it is important to remember that UNESCO and ILO jointly recommended that "an initiation to technology and to the world of work should be an essential component of general education". They further asserted that "an understanding of the technological nature of modern culture and an appreciation of work requiring practical skills should thereby be acquired". And that "this initiation should be a major concern in educational reform and democratization" (UNESCO/ILO 2002).

Hence the most important stakeholder to effectively remedy the misconceptions about TVET in particular and practical skill in general is the education system as a whole. More importantly, the educators and the teachers have special responsibility. Of course to be part of the solution they, first of all, need to redeem themselves from the cultural and otherwise biases against practical training, i.e., to internalize the fact that the practical skill training is not meant to serve as safety net for failing adolescent or drop outs (IIEP: 2002). Rather it is an important means of invention and creativity as well as the promotion and adaptation of technology. Even in the Ethiopian context of under development in technology the very few industrialists and technical innovators are individuals like Daniel Mebrahtu (Dan Techno Craft etc.), Berhane Mewa (industrialist and President of Ethiopian Chamber of Commerce), who both went for TVET training in their youth. The very most common and widespread household apparatus, *ingera* Electrical Stove (*mitad*), was not devised by an

electrical engineer but rather by a technician. This is not to undermine the serious need of full-fledged engineers- but to state the fact that technicians are essential factors of technical innovation and diffusion of technology. Hence, to assume that it is only those who are good at physics or chemistry who can make good engineers and those who are excellent in machine technology need not or cannot have opportunity for further training is a demise for both higher education and TVET.

Of course, it will equally be a disaster if one uses the same higher education entrance exam for those who are chanelled from the academic streams and those who need to come from the TVET. That was unfortunately what happened in Ethiopia in the last forty years. The Technical School students in Addis Ababa used to sit for the ESLCE together with the other academic schools in subjects like maths, chemistry, biology etc. Because of this wrong operational direction students were "graduating" in TVET areas like in general mechanics and electronics whereas they were actually "preparing" themselves for the exams in the academic subjects. In fact the hidden or covert curriculum for the TVET was academic! Total disorientation of the curriculum subtly took place. The result was high pass rates for University but very low quality technicians graduating. It was a defeatist policy.

Worst of all, the graduates of TVET when they join the higher education were never geared to related areas with their former fields of study. To find an electronic TVET graduate in B.Sc. degree in Biology or even English language was not uncommon.

In education it is axiomatic that improperly planned systems of examinations and recruitment highly affect curriculum. That was what happened with TVET in Ethiopia in the past because of an extreme position of trying to give an opportunity of higher education to every TVET graduate with wrong modality of admission. Now we have to avoid another extreme position-to allow *none* from the TVET to higher

education. Both extremes subtly distort the purpose of TVET and seriously affect the curriculum and the quality of training.

Conclusion

Practical skills and trades have been discouraged for a long time in Ethiopia. This social history has negatively affected the development of TVET and thereby the technical and technological capacity of the country.

Currently the overall economic and social policies of development as well as the Education and Training Policy have created a conducive and favourable atmosphere for TVET.

Nevertheless, although the national and sectoral polices are favourable for skill training to suit all levels and categories of manpower requirement, the general social background and prejudices seem to have created some misconceptions and attitudes that negatively affect the operations of training.

To alleviate these serious misconceptions on TVET and ensure a sustainable system the following practical steps are recommended:

- Make students, parents and employees to be more aware of the career potential for technical and vocational education graduates. A continuous and seriously developed public relations work is desirable at both federal and regional levels.

- Ensure that there are both horizontal and vertical articulations between technical and vocational education and other components and segments of the educational system. Never hamper the vision of life long learning continuum.

- Policy implementation, partnerships and resources need to be geared to raise the status and broaden the narrow traditional vision of Technical and Vocational Education.
- Recognize that TVET is essentially preparation for occupation. Accordingly, TVET is especially important in allowing "a seamless transition from the school to the workplace" but to ensure that TVET should "facilitate seamless pathways" for learning in the schools and higher education as well. Do not allow dead ends. This means that one needs to create a corridor for some TVET graduates to pursue higher education in their areas of specialty. In order to avoid curricular distortion do not use the same academic criteria into Higher Education for TVET and non TVET students. TVET students need to be considered on the basis of their TVET performance merits.

- TVET teachers by necessity need to originate from the TVET graduates with work experience. HENCE, TVET teacher training colleges or faculties in the universities need to recruit their students from among TVET graduates with work experience. This compliments the systemic integration and ensures quality trainers who at the same time are professional advocates of the training system.

- Primary education should play a role in orienting students concerning in their future career.

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