

Societal Transformation as a Wagon of Change: The Role of Social Sciences in the Ethiopian Context

Belay Tefera¹

Abstract

The world is transforming; Ethiopia, too, is on the move like never before in its recorded history. Social sciences have a stake in this process of societal transformation. In this short articulation, I shall bring to the fore, first and foremost, the essence of societal transformation (its core actors, domains and determinants) keeping the Ethiopian context in perspective. I shall then talk about the need for harnessing and managing the process for a better outcome. Finally, I will try to forge a space for social sciences in articulating these needs. I specifically spearhead key messages for social scientists as to how to drive the process as front liners in knowledge generation, evidence-based policy making and programing, as well as policy roll out and evaluation.

¹ Professor of Psychology, School of Psychology, CEBS, AAU, Email- belaytefera@yahoo.com

Societal Transformation Globally and in Ethiopia

Drucker (1994) has underscored that no century in recorded history has experienced so many social transformations and such radical ones as the twentieth century. According to him, social transformations are the most significant events of this century, and this unprecedented surge of social transformation seems to continue in the first few decades of the new millennium. Drucker considers the social transformations of the 20thc to have a lasting legacy in which

...work and workforce, society, and polity, are all...qualitatively and quantitatively different not only from what they were in the first years of this century but also from what has existed at any other time in history: in their configurations, in their processes, in their problems, and in their structures.

Societal transformations are then the most pervasive, cross-cutting, and inclusive concept used in social sciences for over a century now. It has been in use in different academic disciplines like political science, development economics, history, social anthropology, social psychology, sociology, and social work, to name but a few. However, in more recent years, the concept has also crossed the academic circle and begun to be increasingly used in multilateral organizations and media to point at adjustments needed in the social fabric, habits and styles of life, technologies and policies to ensure sustainable development in society. For example, UNESCO's Management of Social Transformations (MOST) Program has been instituted to promote holistic capacity-building initiatives on social transformations to bridge social scientific knowledge, public policies and society, and ensuing implementation

(UNESCO, Undated). This is mainly because the world is undergoing important changes in the last few decades driven by the impact of globalization, climate change, unbridled population growth in the third world and many more. These changes are resulting in depletion of resources and economic crises thereby aggravating the poverty of low-income countries and problems of unemployment (Linner & Wibeck, 2020).

Under these circumstances, political instabilities, social crisis, violence and displacement has come to be the bill low-income countries have to settle increasingly. These challenges would undoubtedly urge for innovative solutions from those keen social scientists who carry their social science fields and their own society in their bag. Now is the season not for society to feed and sustain social sciences any more but for social sciences to ensure the sustenance of society through knowledge generation, dissemination, and diffusion. In this regard, I submit to the general public discourse that young people are the most affected group by these changes, and hence, our social sciences need to orient the direction of these principal key actors of social transformations.

Social transformation has become a very complex subject of scientific inquiry (e.g. see Feola, 2015; Linnér & Wibeck, 2020) possibly used to refer to a “deep-seated, sustained, nonlinear, systemic and wider set of structural, institutional, technological, socio-cultural-political-economic as well as environmental changes of society as well interactions between and among them. These changes occur gradually but surly over several years or in some cases at rapid pace as it can be seen in the kinds of changes we are witnessing in this country over the last three years or so. Transformations are not just walks in the park; but in hills and bumpy roads. They embrace understandings and

confusions, hopes and despairs, frustrations and aspirations, enablers and disablers, threats and opportunities, and progressions and regressions.

Societal Transformations in Ethiopia in Perspective

We all testify that Ethiopia as a nation has been subjected to and is, therefore, very familiar to this notion of change, be it revolution or transformation. However, “change” as a practice has never crossed anywhere than becoming a cliché. In fact, it is like what a philosopher once said, “The more things change, the more they remain the same.” For instance, Ethiopia went through the revolutionizing effect of the seventeen years of societal revolution, yet neither the society nor the government was revolutionized (Belay, 2008). It was as if Ethiopia needed another chapter of change. Hence, subsequent changes were crafted and instituted by the Government that ascended to power forcibly overthrowing the socialist Regime. This EPRDF Government came up with all its different agenda of change, called “Social Revolutionary Democracy”. It also staggered a lot to affect it for about three decades but finally went astray with its agenda and, once again, things returning to business as usual.

Of course, this Government didn’t disappear without leaving its footprints behind. The most conspicuous legacies and footprints left behind are evident in so many unfulfilled policy promises formulated to guide the various sectoral ministries. To be grateful to these initiatives, the last three decades in Ethiopia were in fact an era of legislative and policy-making with a plethora of documents produced, apparently making the country a basket of policies than breads now. Furthermore, Ethiopia was enabled to enter into the new millennium with an interesting national culture of crafting visions and missions and national growth plans to inform its development agenda for

so many years to come. I believe that such initiatives have played a role in protecting our nation from not perishing; scriptural writing underscores that “people without vision shall perish”.

However, the zeal of implementation doesn't seem as strong as that of formulation of these legislative, policy and programmatic interventions. Some concerns tend to show the gravity of this implementation problem in Ethiopia. For example, in a conference held on the National Youth Seminar in 2019 at Ras Amba Hotel, a paper presenter lamented in his speech about this concern, thereby overriding some audience by surprise and others with laughter (Belay, 2019). According to this speaker,

if a revolution has to come into this country any more, which in fact isn't at all my wish as a person who amply witnessed the plight this country went through in the name of revolutions, it has to be a revolution of 'implementation.

We can show the gravity of the problems by drawing evidence from the top/national level down the road to classroom implantation practices in Ethiopia. To begin with the very Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia crafted in 1995 itself, there has never been time in its life span when this Constitution crossed bitter critiques over repeated failures of implementation. In an extreme form, the renowned Ethiopian scholar Mesfin Woldemariam lambasted, in one of his speeches, that this Constitution “doesn't even worth the paper and ink it was used to print it” (Belay, Solomon and Daniel, 2020). Being nearly 27 years into effect, the major complaints of opposition parties and citizens alike over a gross violation of constitutional rights has led, first and foremost, to series of riots and violent demonstrations in different regions of the country that eventually brought the demise

of the system and thereby initiated a reform process a couple of years ago. And, afterwards, it has left the country into different sorts of instabilities that apparently is taking a toll of the life of citizens and also seriously compromising national sovereignty at the moment (Belay, Solomon and Daniel, 2020).

Implementation concerns even loom larger when we look into the status of policy implementations in Ethiopia. Many line ministries have not yet made assessments of the level of implementation of their policies. Yet, available assessments data seem to indicate inadequate performances in terms effecting the population Policy (Assefa, 2016), the Social Protection Policy (Social Protection Policy, 2014), the Service Delivery Policy (Bezabih, 2009), the Youth Policy (MoWSA, 2022), the Education and Training Policy (MoE, 2002; Tirussew et al., 2018; MoE, 2019) and the ECCE policy; as cases in point (Britto et al., 2012; Tirussew et al., 2018; MoE, 2019). The Ethiopian National Youth Policy, in particular, was launched nearly 17 years ago and its implementation was found to go through rigorous and comprehensive national assessment with findings suggesting that the national youth policy crafting was fundamentally in line with lots of international and regional instruments. However, the policy development process, contents there in; implementation exercises and outcomes were not sufficient enough to warranty the stipulated standards (MoWSA, 2022). The more comprehensive national assessment of the implementation of the education sector of the country conducted to draw a 15 years national education road map has identified lots of implementation problems (curriculum, governance, qualification and morale of the teaching force, facilities and budget etc.) at all levels (preprimary, primary, secondary and tertiary) of the education system (Tirussew et al., 2018).

Generally, experience shows that Ethiopia is a country where the issue of implementation of intentions cries for implementation. The problem is not only that implementation has been far below satisfactory but also that the issue was not even articulated, particularly among social scientists and humanists, so that attempts could be made to understand the problem and come up with theoretical formulations to address the gap. Of course, some debates were heard among political parties as to whether the effectiveness of government policies, programs, projects, and plans was a “design” problem or an “implementation” problem. Apart from such politicized debates of the problem, very limited scholarship has been pursued among the academia to learn about the issue and, hence, our understanding of implementation concerns, associated factors and way forward is very limited.

Harnessing Societal Transformation in Ethiopia: The Place of Social Sciences

Surly, a transformative and holistic change has kicked off in Ethiopia for some time now, and this would increasingly loom larger in its right course through proper and adequate ‘implementation’ of intentions. We all agree that transforming the landscape of ‘implementation’ needs to be vigorously pursued through concerted efforts that should come in a sense of urgency. What is then the role of social scientists and humanists in this process?

My recommendation is simple! Generating context-relevant theories, assisting in the formulation of evidence-based policy initiatives and practices, and working towards innovative solutions to bridge between social scientific knowledge, public policies and society, and their ensuing implementations are critical roles for our perusal.

I would say, ladies and gentlemen, that on top of engagements of social scientists and humanists in relevant and innovative research and community services to

professionally scaffold the transformation process that is taking shape at the moment, becoming an agent of societal transformation but withdrawing of course from patrician politics is extremely useful. This agentic role of societal transformation involves retaining the spirit that what happens in this country really concerns me and I can be, as a social scientist and humanist, a solution to many problems in different ways. We can bring our disciplines on board to addressing many of the challenges we witness as a nation today.

One of the problems in this country relates to knowledge borrowing with little customizing to local realities. We teach what may not be practical, borrow policies and programs that may not be feasible to implement etc. The question is “do we really mean what we say?”: Are we philosophers with philosophy, psychologists with psychology, educationists with education, politicians with political science, sociologists with a sociology, social workers with a social work...? I am afraid we are not. Many of us, including myself, are simply trying to teach a field that we don't own. We are teachers of social sciences we are not social scientist ourselves. It doesn't take to become a social scientist to teach social science. Owning a field requires someone have a vision to forge a space to advance one's field in a more professional manner than using it to earn a living. This sense of professional ownership goes beyond intellectual competence and requires professionalism, ethical integrity, greater commitment and passion for the field. Intellectual competence coupled with professional commitment would serve as a platform either to develop our communities using our field or develop our field using our communities. In either of the cases, our disciplines are to increasingly become relevant enough to catalyze, aiding, and sustain societal transformations. So, the bigger picture that we call 'societal transformation' begins from individual-level commitment because,

unlike what Marxism holds that the masses are history makers, individuals can make history. History is in the making in this country and we can't afford to stay behind or work to detour its course.

What is the Takeaway, then?

Ducker (1994) holds that the twenty-first century will surely be one of continuing social, economic, and political turmoil and challenge, at least in its early decades. And the challenges looming ahead may be more serious and more daunting than those posed by the social transformations that have already come about, the social transformations of the twentieth century. We first need to address the challenges posed by the developments that are already accomplished in the earlier century before resolving the new and looming problems of tomorrow.

I would buy Ducker's recommendation in which he positions the first order of business for, among others, social sciences, economists and educators to work on the priority tasks like the following:

- We will have to think through *education*--its purpose, its values, its content. We will have to learn to define the quality and productivity of education, to measure both and manage both.
- We need systematic work on the *quality of knowledge* and *productivity of knowledge*--neither even defined so far. The performance capacity, if not the survival, of any organization in the knowledge society will increasingly depend on those two factors. But so will the performance capacity, if not the survival, of any individual in the knowledge society. And what *responsibility* does knowledge have?

What are the knowledge worker's responsibilities, especially of a person with highly specialized knowledge?

- Increasingly, the *policy* of any country will have to give primacy to the country's competitive position in an increasingly competitive world economy. Any proposed domestic policy needs to be shaped to improve that position, or at least to minimize adverse impacts on it.
- We are beginning to understand the new integrating mechanism: *organization*. But we still have to consider balancing two apparently contradictory requirements. Organizations must competently perform the one social function for the sake of which they exist--the school to teach, the hospital to cure the sick, and the business to produce goods, services, or the capital to provide for the risks of the future. They can do so only if they single-mindedly concentrate on their specialized mission. But there is also society's need for these organizations to take social responsibility--to work on the problems and challenges of the community. Together, these organizations *are* the community.
- The *function of government* and its *functioning* must be central to political thought and political action. Effective government is needed in this highly competitive and fast- changing world of ours, in which the dangers created by the pollution of the physical environment are matched only by the dangers of worldwide armament pollution. And we do not have even the beginnings of effective political organizations needed for effective government in the knowledge-based society of organizations.

In fact, I also concur with Margaret Mead, the renowned 20th-century anthropologist, who once said, "Never ever depend on governments and institutions to

solve major problems. All social change comes from the passion of individuals”. Mal Flecher also holds “Lasting solutions to many social problems will be found only as each individual will learn to say, “I am society”. This has been nicely explained by the 17th-century Cartesian philosophy, René Descartes, who declared that the proper approach to understanding of the world, including humanity and society, was through a few simple, fundamental ideas of reality and, then, rigorous, more complex ideas will emerge from these simple ideas. Hence, initiatives like this little piece of writing may seem small, but that is how bigger ideas kick in. Think big, start small, and continue perfecting implementation skills at individual and national levels.

References

- Assefa Hailemariam (2016). Implementation of the Population Policy of Ethiopia: Achievements and challenges. *Population Horizons*, 13(1), 1–14.
- Belay Tefera (2008). *Notions of fatherhood among adolescents: Nature, effects, and determinants*. Delhi: Gagandeep Publication.
- Belay Tefera (2019). Youth Development, Contexts, Services, and Policy Recommendations. A paper to be presented on National Youth Seminar, Ras Amba Hotel, March 22, 2019.
- Belay Tefera, Solomon Areaya & Daniel Tefera (2020). Program implementation in Ethiopia: A framework for assessing implementation fidelity. *Ethiopian Journal of Behavioral Studies*, III (1), 1-25.
- Bezabih Bekele (2009). Implementation Challenges of Service Delivery Policy of Ethiopia: Civil Servants' Perspective. A Paper presented on the 3rd National Conference on Assessment of the Practices of Civil Service Reform Program in Ethiopia organized by the Ethiopian Civil Service College and the Ethiopian Management Institute.
- Britto, P. R., Ponguta, L.A., Reyes, M.R., MekoyaWodaj, TirussewTeferra & Tezera Fisseha (2012). Feasibility study for the implementation of the early childhood.
- Drucker, P.F. (1994). The age of social transformation. *The Atlantic Monthly*, 274 (5), 53-80.
- Feola, G. (2015). Societal transformation in response to global environmental change: A review of emerging concepts. *Ambio*, 44, 76–390.
- Linnér, B., & Wibeck, V. (2020). Conceptualising variations in societal transformations towards sustainability, *Environmental Science and Policy*, 106, 221–227
- MoE, Ministry of Education (2002). *The education and training policy and its implementation*. Ministry of Education, Ethiopia.
- MoE (2019). *Ethiopian Education Development Roadmap (2018-30)*. Ministry of Education, Ethiopia.
- MoWSA, Ministry of Women and Social Affairs (2022). *An Assessment of the Implementation Status of the National Youth Policy of Ethiopia (2004)*. Ministry of Women and Social Affairs, Unpublished Report, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.
- Social Protection Policy (2014). Implementation Challenges of the Social Protection System in Ethiopia. A paper presented in a conference in December 2014, Washington, D.C.
- Tirussew Teferra, Amare Asgedom, Jeilu Oumer, Tassew W/hanna, Aklilu Dalelo and Berhannu Assefa (2018). *Ethiopian Education Development Roadmap (2018-30): An integrated summary*. Ministry of Education Strategy Center (ESC). Draft for Discussion.
- UNESCO. (Undated). *Social transformation*. <https://en.unesco.org/themes/social-transformations>.