

# POLICY DEVELOPMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN ETHIOPIA AND THE ROLE OF DONORS AND DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS<sup>1</sup>

Teshome Yizengaw<sup>2</sup>

## **Current Status of Higher Education in Ethiopia**

Higher education is crucial for the production of vital human resources, such as teachers, healthcare professionals, lawyers, engineers, managers, businessmen, and researchers critical for socio-economic development of a nation. Furthermore, higher education is a center for knowledge and skills creation, adaptation and dissemination. It also plays a significant role in providing relevant and quality community and public services. Higher education is therefore critical for economic progress, political stability and peace, as well as building democratic culture and cohesive societies.

Higher education and training in Ethiopia has started over 50 years ago, but still remains highly underdeveloped. For a population of over 70 million, the enrolment in both public and private higher education institutions is less than 200 thousand. In fact, it is only recently that the enrolment has reached such a figure with the establishment of new public and private institutions and expansion of programs (Teshome, 2004). Access is still very low and the quality and relevance of the education and research activities of the institutions are not up to expected standards and levels.

The annual intake capacity of degree students has increased from around 3 thousand in 1994 to over 31 thousand in 2004. The system as a whole (private and public) has enrolled a total student population, which includes degree and diploma, of 172,522 (77% in public and 23% in private and non-governmental institutions) in the 2003/4 academic year-an increase of 16% compared to 2002/03. This is a significant increase from the situation in 1996/97 where the total student population was not more than 30 thousand. The total number of graduates in 2003/04 was over 39 thousand, of which 29% were female-a significant increase from 1999 which graduated less than 12 thousand students. The massification of higher education will succeed only with the active involvement of the private and non-governmental sector in higher education provision. In 2003/04, the student population in private higher

---

<sup>1</sup> Paper presented at the International Expert Meeting-“Formulas that work: Making Higher education Support More effective; The Hague, The Netherlands, 23-24, May, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Associate Professor and Vice Minister for Higher Education; Ministry of Education; P.O.Box 1367, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

education institutions has reached over 23% considering both diploma and degree level enrolments and around 11% considering only degree level participation. This figure was zero in 1996.

Even by Sub-Saharan African standard, the enrolment figures of Ethiopia are simply dismal. Recently, the higher education system in Ethiopia is moving away from exclusive enrolments of about 1% of the age cohort towards increasing massification of over 5%. Not only enrolments, but also issues of quality and relevance, as well as equity that mainly revolve around gender and underserved or marginalized regions loom large as issues seriously confronting higher education development in the country. Furthermore, the research development and publishing capacity and culture of institutions are also severely limited largely due to poor infrastructure, high brain drain and limited resources and inefficiency in the use of available resources. Overall, the challenges that are compounding higher education development in Ethiopia are numerous and complex.

In recognition of these multiple challenges, the Ethiopian government has introduced several policy and strategy provisions and major re-engineering or reform initiatives. The initiatives are mainly efforts to realign the system in order to contribute more directly to the country's strategy for rapid economic growth and poverty alleviation. Such a reform is necessary to make the system (a) democratic in all its affairs, centering on student learning experiences, (b) more responsive in producing quality graduates and citizens, (c) involve in relevant research that focuses on solving societal problems, and (d) cost effective and result-oriented in all its undertakings.

Since the development and implementation of specific policies and strategies, as well as the implementation of reform agendas, the enrolment figures in the country and the number of universities have more than quadrupled, the number of private higher education institutions has dramatically increased, the recurrent budget and capital budget allocations have more than trebled, and institutions for policy research and quality and relevance assurance and enhancement have been established.

### **Major Policy and Strategy Issues in the Higher Education Sector**

The deepening economic decline, the political turmoil and the shifts in priorities caused by war created immense pressure on the Derg regime (1974-1991) to limit or diminish public sector expenditure. Accordingly, the capacity of the government and its willingness to support the provision and development of education, and in particular higher education, in Ethiopia was severely affected. Above all, there was a lack of a clear direction, vision and commitment for the development of higher

education in the country. Until recently, the significant and meaningful role that higher education plays in the improvement of the life of the society, the reduction of poverty and the overall development of the country was not properly addressed in government strategies and was not given due public attention. However, these situations have changed positively and significantly since 1991. This has been demonstrated by the current government's broad and forward-looking educational vision, clearly defined policies and priorities, realistic education sector development strategies, and sufficient support to attain better and equitable access and overall quality.

In the early 1990s, the government identified the need for strengthened, re-oriented and revitalized human resource development as a key to the success of socio-economic policies and strategies. The need was felt during the transitional period (1991-1994) when a serious shortage of trained, able and adaptable workforce and leaders at different levels within the new government structure was encountered. Free market economic policies, improved environment for private investments, and the relatively better and steady growth of the economy, as well as openness to the world and the spread of information and communication technologies; have required more personnel with higher education and training. With a shift in the social and economic development directions of the country, it had become essential to expand equitable access and to reform the education system, including the higher education sector.

The last decade or so a unique situation is experienced where the government is committed to education and the Ethiopian society seems to have woken up to the importance of education. Ethiopia clearly understands that economic growth in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be driven by the nation's performance in raising levels of national productivity in comparison to its economic competitors, and it is determined to make up the ground lost over the past four decades because of political instability and economic stagnation. National policies were developed based on the government's vision in transforming the economy, reducing poverty and improving the livelihood of the population. A succession of new policies, therefore, was designed and implemented in Ethiopia over the past few years with an eye to setting Ethiopia on a new course of development and poverty alleviation.

Realizing the fact that education is key to human development and the overall socio-economic development of Ethiopia, a comprehensive Education and Training Policy (TGE, 1994) was prepared and implemented. The ETP was drafted and discussed upon by experts in the field, with a number of discussion forums organized to collect views and opinions of stakeholders before its ratification. The

policy has stressed issues of quality and relevance in educational programs; quality of teaching staff and facilities; improvement of learning process towards a focus on students; improvement of management and leadership; introduction of financial diversification, including income generation and cost-sharing by students; and improvement in the system of evaluation, monitoring, autonomy and accountability. Higher education policies and strategies were also designed and implemented with the same objective of ensuring national development and competitiveness. Within the framework of the ETP and its strategy, the government and the higher education community have begun a concerted effort to design detailed strategies outlining the reform and the future directions of higher education in Ethiopia.

On the basis of the ETP and a 20-year strategic direction concept paper produced by government, a sector development program for education was initiated and prepared in 1997. This country owned and locally developed education sector development program is probably a pioneer in Africa. The Education Sector Development Program (ESDP) was drafted and prepared by the direct involvement of national experts, policy makers and stakeholders both at federal and regional levels. The final form of the ESDPs so far developed and implemented has a significant input from the donor-government consultations undertaken on the basis of partnership. The ESDPs had activities spanning over five years, the first ended in 2002 and the second ending in June 2005.

In 1995 the government took the initiative to organize a national conference on issues of higher education at Nazareth. Heads of institutions, regional institutions' board members, renowned persons and education experts and other stakeholders participated in the conference. This conference was the first and comprehensive undertaking in building stakeholder consensus and bringing to the fore issues, problems and challenges of the higher education as a basis for policy and strategy formulation for the sector in Ethiopia. As a follow-up and consolidation of the Nazareth meeting, a larger and more focused conference was held at Debre Zeit in 1996. The two conferences focused on issues of (a) general status and major problems of higher education in Ethiopia, (b) issues of effectiveness and efficiency, (c) alternatives for widening resource base of financial requirements, (d) undergraduate and graduate programs' quality and relevance, (e) research and studies in higher education, (f) relations between regional governments and higher education institutions, and (g) relations between higher education and the other levels of education. As a result, a document outlining the *Future Directions of Higher Education in Ethiopia* (MOE, 1997) was prepared. This was in its true sense, the first major step towards identifying the priorities for action and clearly defining the vision and mission of higher

education in Ethiopia. It was also a major step in building and strengthening the already started consensus amongst the major stakeholders on issues and strategies on higher education reform.

The *Future Directions of Higher Education in Ethiopia* document identified the major challenges and problems of the higher education sector in Ethiopia as: (a) Lack of clarity in vision and mission, (b) Problems of quality and relevance of programs of studies and research, (c) Lack of clear program and institutional evaluation mechanisms, (d) Financial and resource constraints, (e) Lack of alternative ventures in resource mobilization in addition to the public purse, (f) Inefficiency in resource utilization, and (g) Poor quality and commitment of the leadership of the sector at all levels. The document stressed the importance of properly tackling these major challenges in the ensuing activities of higher education expansion and reform in Ethiopia.

In 2000, the government initiated another detailed study on Higher Education Capacity Building, as one component of the overall National Capacity Building Programs study. The study was conducted by a group of professionals and decision makers, with a continuous consultations and feed back with higher education institutions. Furthermore, the draft document was discussed in all higher education institutions in the country and feedbacks were collected and included in the final document. In its findings it has mainly strengthened and elaborated the outcomes of the 1995 and 1996 conferences of Nazareth and Debrezeit, but including new developments in the country and in the world. The document gives new and ensuing policy issues of higher education in Ethiopia, providing opportunities for deepening efforts for growth and accelerating the contribution of the sector to national development.

At the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Ethiopia's higher education system is still traditional or conservative in its academic orientation and poorly connected with national development requirements and hardly meets international standards. Recognizing these shortcomings, Ethiopia is currently engaged in a highly ambitious effort to re-align its higher education system in order to contribute more directly to its national strategy for economic growth and poverty reduction. Its achievements over the last decade have been little short of extraordinary. The policy and strategy of reforms have targeted all levels: the overall system, institutions and the academic programs. The foundation for major reform has been provided by ratification of a new Higher Education Proclamation.

The Higher Education Proclamation (FDRE, 2003) was a major step forward in showing policy and strategy directions of the sector in Ethiopia. This comprehensive law provides a thoughtful and forward-looking policy framework for guiding the growth of Ethiopian higher education. It is the first

national law regulating higher education in Ethiopia in its history of over fifty years. The law was produced by Ethiopians with strong, transparent and engaging involvement of public and private higher education institutions and their community, including the student body. Some inputs were also obtained from donors (mainly the World Bank through its technical assistance support) and other partners. The major provisions relate to administrative and financial autonomy of institutions, introduction of cost sharing in form of graduate tax, income generation and contracting out of services, and the allocation of block grant budgeting system using a funding formula. It has also established two important agencies, namely Higher education Relevance and Quality Assurance Agency and Ethiopian Higher Education Strategy Center.

One important aspect that is necessary for the development of tertiary education policy and strategic vision is consideration of the political economy of reform. Translating a vision into successful reforms and innovations depends on the ability of decision makers to build consensus among the diverse constituents of the community, allowing for a high degree of tolerance for controversies and disagreements. A potentially effective approach for addressing the political sensitivity of the proposed reforms is to initiate a wide consultation process concerning the need for and content of envisaged changes. This effort involves a blend of rational analysis, political maneuvering, and psychological interplay to bring all concerned stakeholders on board.

When the initial reform and expansion agenda was put forward by the Ethiopian government in the mid-1990s, there were mixed opinions and attitudes by the academia, the leaders of higher education institutions, and even a few in the government itself. The reform and expansion required not just a simple change but a serious transformation in the system together with significant expansion of access. Many were pessimistic in that they concluded, without giving alternatives, that expansion would be a compromise to educational quality maintained by the university system existing at the time. However, even with the elitist system of limited enrollments, the quality of higher education had been in decline for over a decade. Issues of political partisanship were overwhelmingly influencing academia. At its initial stage, the reform agenda was seen by many as a purely political issue, rather than as a development objective. The difficulty resided mainly in the silence and indifference (neither openly opposing it nor expressing support) of many in the higher education community towards the reform.

The major points of contention were the issue of expansion versus quality, and the wish to continue with the status quo versus the need to reform and change. Some reluctance grew out of

concern and caution, while other resistance was due to pessimism, many times infused with political partisanship. Many opposing the endeavor from political points of view were not looking the agenda as issue of development and the way out of poverty and misery. These concerns were largely addressed and many were brought on board by the transparent manner with which the agenda was tabled and through consensus building efforts. Consultation meetings with leaders of institutions and other stakeholders (other sector ministries, chamber of commerce, private providers, etc.), periodic radio, television and newspaper press releases, as well as workshops with donors and partners, have helped to develop consensus and wider public awareness. At all echelons of the leadership of the government as well as to a large extent the governance of higher education institutions, keen interest and support has been observed and cultivated. This was later translated into ownership of the agenda that has helped generate success in the implementation.

### **The World Scenario Towards Support for Higher Education**

The World scenario and the policies of donors and development partners have influenced the policy thinking, directions and implementation of higher education in Ethiopia. The Education Sector Development Program (ESDP), the Higher Education Sector Capacity Building Program and many specific implementation modalities of higher education expansion and reform in Ethiopia were informed and had given due consideration to several recommendations of the World community. The World Conference on Higher Education (UNESCO, 1998) was unanimous in considering that “a renewal of higher education is essential for the whole society to be able to face up to the challenges of the twenty-first century, to ensure its intellectual independence, to create and advance knowledge, and to educate and train responsible, enlightened citizens and qualified specialists, with out whom no nation can progress economically, socially, culturally or politically.” The Declaration of the Conference emphasized that since society is becoming “increasingly knowledge-based (...), higher education and research now act as essential components of culture, socio-economic and environmentally sustainable development of individuals, communities and nations.” Thus, even in the twenty first century, the development of higher education figures among the topmost national priorities across nations.

The Human Development Report (UNDP, 1999) sets out the mission of higher education, resolving that “beyond its traditional functions of teaching, training, research and study, all of which remain fundamental”, and higher education must “promote development of the whole person and train

responsible, informed citizens, committed to working for a better society in the future”. Based on research and intensive discussion and hearings conducted over two year period, a Task Force report “Higher Education in developing Countries: Peril and Promise” (World Bank and Unesco, 2000), presents a powerful message: “higher education is not longer luxury; it is essential for survival”. The Task Force has concluded that, without more and better education, developing countries will find it increasingly difficult to benefit from the global knowledge-based economy.

These extracts from various reports clearly bring out the fact that the developed world is reacting quickly, with education as a major political priority. It believes that high-quality human capital is developed in high-quality education systems, convinced that even though the world as a whole is passing through a “knowledge revolution”, the four key principles – quality, access, equity, and accountability – which have always been crucial in the development of higher education continue to be the guiding principles when planning for higher education for the twenty-first century.

The World Bank has also contributed to improving support to tertiary level education through its publication as a policy document titled *Constructing Knowledge Societies: New Challenges for Tertiary Education* (World Bank, 2002). The document has reaffirmed the crucial role that higher education should play in alleviating poverty and in taking up the challenges emerging from the knowledge driven economy. There is also a growing awareness that the sustainability of long term capacity development depends in part on the local supply of high caliber talent and more broadly, country specific capacity for knowledge generation and management to pursue development and poverty alleviation objectives on a sustainable basis.

## **Roles of Donors and Partners in Higher Education Policy Development and Implementation**

The many policy initiatives of the government and higher education institutions in Ethiopia have been commented upon and indirectly influenced by studies or technical assistance works of donors and development partners. Specific requirements of different actors, mainly donors and development partners had some influence. Though, the major influences relate to the way policies and strategies are implemented, there are also some roles played in the initiation and development of policies and strategies by donors and partners. These refer to, in some cases, setting priorities for policy and action, ways in which they should be addressed, and manner and framework in which those are to be

implemented. Such studies conducted by the World Bank (World Bank 2004) and many technical assistance works by international experts had their influence in shaping some policy or strategy considerations, particularly in terms of implementation.

One important issue that Ethiopia requires from donors and development partners is to get support in form of budgetary support. Although few, such as the United Kingdom support through DFID and the World Bank, have pledged and have started to give budgetary support many partners are skeptic to align their support to the country's requirements. A very important principle usually neglected by donors and partners is the need to focus efforts around clear set of country-owned and defined objectives and expected results, and then following through with viable implementation strategies. Donors and development partners need to make sure that their efforts are fully aligned with the strategies of the recipient country rather than with their own competing priorities and procedures. The reporting requirements of donors and development partners which are hardly harmonized with national systems, the insistence in the use of most of the support for technical assistance, and lack of understanding and willingness to support sustainable and long term capacity building efforts are few of the most critical influences. Most, if not all, donors will have their specific requirements for reporting which is different from the national system and which creates poor performance in disbursement and utilization of funds for the intended use in due time. Many insist that large part of the fund be used for employment of technical assistance from their countries or elsewhere without addressing the real issue of local capacity building. Many focus on soft programs support rather than on long term staff development, local institutional strengthening and capacity building. There are also many so called policy conditionality associated with external assistance that need to be strongly reduced. The World Bank, for example, puts some policy premises as conditions for loan agreements. The introduction of cost recovery schemes as part of the cost sharing policy, necessity for labor demand studies as prerequisite for expansion, greater emphasis on fiscal or budgetary situations rather than the need for capacity building are issues and sometimes stumbling blocks which donors and partners usually pose in higher education policy development and implementation. Some even put unnecessary conditions such as compulsory employment of experts in a ministry or an institution. Instead of this usually ineffective conditionality, ways of strengthening mutual accountability and monitoring of implementation should be put in place.

In policy development dialogues, many partners and donors were and still argue that Ethiopia should not expand its higher education sector but focus only on universalizing access to primary

education. In recent years, however, there is a growing acknowledgement of the need to systematically build local “capacity to build capacity” by strengthening institutions across the knowledge sector that supply this range of services including higher education. The recently revised policy of the Netherlands Government support to Post-Secondary Education is a very good example of partnership. This policy empowers the receiving country to develop its project proposal and work together with the southern partner in shaping the proposal and seek for higher education institutions in the Netherlands that could deliver as per the jointly designed proposal to the benefit of the Southern partners. The support from NORAD to Mekele and Debub Universities, SIDA support to Wondo Genet College of forestry, and Belgian support to Mekele University are also good examples of project supports that are mainly based on the requirements of the receiving institutions in Ethiopia.

### **Lessons Learnt and Conclusions**

The government of Ethiopia has made poverty alleviation and its ultimate eradication the centerpiece of its development strategy and it has continued to advance the reform of government structure, functions and finances. Of the many important economic and social growth initiatives of the government of Ethiopia, perhaps one that holds great promise and possibility of large scale and sustainable returns, despite many daunting difficulties, is the effective expansion of quality higher education in the country. The impact of higher education encompasses not only the economic sector, but also will produce greater social impact contributing to a just, democratic, peaceful and enlightened society.

Visionary, practical and relevant national policies, including those related to higher education; have been and continue to be developed based on the government’s vision in transforming the economy, reducing poverty and improving the livelihood of the population. Higher education policies may be initiated mainly by the government, as is the case in Ethiopia. However, issues and challenges raised by the implementing higher education institutions, studies conducted by professionals and academic staff and students, as well as reports of institutional leaders and managers have to be essentially used as basis. Government leadership in designing, initiating, pursuing and following the implementation of policies and strategies for expansion and reform in Ethiopian higher education has been found to be the key to the success of many of the initiatives.

Participation of all relevant stakeholders from the time policies emanate, develop and are implemented is important for the success of achieving the goals set out. In this respect, transparency in the overall undertakings is of paramount importance. Active involvement and participation at all stages will develop and ensure ownership of the policy agenda. It will also assist in inculcating creativity and innovation, and facilitate mobilization of the community for successful implementation of initiatives. This has been witnessed in the Ethiopian experience which has shown that regular and consistent consensus building efforts are essential to bring many pessimists on board and for the success of any policy initiative. Consultative process helps stakeholders to contribute, build consensus and commit to a shared vision or goal, helps establish wider acceptance, ownership and networking, helps identify gaps and design mechanisms of overcoming those, and helps bring debate, interaction, learning from one another and build capacity to mobilize for future changes, challenges and innovation and implementation.

Strategic thinking and policy initiations as well as contents are significantly influenced by developments and issues in the world and the policies and working principles of donors and partner countries. Most of these interventions are usually positive and constructive. However, few lack willingness to understand and address local problems, opportunities and priorities. The need to focus efforts of both the national governments and the donors and partners around clearly set country owned , prioritized and defined objectives and expected results though extremely necessary is lacking. Mechanisms such as transparency and integrity of the budget, and the effective functioning of democratic processes of accountability should make governments accountable to their citizens, as well as the donors or development partners. This is an important principle that is usually neglected, deliberately or otherwise, by donors and partners.

The World Scenario has also helped in shaping the attitude of decision makers and stakeholders (mainly the leaders and academic staff of higher education institutions) in the ongoing reform and expansion policy development, refinement and implementation of the higher education sector in Ethiopia. Globalization has a far-reaching impact on education constantly increasing the scope and demand for it. The new paradigm involves the creation of intellects of world standard in large numbers without compromising quality. This suggests the need for a forward-looking policy and strategy for the generation of human resources, which safeguards our interests at the global level and also satisfies our internal need for skilled human power. Such policies and strategies need to have input from donors and

partners that are provided with a spirit of cooperation and local capacity building fostering the principle that investment in higher education is investment in the future and improvement of quality of living standards. Cooperation and inputs from the international community (donors and partners) should be based on genuine partnership, mutual trust and be aimed at enhancing local/national development. Comprehensive capacity building strategies developed by our governments need to be the basis on which donors and development partners should invest. Any development support should be predictable and harmonized and linked to the decision making and budget process of our country. Renewed convergence of thinking that higher education is central to the overall development of the education system, enhancement of national capacity building and poverty reduction need to be fostered.

## References

- 1) FDRE (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia). 2002. *Capacity Building Strategy and Programs*. February 2002, Addis Ababa, 295 pp.
- 2) FDRE (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia). 2003. *Higher Education Proclamation No. 351/2003*, Negarit Gazette, Addis Ababa
- 3) MOE (Ministry of Education). 1997. *The future directions of higher education*. January 1997, Addis Ababa, 84 pp.
- 4) TGE (Transitional Government of Ethiopia). 1994. *Education and Training Policy*. EEP 86, Addis Ababa April 1994, 33 pp.
- 5) Teshome Y. 2004. **The Status and Challenges of Ethiopian Higher Education System and its Contribution to Development**; Ethiopian Journal of Higher Education, Vol 1, No.1, 2004
- 6) UNDP (United Nations Development Program). 1999. **Human Development Report 1999**, New York, Oxford University Press.
- 7) UNESCO (United Nations Educational and Scientific Organization). 1998. *Higher Education in the twenty first century: Vision and Action*. Framework for priority action for change and development in higher education. World Conference on Higher Education, Paris 5-9 Oct., 1998, 32 pp.
- 8) World Bank 2004. **Higher education development for Ethiopia: Pursuing the vision**. World Bank, Human Development Sector, Africa Region.109 pp.
- 9) World Bank. 2002. *Constructing Knowledge Societies: New challenges for tertiary education*. 204 pp.
- 10) World Bank and UNESCO. 2000. *Higher education in developing countries: Peril and Promise*. The Task Force on higher education and society. 135 pp.