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The Emergence of a Dual-System of Primary Schooling in Ethiopia and Its Impact

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Abstract

Over the last twenty years, in quantitative terms, Ethiopia has expanded and universalized the enrolment of school aged children in primary schools in line the International Covenant of Economic, Social, and Cultural rights in order to minimize the irregularities that have existed over the years. However, when the existing primary schooling is visualized in terms of quality and equity, it is sad to observe that privately run-ultra-modern primary schools seem to be mushrooming in Ethiopia in order to serve the sons and daughters of a newly emerging privileged class. On the other hand, the sons and daughters of the poor and disadvantaged are confined to over crowded classes manned by semi-qualified teachers and equipped with inadequate teaching materials. Stated differently, it is unbelievable to observe that primary schools in Ethiopia are sliding into a class-based education. Thus, if the government believes in equity and fairness, it needs to completely redesign and better equip the public primary school.

Introduction

Based on the manpower planning process where schooling is considered an important tool for the training of a workforce, an essential prerequisite for economic growth, and an effective instrument of citizenship training, the central goals of schooling in Ethiopia during Haile Selassie's reign were to build a limited number of trained human resources, instill obedience to the established authority, and to develop respect for the then existing political institutions. Stated differently, the few schools that existed in Ethiopia during Haile Selassie's reign were not only elitist but were designed to maintain respect for the existing order. In short, the school system during the ancient regime was not open to everyone but was predominantly geared to the elite, reinforcing consensus values for regime norm acceptance and trust in the system, thereby producing obedient citizens.

With the rampant student activism that brought the collapse of the Haile Selassie regime in 1974, the Military Junta or Derge (1974-91) replaced the Haile Selassie regime and embarked on socialism to restructure the outmoded socio-economic order. Furthermore, to inculcate a sense of loyalty to the Military Junta, and to establish a new Ethiopian society, the Derge closed all higher educational institutions and senior secondary schools and forced the remaining junior and elementary schools to go through a massive indoctrination of Marxism and Leninism. In short, the Military Junta overwhelmingly urged all schools to instill in their students the socialist

ideology. To create the “new socialist Ethiopian man,” over the seventeen years of its rule, the Military Junta committed not only to reduce mass illiteracy, but to emphasize the indoctrination of the young and the adult Ethiopians to unquestionable discipline by terrorizing them so that they would accept socialist ideological commitments and values.

With an oversimplified dogma and the mechanistic view of Ethiopian socialism, a civil war broke out in Ethiopia in 1991. The then transitional government that replaced the communist Military Junta introduced a new constitution in 1994 and also formulated the creation of a federal structure of government, and organized the country’s first multiparty elections in 1995 (World Bank, 2005, p. xxi). Whatever the vagaries in practices, in line with “the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights” (Article 13.2(a), and UNESCO and UNICEF, 2007)), the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) was based on the Sustainable Development and Poverty Reduction Program (SDPRP). Also it announced that every citizen would have universal entitlement to education as a human right and the education sector was expected to help reduce poverty by offering universal primary education in order to produce a workforce capable of fulfilling jobs that required skilled labor. The 2004 World Bank Poverty Assessment for Ethiopia estimated that if all of adults in the country had at least four years of primary education, the share of households living in poverty would drop by 8 percent (World Bank, 2005, xviii).

Given that the goal of the current Ethiopian government is to render universal education at the primary level, this prompts a number of questions at this juncture: 1) has the current government in Ethiopia for the last twenty years rendered the rights to quality and quantity of educational services to all school age children at the primary level? 2) If so, what resources have been allocated to achieve the stated goals? and 3) Is there equity in the delivery of primary schooling among the different social classes in Ethiopia?

The Universalizing of Primary Schooling in Ethiopia

Since 1991, a casual observation of primary school age children in Ethiopian schools reveals that in quantitative terms, it is remarkable that Ethiopia has almost achieved universal primary education. For almost all households in the country there is at least one primary school available within a distance of less than 10 kilometers (World Bank, 2005). The gross enrollment ratio for females and males enrolled in grades 1-8 has increased from 37 percent in 1996 to 91 percent in 2011. Also, there is an equitable representation of males and females in the Ethiopian primary schools (Lisane Masie (March 2012)).

In addition, unlike the patterns of stagnation, reversal, and uneven growth of the past regimes (World Bank, 2005) and the fact that the education system was urban biased, and the rural areas were sparsely covered, today Ethiopia has almost fulfilled its goal to educate in both rural and urban areas. It has been shown that student enrollments in urban areas are almost 100 percent, and about 86 percent of school aged children are enrolled in rural areas.

Also, the rate of attrition, or the dropout rate at the primary level has declined from 13.3 percent in 1996 to 4.2 percent in 2011, though the problem of school dropouts due to the need for work and sickness seems to be more serious in rural (i.e., 4.7%) than in urban areas (i.e., 2.2 %) areas (See for example, Lisane Masie, March 2012, pp. 50-53). Thus, in quantitative terms, it is possible to assert that the Ethiopian primary school system seems to be in the process of universalizing primary education by providing basic education for all school aged children.

Quality and Equity of Primary Schooling

In terms of quality and equity, Ethiopia has the highest student-teacher ratio in the world. It was reported by the World Bank that since 1993-94, the pupil-teacher ratio is 65:1 and the number of pupils per section is 75 to 82 in government primary schools compared with about 30 in privately operated schools in non-governmental organizations, religious bodies, business enterprises, etc. (2005, p. xxiv). Also, for public schools, the government spends only 3 percent of the country's gross domestic product on administrative overhead and post-secondary levels of instruction, though the Ethiopian government is supposed to spend 4.5 percent of GDP just to attain the Millennium Development Goal of 100 percent primary school completion by 2015 (World Bank, 2005, p. 172). Moreover, while the teachers of private primary schools are well paid and better equipped, a sizable number of teachers in public schools don't meet the certification standards. Because of the shortage, administrative regions have hired paraprofessional (uncertified) teachers for relief (World Bank, 2005, p. 172).

In addition, given the dual system of primary schooling in the country, the existence of well-furnished private primary schools that "...house the children of the emerging upper class against the ill-equipped public schools that harbor the children of the down-trodden classes may not only perpetuate class differentiation but also are likely to deter the government's initiated plans for growth and transformation" (Desta, 2012, p.18).

Summary and Policy Implications

Over the last twenty years, in quantitative terms, Ethiopia has expanded and universalized the enrolment of school aged children in primary schools in order to minimize the irregularities that have existed over the years. However, when the existing primary schooling is visualized in terms of quality and equity, it is sad to observe that privately run ultra-modern primary schools mushroomed from 6 percent in 2009 to 11 percent in 2010 (See world Bank, 2012) in order to serve the sons and daughters of a newly emerging privileged class. On the other hand, the sons and daughters of the poor and disadvantaged are confined to over-crowded classes manned by semi-qualified teachers and equipped with a dearth of instructional materials. While the sons and daughters of the down trodden masses are "harbored" to study up to grade eight in local languages that could lead them nowhere, the sons and daughters of the rich are prepared for the globalized world by having access to well-qualified teachers and entertained by the latest pedagogical innovations using the world's lingua as a medium of instruction.

Stated differently, it is sad to observe that primary schools in Ethiopia are sliding into a class-based education system that strongly encourages emerging social classes in Ethiopia to tighten their grip on selected positions in society. While the new elites can afford to send their children to distinguished private schools, the boys and girls of the poor, who might overcome the challenges in public primary schools and score marks to enter the emerging universities may find road-blocks when competing with the sons of the well-to-do because they are inadequately prepared in the English language used in instruction at the universities.

Thus, given that a dual-system of primary education is perpetuating class differentiation in Ethiopia, if the government believes in equity and fairness, it needs to completely redesign and better equip the public primary schools by upgrading their services to be in line with private schools. Furthermore, if concerned about the emerging class structure, the government should charge higher taxes to private schools and redistribute the revenues to subsidize public primary schools in order to improve their services. Otherwise, it is immoral to pretend that the government in Ethiopia is universalizing primary education while the dynamics on the ground reveal that primary public schools in Ethiopia are malnourished and are mainly tailored to the down-trodden poor.

In addition, the practice of appointing school administrators should be based on professional qualification instead of on the appointment of political cadres to run schools. The present system encourages cronyism and corruption. Given the inadequacy of the public primary schools in Ethiopia, the probability of their graduates ever becoming able to compete successfully in a globalized world seems to be very slim. Thus, it is time for the government to think seriously about dismantling an education system that has developed a public primary school system that continues to hold back children from poor backgrounds and prevents them from competing with those from private schools.

The current dual schooling system in Ethiopia is challenging and highly disturbing. Rather than allow the present structure to be prolonged, policy makers need to listen to all stakeholders in the school system within the Ethiopian polity and then redesign a new coherent, transparent, and accountable program for both the haves and the have-nots. However, it entails courage to restructure the existing organization in order to dismantle the emerging social divisions in schools.

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