

**Rethinking Education in Ethiopia. Tekeste Negash,
Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, Uppsala, 1996, 118 pages
Reviewed by Amare Asgedom, Associate Prof., AAU**

Rethinking Education in Ethiopia, one of the recent books of Dr. Tekeste Negash, the author of *The Crisis of Ethiopian Education*....., is now in circulation.

The book appears to be as highly readable as it is sensational, although laden with certain conceptual fallacies (such as, *dependent*, instead of, *independent*, on page 11). Of course, it might be tantalizing to have as many readers as possible to satisfy whatever *wants* the author has (economic, political or social aspirations).

The author argued that the *Ethiopian Education and Training Policy* has been flawed in many ways and concluded that "it is morally wrong and economically unjustifiable to invest scarce resources on the formal education system whose contribution to the development of the society is at best tenuous and at worst irrelevant." He finally made a recommendation with a catchy statement, "Let the formal education sector defend itself; invest in the non-formal education sector". The author has also made the following four assumptions:

- (a) formal education is irrelevant to development
- (b) that the majority of rural people are hostile to formal education
- (c) that the educational policy must address the developmental issues of the country, "*production of food*"
- (d) that non-formal education is an appropriate strategy to addressing development issues

For all these grand assertions, however, the author appeared to care least about providing evidences. He has not given any example from the Education and Training Policy document (a chapter or a paragraph) that demonstrates government preference of one program over another. In fact, the policy document was not organized program wise. The four parts are equally applicable to any program, be it formal or non-formal.

It is also unfair to be critical of government investment in education, when one knows the beneficiaries of government education are mostly common people. The rich can afford to send their children to private schools. The poor can not. A reasonable argument could have been to advocate a tailoring of educational investment to the poor and the rural people which of course was already taken care of by the Policy. The educational model of the Highly Developed Countries where education is fully privatized is least desirable to our conditions. The Private Sector can participate in educational investment, but advocacy of complete government withdrawal from this sector is, at its best, partisan. Ignoring the formal educational program is also tantamount to ignoring the education of the country's children, whom we believe are the most important segment of the population. The future of the country depends on them. Non-formal education can only complement but not substitute the education of these children. If the author had shown how non-formal education could substitute the formal one, then this could have been an innovation for an intellectual debate. It is, however, unbecoming to recommend something without specifying how to do it. Tekeste does not also give examples of countries that have become successful with the advocated system.

1. Development and Education

Tekeste's advocacy of non-formal education could be legitimate as it is one of the routes for access to education. It is also obvious to believe that education must be relevant, functional and problem solving. Everybody in Ethiopia agrees with the author in the desirable role of education for food production, though a very old view and reminiscent of Abraham H. Maslow, in his theory of *hierarchy of human needs*. The role of education in development should not, however, be limited to the production of food. It is not also clear how this can be directly achieved. Neither does the author's rhetoric provide operational definitions of his abstractions. Any way, educators agree in the broader role of education in developing the required skills, knowledge and attitude (KAS) to prepare productive and responsible citizens. To this can be added education's role in creating the access to information sources, specially in the context of the present era, when information has become the most important commodity. The major difference between the literate and the illiterate is that the former has access while the latter has no access to information from the *print medium*, the sources of all technical information, including development education. We know that books and publications have been dividing society (in favor of the former) on the criterion of literacy. Literates were *information-rich* because they had the access to books and other publications. Illiterates, on the contrary, had no access to the written world and remained *information-poor* for all generations after Gutenberg.

The old notion of the absence of a relationship between development and education has already become *obsolete* as the corrolational premise between individual income and level of education has been proved to be a defective methodology to predict this relationship.

Current indicators of the relationship are more indirect, less easily observable and unquantifiable. The access of the literate to information, the literati's use of more formal information-sources, the tendency to seek more tangible evidences than mythologies, the enhanced need for more information, etc., which are all attributable to education have much more impact on development than what the author advocates. Development educators very well know that education was the basis for the technification of Japan. The uncompromising position of Tekeste on the absence of a relationship between education and development, at best, could be political. The Ethiopian Education and Training policy is clearly premised on the important role of education in development and no one doubts the truth of the consensus of Ethiopian educators on this issue. How can a historian who has a limited interaction with the authentic sources of Ethiopian education make such a sweeping generalization that transcends the available information in the field? Neither is it sufficient to use a Review of Literature for reaching these grand conclusions. Isn't this a unidimensional approach to the study of complex educational processes?

Every one in the Field of Education knows that non fiction book-writing requires extensive experience in the field. To write about Ethiopian Education, one needs to experience the educational environment directly and physically not imaginatively through remote sensors. It is, however, unfortunate that one's problems are another's resources. The reviewer knows many cases where national problems have been commoditized (exploiting the problems to meet egoistic ends). It is surprising to witness a lobby of the author to make us believe that education is irrelevant to development without again caring to give us any better recommendation than itself.

2. Development-Irrelevant Education?

Tekeste rejects the relevance of education to development without any qualification. Not moving too far, however, he starts advocating non-formal education for a purpose of development, a syndrome of inconsistency. It is a common sense that the essence of education is to be found in the *content* (curriculum) and not in the *container* (the program). Neither does any program define its content. A formal education program does not necessarily imply development-irrelevant content. The opposite is not also true. The contents of non-formal education are not necessarily developmental. They all depend on the objectives of education. Development-relevant curriculum can be contained in the formal or non-formal programs. The principle should not also exclude the informal one--the culture.

The key to development through education does not lie in what program one emphasizes. It lies in how one synchronizes the three programs, including the informal one, and in how one synchronizes the content of curriculum to the needs of the individual and the society. A problem arises when the three programs (formal, non-formal and informal) are mutually exclusive. By facilitating community-participation, one is also making the informal system support the two systems, as no one inhibits their natural interaction. Of course, direct educational interventions are possible mainly in the formal and the non-formal programs. These programs can be planned but the informal is difficult to plan and directly-intervene, as it addresses the whole culture. In addition to making curriculum relevant to the learner, educational decentralization (the New Policy) presumes an important role of the local culture in education for a good blend of all educational programs. The formal-versus-non-formal approach to the study of development-relevant education is too simplistic and less instructive.

By using such an approach, the author contributes more to obfuscation of Ethiopian education than illumination.

3. Ethiopian Education Policy and Development

A person who has read the technical papers that were used for the Policy development would not have any doubt in the motives of the Policy. This Policy was aimed at bringing about an accelerated development. The rationale for this Policy were the observed development problems in the previous educational system. In fact, one could be critical of this Policy for being too ambitious but not for ignoring development issues. The educational Policy was based on the Economic Policy of the country, *Agriculture Development Led Industrialization (ADLI)*. It is also based on analysis of available resources in the country. Development and education have been *ruralized*, in the sense that rural areas and people were to be the subject and object of development and education. It is clear that Tekeste has read all the technical papers that were used for the Policy development as he has always been privileged in getting easy access to any official documents. Most developmental issues on which Tekeste has dwelled much were already attended by the Policy Drafting Committee. This committee had identified numerous problems in the old educational system of the country. But Tekeste has used these old problems to describe the present education system. Although it might be hasty to conclude that the present educational system is perfect, it is less ethical to be critical of the present educational system using old problems. Tekeste has borrowed many ideas from the technical papers of the Policy without again caring much for acknowledgment. How can one become the beneficiary and the accuser of the sources of these ideas at the same time?

4. Rural People and Hostility

Tekeste has alleged that the rural people of Ethiopia are hostile to formal education programs. This is simply a misrepresentation of simple facts. The rural people of Ethiopia have never been hostile to any form of education. Survey studies have consistently demonstrated positive attitudes. We have no evidence of burned schools and murdered teachers to conclude hostility to formal educational programs. Of course, the educational participation rate of the rural people was low. Studies suggest that economic and spatial factors explain, mostly, the low GER in the country. Education was too expensive to the rural people in terms of distance and opportunity costs.

Current trends are such that *rural-centeredness* is the principle of development. Rural people would be the prime beneficiaries of education. Where schools are constructed within a walking-distance of the rural child; and where rural-life is replicated in the curriculum, it is logical to argue that, the participation rate will significantly grow. Already, indications suggest this trend, as the case in Tigray, where the figure is more than 50 percent now.