
Education and the Labor Market Crisis in Ethiopia

Derebssa Dufera*

A basic assumption about education and its link with development strategies is its role in creating a skilled and viable work force. Both human and modernization theories contended that a more educated population is more productive and would have the attitudes and behavior required for a sustained modern industrialized economy. This is the underlying assumption in the goals of most development strategies. Although there is considerable research evidence to support this assumption (Psacharopoulos, 1973), the world economy and the economies of individual countries, are in sub conditions that this aspect of education and development is no longer tenable.

While the production costs soared and economic expansion leveled off, the rapid increase of participation in educational systems in most countries continued to produce larger numbers of skilled and qualified manpower. Between 1960 and 1970 unemployment rose at a rate of about 2 percent per year world-wide and is estimated to rise at a rate of 2.7% per year until the year 2000 (World Bank, 1980).

In addition to the general problem of unemployment, there also arose considerable skepticism about the relevance of schooling for specific kinds of work, and more particularly about the tendency to use educational credentials as a screening device for job recruitment and selection (Berg, 1971; Dore 1976,

Foster 1965). In some developing countries, it has been argued that schooling has trained students for the wrong kinds of jobs and created a skilled work force inappropriate to the demands of the developing countries. Thus we find the unusual situation in some of the developing countries where there are large numbers of unemployed school graduates with inappropriate skills, while an appropriately trained labor force is to be imported from abroad for certain sectors of the economy.

Consistent with modernization theory, there is evidence that schools have direct influence on levels of aspirations and expectations among students. Some argued that these aspirations are in consistent with opportunities in, and the needs of the labor market (Husen, 1977; Little, 1978), while others contend that the unemployment crisis may be a social phenomenon rather than an educationally related one (Blaug, 1980; Carnoy, 1980). Irrespective of its source, the disjunction levels of educational attainment and of aspiration with job opportunities have been regarded with concern by some who consigned that disruptive social and psychological consequences, both for individuals and socialites might result (Wober, 1975). Although schooling can produce a work force with needed skills, it could be argued that insofar as

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schooling raises ambitions to levels inconsistent with labor market opportunities, its contribution to this aspect of economic development is doubtful (Ingermar Fagerlind, 1985).

In many developing countries, attention is being focused on widespread and growing unemployment among young people, most of whom have attended schools for varying lengths of time and cannot find works which match their aspirations or their potential abilities. Richer nations in recent years have also had to contend with unemployed youth, but the relative magnitude of their problem has been much less.

In the developing countries, the problem of unemployment is different, more complex and more critical in the high proportion of youth involved. Although the economy is fairly increasing, it is not developing in the direction which opens up enough job opportunities to absorb the large numbers of educated young people arriving each year to join the labour force.

Before discussing the problem of employment opportunity, it is necessary to point out certain ambiguity in the term employment opportunity. Employment is commonly understood to mean work on hire for wages and salaries. Yet in most developing countries only a small portion of the labour force is employed in that sense. Most of it is self-employed. Underlining this fact, (Roa UNESCO- II EP 1968) suggested that when employment opportunities for educated manpower were being assessed, the prospects for self-employment should also be taken into account. UNESCO- II EP, (1968) further suggested that the effect of education on economic development

should be measured not simply in terms of paid job creation, but also by what education does to raise the productivity of the self-employed.

Concerning the impact of educational expansion on employment opportunity, the participants of the symposium convened by the International Institute of Educational Planning at Paris in 1966 (UNESCE-IIEP, 1968) agreed that the main general cause of current unemployment in developing countries is not education per se. It is the consequence of the slow economic growth, greatly aggravated by unprecedented population explosion. Education per se does not generate unemployment, except indirectly perhaps, under special circumstances of wrong type of education. The central point is that as long as a significant proportion of young people in developing countries - whether with or without education-will in any case be unemployed. What education does is to turn this hidden unemployment into a visible and open one. As Erder observed in the symposium discussion, education changes the quality of unemployment by turning uneducated underemployment into educated unemployed.

Supporting this assumption Archibald Callaway (1971, p.31) suggested that there can never be an over-supply of educated youth. A society is better off the more people it has who can read and write and who have learned more advanced ways of doing things. For the nation, the educated young are potential agents for modernization. For the individual, education usually means greater choice in occupation and the possibility of a richer cultural life.

However, the lense through which the complex impact of education on

employment is perhaps most clearly seen is provided by the rural exodus to the urban centers. The exodus results from such mixed motivations as legitimate hope of the younger generation for change and improvement, and the expectation of higher income together with an aversion to manual work or a desire to escape from the sweat of rural life to an office in the city.

Formal education, because of its disciplines, ideas and goals, disrupts the cohesion of traditional societies. For example, only few parents, most of whom are peasants, want their school children to become farmers. Compared with the possibility that education can lead to farming, however necessary, is down graded. The village school is more often thought of as a symbol of the means of freeing the younger generation from the drudgery of farming. This parents spend a considerable amount of money for their children's schooling with the hopes that their children later on will gain jobs that provide financial rewards and prestige.

Most students go to school hoping that, when they leave, they will not have to be farmers. They often look upon farming as being servile and degrading. This attitude is further compounded by the awareness of the excessive disparity between civil-service salaries and farmers income. A farmer thus feels that his son has a better chance for a better life if, through schooling, he can go into the civil service, politics, business or other professions in the urban areas where these are generally located, instead of becoming a skilled farmer, anxious to modernize his agricultural venter.

This economic disparity and the tendency fosters the looked down the peasant. This is particularly serious in view of the fact that Ethiopia because of population explosion and drought, is confronted by a difficult task. Agriculture is the dominant sector of the economy providing about 50 percent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), some 90 percent of the export and more than 85 percent of employment (Ethiopia, - Education and Training projects for self-reliance, 1985, p.4). In the last 15 years agricultural value added was increasing by a little more than 1 percent; less than one half of the population growth rate. Peasant farming accounts for 94 percent of total agricultural output. And yet school graduates (elementary and secondary) are trying to escape from agricultural work. But agriculture is the basic occupation of the country. Upon the country's food supply depends as development and so also much of future progress in all sectors. But agriculture (farming) is looked upon as an occupation in which the poor and the unprogressive will be retained - and from which the intelligent and the educated must escape.

This continuous 'brain drain' from the rural areas deprives agriculture of the most dynamic human elements. Education, undoubtedly gives further encouragement to this flight from the countryside, though it is by no means the only cause. Unemployment in urban centers of Ethiopia is believed to be about 25 percent of the labour force particularly in the age group of 25 and under (Ethiopia-Education and Training projects for self-reliance, 1985, p.5). Excess supply of people with secondary school education but with no technical

skills is becoming a chronic problem. Underemployment in agriculture is considerable but cannot be quantified. At the same time, there is shortage of skilled personnel in the area of professional, managerial and technical staff at the high and middle-level in different regions. Many factors have contributed to the development of this shortage, among them an Ethiopian "brain drain".

Farming in Ethiopia is the basic sector which is in greatest need of people trained as scientists, technicians, extension workers and more efficient producers. Hence, Education must be extended to the greatest possible number of future farmers if it is really to prepare children to take up modern farming and not channel all the best elements into the cities. Some of the brighter elements must remain in the countryside to organize the peasants, to teach them how to protect their interests if they are subject to abuse from urban center.

As long as traditional agriculture remained backward and the rural milieu remained fundamentally conservative and unchanged, school learners could hardly be blamed for trying to escape from the villages. The case only underlines the urgent need for coordinated action on several fronts aimed at rural transformation.

What seems appropriate is, therefore, development which fits reality - in other words, a development on specifically Ethiopian lines. In education, new concepts must prevail, and schools must be made to participate in the agricultural progress as quickly as possible. The joint efforts of educationists, politicians, economists, agriculturists and manpower planners are urgently needed in order to

adapt the content and form of education to the present condition of the country, and to make education generate new values and attitudes toward agricultural and technical occupations. Agriculture must have increased attention particularly in food production for internal consumption. It will be difficult to bring this about without reducing the excessive difference between urban and rural living standards. The latter must be given a better position and status relative to the former. But how can the rural dweller's standard of living be improved quickly when, left to his own devices? The answer is a policy of a greater investment in agriculture combined with a policy of reduction public expenditure on the urban front should be formulated and operationalized.

It is absolutely useless trying to create among school children a love of the land and an interest in going to farming unless the environment is changed first or at least simultaneously. Because school leavers observe that life in the rural areas is less attractive than even the life of unemployed in the town. To avoid this mistake in the future, policy makers and educational planners who look for education to generate new attitudes and new systems of values must be prepared to carry out vigorously policies designed to bring about thorough changes in the environment and institutions of the rural societies.

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