



In 2010, the Global Campaign for Education (comprising Education International, Plan International, Oxfam, Save the Children and VSO) produced a report entitled "Back to School?" According to that report, Ethiopia is one of the 5 worst countries in the world to be a school child, and is "teetering on the brink of an education crisis."

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And that's a huge problem, because Ethiopia will not thrive until it prioritizes education. No country has ever achieved continuous and rapid economic growth without first having at least 40% of adults able to read and write.

Education as a Liberator

The main purpose of education is empowerment. The mind is empowered and geared towards its full potential through a systematic, relatively slow but steady learning process. The mind, body, and the senses are liberated to think critically and independently. With education we are positioned to shape and control our own future. In that sense, education is a true liberator. When we educate children we are giving them a critical tool to understand and interpret the world around them; and to understand themselves. In other words, we make them proactive about life. With education their future is much brighter. So, we cannot put price on education. It is a treasure within, deposited safely in the mind- where no one can ever snatch away or steal. If I may borrow a line from Benjamin Franklin: "If a man empties his purse into his head, no man can take it away from him. An investment in knowledge always pays the best interest." Thomas Jefferson puts it, even more succinctly, when he says, "Enlighten the people generally, and tyranny and oppressions of body and mind will vanish like evil spirits at the dawn of day." In

other words, to enslave a person or a society, the most effective, albeit sinister, method is to deprive them of education. All tyrants seem to know well the effectiveness of that equation: Control the education system, make it weak, reign over it, and you will be able to control the society, the economy, the institutions, and its future.

Society is powerless without education. The quality of education in a country is the litmus test to the quality of governance in that particular nation. On the economic side, education is the most effective weapon to fight poverty. There is a direct correlation between a sustainable socio-economic development of any nation and its commitment to quality education. A nation that is committed to and invests in the education of its new generation has a promising future. When education is a priority, population growth becomes another national resource rather than a burden or a threat. India is a good example for this.

The Education Crisis in Ethiopia

While the liberating factor of education is a matter of fact, it is unfortunate to hear that millions of potentially fertile minds of Ethiopian children are uncultivated, year after year, because of a failed public school system. According to a study done by Global Campaign for Education (2010), Ethiopia is one of the five worst countries in the world in which to be a student. The problem is not lack of public education - there are numerous primary and secondary schools throughout the country. It is the quality of education that is the issue. First of all, students are at school for half days only, classrooms are extremely crowded- the average is about sixty five students in a classroom per teacher. There is a lack of resources in all schools at all levels. The majority of public school educators in Ethiopia are unmotivated and they lack self-discipline. As a result, the younger generation is without role models. This was my observation as I travelled through different parts of Ethiopia in 2006, 2007, and 2010.

Alarmingly, the dropout rate in the elementary and secondary schools is at its peak. As a result, social problems and civil strife are on the rise along with the number of unemployed young adults. Prostitution, teenage pregnancy, and the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the country are all related to poverty and they all find their root cause in a broken education system. It is a misplacement of blame to assume poverty as a cause for Ethiopia's socio-political and economic predicament. Ethiopia's problems are lack of reform in the education system and lack of reform in the agriculture sector- and the two are related. Again, the question is, what can we do to reverse this trend?

Secondly, and unfortunately, the education crisis goes beyond the public education system into higher academic institutions. Today, Ethiopia boasts a five hundred percent growth in the number of higher academic institutions compared to the past two administrations. However, in terms of quality they are all skin-deep. With the mushrooming of private universities and colleges, quality of education is so highly compromised that the outcome is obvious. The vicious cycle continues as embarrassingly poorly prepared graduates become teachers in the schools. How can we redeem the future generation? How can we restore hope and initiate a lasting solution to Ethiopia's socio-economic predicament in view of the looming global food crisis?

If a lasting solution is desired, primarily, the education system of Ethiopia must be reformed in its quality and focus. In other words, its quality needs to measure up to international standard. For that to take place, the transformation needs to start at the higher institutions. Universities and colleges are the powerhouse of transformation; and therefore, they need to be kept free from political manipulation and control- they need to remain independent for free thinking. At the same time they need to be adequately funded so that they become effective transforming agents.