
Critical Perspectives on NGOs and Educational Policy Development in Ethiopia

Thashika Pillay, University of Alberta (Canada)

Abstract: *This paper examines the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in advocacy and educational policy development in Ethiopia and puts forward the proposition that development organizations working in the education sector in Ethiopia have moved away from their initial role as service providers and are morphing in to policy developers; a trend that has and will continue to have a detrimental effect on the languages, cultures and educational prospects of Ethiopians. While NGOs have gained acceptance in the country based on their claims to speak on behalf of/for/with the people (grassroots claims), utilizing the example of the NGO, Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO), my experience as a teacher in Ethiopia as a VSO-placed volunteer and a related review of education policy documents and critical literature on NGOs, it is suggested that INGOs (international NGOs) are in fact dominant institutions that primarily work in collaboration with and in the socio-political interests of the upper echelons of the state, higher education institutions and multilateral development agencies (in contra-distinction to their alleged grass-roots championing rhetoric). INGOs are subsequently implicated in the contemporary process of neo-colonial penetration of the country by aiding the process of reproducing an imported and externally driven schooling/educational policy.*

1. Introduction

NGOs have gradually begun to transform the sub-Saharan African political and educational landscape over the past twenty years or so. Education is seen as a general societal need by many, and few would argue against improving the formal educational system in African nations to educate the masses. NGOs work within this context, taking up the challenge to educate the uneducated and free them from their subordination, initially intervening as educational service providers. When the development sector and some governments started to lament the lack of quality educational opportunities in Ethiopia, NGOs gradually moved beyond their role as service providers, making educational quality their new *raison d'être* and subsequently eased in to policy development work, thereby staking out a greater claim and control over educational direction/purposes, schooling experience and curricular/linguistic content, while simultaneously legitimizing their indispensability with respect to education and development in the country.

Based on a review of critical literature on NGO led development and education in the global South and Ethiopia and a related analysis of educational policy documents pertaining to formal education in Ethiopia, as well as an examination of my own experiences as a volunteer with the NGO Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) in Ethiopia, the attempt here is to demonstrate the role and impact of international NGOs on educational policy development and associated directions in education in Ethiopia through an examination of the policies of VSO. It is suggested here that NGOs could well have become the first (neo)colonizers of Ethiopia through their propagation of globalized education programs and contradictory assertions around encouraging participatory development and that Ethiopian education is in danger of severing its connection to its historical, linguistic and cultural lineage, in an attempt to insert an imported education philosophy/system predominantly aimed at modernizing Ethiopia; a process that circumvents the necessary participation of Ethiopians at large in helping to determine their educational and developmental paths. The

paper and this guiding proposition/thesis is developed as follows: (a) a brief historical overview of key educational developments in Ethiopia, (b) a selective review of some propositions from the critical literature on development NGOs and educational NGOs in particular and their rise to prominence in education advocacy and policy development, (c) the NGOization of education/policy development in Ethiopia (post 1990) and (d) a specific examination (the case of VSO) of how an educational NGO (and other NGOs) has and continues to shape educational policy development in Ethiopia and implications for Ethiopian sovereignty and cultural and educational development. Lastly, based on the preceding analysis, a few critical observations/discussion pertaining to the NGOization of education in lieu of Ethiopian sovereignty are given due consideration. This work represents an initial attempt to address the paucity of critical literature/studies (unlike in the case of Latin America and Asia) examining the role of NGOs in educational policy development and advocacy in the African context and in particular, sub-Saharan Africa.

2. Education in Ethiopia: A Historical Review of Key Developments

The earliest formal education systems in Ethiopia are attributed to the Christian Orthodox churches and mosques which were the centres of religious and social knowledge (Kassaye, 2000). It is due to the Church that Ethiopia became the only nation in sub-Saharan Africa to develop its own script for the traditional language of Ge'ez which is the origins for the national language of Amharic (Milkias, 2006). The development of a script to transform a formerly oral language into a written language should have signified a massive shift to literacy within Ethiopia. However, literacy remained within the purview of the elite.

Emperor Menelik II came to power in Ethiopia in 1889; Menelik wanted the expansion of education in order to modernize Ethiopia. Areaya (2008) argues that Menelik was determined to ensure the centralization of government, the reform of administrative apparatus, and the improvement of social conditions for the people as well as for the sovereignty

of the country. Menelik valued education since it would ensure peace thereby reconstructing the country and enabling it to “exist as a great nation in the face of European powers” (Areaya, 2008: 37). Thus began the role of education as a tool for Ethiopian modernization and according to Asgedom (2005) as a tool for the marketization of Ethiopia. In 1908, Menelik opened the first state supported secular school in Ethiopia (Tefera, 1996: 2). Ethiopia was the only nation in Africa not colonized or occupied by a colonizing force at the time. It is feasible to hypothesize that Menelik believed that by introducing a modernist education system, Ethiopians would learn the language and skills of the colonizers, thereby ensuring that they could fight future attempts by the European powers who had divided up the rest of Africa. Menelik started Ethiopia on the path towards modernization on the assumption that a Westernized education system would ensure Ethiopian sovereignty.

Ethiopians are extremely proud of their history, of having never been colonized with the exception of a brief military occupation by the Italians from 1935-1941. However, this brief occupation caused serious turmoil to Ethiopia’s education system. The Italians killed thousands of educated Ethiopians, leading to the exile of educated survivors to England, France, and the United States (StateUniversity.com, 2010). The death and exile of thousands of educated Ethiopians along with the creation of a subpar education system incapacitated the Ethiopian education system. Prior to 1935, there were over 4000 students attending schools, a significant percentage as the population was approximately 16000 at the time; by 1941, enrolment was 1,400 (StateUniversity.com, 2010). These numbers are even more surprising considering the relatively low levels of urbanization in Ethiopia during this period.

Ethiopian education, following the introduction of the first national curriculum, was formulated according to a Westernized education system as the curriculum for grades one to six (elementary) was decided by a committee made up of foreign “experts”. Furthermore, the curriculum emphasised non-Ethiopian concepts such as textbooks, classroom management and examinations with the language of instruction being English from grade three (Areaya, 2008). Education in Ethiopia remained in the decision making

hands of foreign “experts”, both as a result of the desires of numerous governments to educate the population in such a manner as well as the high numbers of foreign “experts” playing a role in decision-making. The educational system, with its plethora of foreign “experts”, did not meet the needs of the Ethiopian population. In 1972, the system was critiqued as “wasteful as most students dropped out without having employable skills” (Areaya, 2008: 48). According to the goals of government and foreign “experts”, the education system was failing as it was not giving students the skills needed to be successful in the work force or to be leaders whose skills would lead to Ethiopia’s economic revival.

Human capital theory/perspective is at the heart of the modern Ethiopian education policy (World Bank, 2008). On 20 November 2004 in a televised debate in Ethiopian Television (ETV), the Capacity Building Minister, Tefere Walwa (translated by and cited in Areaya, 2008: 66), stated:

Every individual who completed grade eight will not necessarily be admitted to secondary education because since we have to make and allow every citizen to complete grade eight for the purpose of rapid development, we then can’t afford for every grade eight completer to join secondary education. The country doesn’t have such capacity to absorb all primary education graduates into secondary level. If we let all primary school completers join secondary education, the majority of the people, in turn, will not get the opportunity of completing primary education. The majority of primary education graduates will join some kind of post primary technical and vocational education and prepare themselves for the world of work. Only a few will prepare for higher education. At the ends of grades 8 and 10, the majority of students are expected to embark on vocational training in order to bring about rapid development and achieve our goals.

It is the government’s intention that Ethiopian education train individuals to enter the formal workforce in order to aid Ethiopia’s economic development. Ethiopia is currently viewed as one the poorest nations in the world, ranking 171st

Thashika Pillay, University of Alberta (Canada)

out of 182 nations on the Human Development Index (Human Development Reports, 2009). According to UNDP statistics, 78% of the population currently lives on less than \$2 a day (Human Development Reports, 2009). This is not a nation which can afford to educate an ever increasing population without foreign funds. The Ethiopian government has mandated the need of a Westernized education system for development; by doing so they have also invited international donor organizations and non-governmental organizations into Ethiopia in order to guarantee the necessary funds to ensure access to education and ensure that Ethiopia meets the millennium development goals (MDGs).

The Ethiopian government has an essentially top-down approach to development and educational decision-making, as seen by Proclamation 41/1993 of January 20, 1993 which stated that the Ministry of Education had the powers and duties to:

- Formulate the country's education policy and strategies and, upon approval follow up and supervise their implementation;
- Determine and supervise the implementation of the country's educational standard;
- Determine the educational curriculum offered at the level of Senior Secondary Schools, higher education institutions. (Areaya, 2008: 56)

This top-down approach to education has resulted in a nationalized, non-local education system which is not meeting the needs of students nor society at large. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education has been instrumental in allowing international NGOs to play a significant role in educational policy-making decisions in the hopes that transforming Ethiopia's education system into a more Westernized system will ensure faster development and economic stability. In a 2004 report to UNESCO, the Ethiopian Government contends that the only way in which to meet the first millennium development goal (MDG) – the eradication of poverty – is through increased literacy levels, a goal which the government alone does not have the capacity to ensure; therefore NGOs must be actively involved (The

Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2004). Tobia (cited in Tefera, 1996) refers to a longtime Ethiopian educator who asserts that participation by a few passers-by does not mean that the people have been involved, and argues that an educational document in which teachers have not been directly involved will not be of much use. Hailu (2007) reiterates the lack of community participation in the decision-making processes of the selection of contents of the curriculum. The opinion of the majority of the Ethiopian population has not been solicited, bringing into question the belief that NGOs support participatory development as well as the democratic credentials of the Ethiopian government.

3. Critical Perspectives on Development NGOs and Educational Advocacy and Policy Development

NGOs have become dominant actors in the development sector over the past three decades, a meteoric rise to prominence with the simultaneous increases in poverty, inequality and marginalization across the globe. They are part of a multi-billion dollar industry as international NGOs sit at the bargaining table with International Financial Institutions (IFIs) such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, inter-governmental organizations such as USAID and CIDA and representatives of nation states. Riddell (2008) claims that NGOs hold an extremely privileged position and have the ability to influence other organizations and agencies to change their policies and approaches. Mundy and Murphy (2001: 128) assert that NGOs:

are frequently portrayed as the building blocks of a prototypical 'global civil society', with the power to influence, and perhaps democratize, the structure of world politics, both through increasing influence within existing international institutions and their capacity to use this influence to leverage change in individual nation states.

NGOs, as described above, are now clearly seen as extremely powerful organizations and hence the importance of taking a

Thashika Pillay, University of Alberta (Canada)

closer look at their various involvements in the lives/nations of the people in whose name they justify their very existence, i.e., many NGOs advertise themselves as the voice of civil society and local/marginal populations, subsequently deploying this rhetoric to maneuver themselves in to key inter/national policy and decision making forums.

An examination of critical literature pertaining to NGOs suggests that there is much debate and contradictory opinion among scholars as to the role of NGOs in development, education advocacy and policy development. A study funded by USAID found that NGOs believe that education programs in Africa cannot meet the objectives outlined by donor agencies without changes in education policy, propelling them to “change policies that hamper their work or seek new policies that would enhance it” in order to realize educational goals (Academy for Educational Development, 2003). Mundy and Murphy (2001: 92) contend that NGOs act as the voices of civil society to governments and safeguard the public by “limiting the government’s ability to impose arbitrary rule by force”. Dibia (2008) argues that joint ventures between government, NGOs and civil society and the private sector are crucial to achieve sustainable development and increase standard of living.

While several scholars criticize any possible role for NGOs in policymaking and advocacy, others attempt to find a compromise. Kadzamira and Kunje (2002) claim that problems ensue when NGOs design programs with little interaction and collaboration with the state and when government offices do not involve the NGO community in the policy process, resulting in misunderstandings between the two sides. According to Kadzamira and Kunje (2002), NGOs implementing government-sanctioned programs are more likely to affect policy than those working on their own, and some NGOs programs have been successful in initiating debate and dialogue on policy issues, which they view as a positive development in the policy formulation process. According to Malhotra (2000), it is the responsibility of NGOs to hold governments accountable for the welfare of their citizens. Malhotra (2000) argues that cutting aid to NGOs will mean that NGOs will no longer have the resources to decide for themselves what programs to support, thus compelling NGOs to work with governments, a change which

will allow NGOs to work in more appropriate contexts. Many scholars attempt to find ways in which NGOs can continue to work in development as their work is seen as extremely valuable to the populations they claim to serve.

Critics of NGOs view the NGOization¹ of education as the cultural, linguistic and economic domination of the global South. Petras and Veltmeyer (2001: 132) argue that NGOs are not “non-governmental” organizations since they “receive funds from overseas governments, work as private subcontractors for local governments and/or are subsidized by corporate-funded private foundations with close working relations with the state”; furthermore, NGO programs are accountable not to local people but to overseas donors. According to Petras and Veltmeyer (2001), NGOs reproduce the international and national power structure, thereby effectively becoming a part of the decision-making process as they neutralize political opposition at the bottom while promoting neo-liberalism at the top. According to Amutabi (2006), NGOs represent a new third sector initiative in the globalization process in which governments are being removed from certain spheres of involvement while at the same time allowing people freedom to initiate and choose what they want; this privileging of NGOs allows them to fill in the gaps left by governments in the development process, a process Amutabi refers to as ‘philanthrocracy’, arguing that NGOs have become such significant actors in development that little development occurs without NGO input, as acknowledged by the Kenyan government’s inclusion of NGOs in government development plans. Shivji (2007: 21) claims that World Bank accusations with respect to the corruption of African states has led to a situation in which “decision-making and policy-making slipped out of the hands of African states as the West financed policy and governance consultants in their thousands to produce policy blue prints, poverty reduction strategies and manuals on

¹ NGOization, here, refers to the the role played by NGOs in encouraging a universalization of educational policies/approaches through the provision of educational services, policy development and advocacy work which encourages the homogenization of educational systems across the globe thereby promoting educational, cultural and linguistic colonization and imperialism.

good governance”; subsequently, states would need foreign non-political development practitioners, such as NGOs to mentor, monitor, and oversee them. African states are no longer sovereign entities as policymaking and policing become the role of NGOs.

NGOs are sometimes criticized for transmitting global cultural norms. Schafer (1999: 81) argues that a “global polity or international civil society is continuously evolving, and as it does, it persuades its member states and societies to adhere to world cultural institutions and norms”. Edwards (2008: 47) asserts that NGOs have failed in many respects; they have internalized functions that should have been distributed across local and national governments in developing countries and are franchising global brands as opposed to “supporting authentic expressions of indigenous society”. Edwards (2008) sees NGOs as a conduit through which donor organizations can channel aid and their view of development into the global South. Furthermore, the changes brought about by NGOs tend to be more permanent than that initiated by agents of government. Kamat (2002: 155) argues that NGOs have been “identified as the preeminent, if not sole, organizational forms that can implement the global commitment to ‘bottom up’ development”, claiming that the globalization of NGOs reflects a new policy consensus in which NGOs are “de facto agents of democracy rather than products of a thriving democratic culture” (156). She asserts that current debates on the role of NGOs delegitimize the state as there are no mechanisms by which NGOs can be made accountable to the people they claim to serve. Furthermore, Kamat (2002) discusses a report by the UN Commission on Global Governance (1995) which depicts global governance as involving NGOs, citizen movements, multi-national corporations and the global economy, each of which is seen as participating in the global governance process equally and without mention of the role of individual states. NGOs, it appears, are transplanting the state’s role as policymakers while propelling a Westernized, non-localized education system.

The role of NGOs in education advocacy and policy development is currently being debated. However, both critics and supporters agree that NGOs are involved in

advocacy and policy development. Supporters claim that the NGOization of education in the global South is necessary in order for modernization and for countries like Ethiopia to achieve the MDGs; this can only be achieved through NGO involvement in policymaking. Critics respond that the NGOization of education results in a specific knowledge system being promoted, a knowledge system which regards Euro-American knowledge as superior to indigenous/local knowledges and ways of living. International NGOs steer educational policy towards homogeneity, and local/national culture is considered superficially as part of what is often a public relations exercise aimed at masking assimilationist educational and developmental projects.

4. The NGOization of Education in Ethiopia: Towards a Preliminary Critical Analysis of NGOs and Educational Policy in Ethiopia (post-1990s)

The defeat of the Communist government in 1991 and the subsequent rise to power of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) resulted in a shift in focus for NGOs. Prior to 1991, the majority of NGOs in Ethiopia were involved in humanitarian efforts; with the defeat of the Derg regime, while many NGOs continue to be devoted to humanitarian efforts, the vast majority are involved in service provision and advocacy work. Ethiopia is the beneficiary of aid funds from intergovernmental donor organizations such as USAID, DFID and CIDA as well as IFIs and international NGOs. The current government is in need of a massive influx of capital in order to maintain its modernizing education system. Furthermore, the government simply does not have the resources to implement a massive overhaul of the education system. This has resulted in an avalanche of NGOs in Ethiopia as educational service providers. The government has allowed NGOs into Ethiopia on the grounds that they will provide the much needed infrastructure to modernize Ethiopian education, thereby hopefully leading to economic and social development.

In the aftermath of the widespread famine of the 1970s and 1980s, the number of international humanitarian and

Thashika Pillay, University of Alberta (Canada)

aid NGOs in Ethiopia ballooned (Clark, 2000: 4). With the victory of the EPRDF and a decrease in the need for humanitarian aid, many NGOs switched focus and became employed in the education sector (van Beurden, 1998). Mundy and Murphy (2001: 124) argue that NGOs, “venue shopping” in the mid 1990s, “chose education precisely because it was an issue already adopted by government and intergovernmental organizations and, thus, capable of providing them increased legitimacy and leverage”. According to Seboka (2004: 20), 35% of NGOs working in Ethiopia are engaged in education, and this increasing trend of “NGO engagement in the education sector shows that NGOs are now paying more attention to the development of human resources in the country, putting education as one of the priority areas of intervention in their poverty reduction strategies”. The Ethiopian government is willing to simply continue the modernizing education program of previous governments, having been convinced by the international community that only “modern” education is the answer to the problems facing sub-Saharan African nations.

In January 2009, the Ethiopian Parliament passed the ‘Charities and Societies Proclamation’, restricting the activities of NGOs. Opponents of the proclamation argue that the new law will present severe obstacles to the provision of much needed aid. Proponents respond that while it will limit the ability of foreign funding agencies to influence policy, there is no restriction to the continued provision of much needed funding for programmes such as those aimed at improving quality education. NGOs working in education are seen as service providers whose main role is the modernizing of the Ethiopian education system in order to ensure economic and social development. Unlike NGOs working in human rights and governance issues, it appears that educational NGOs are not considered to be a threat to state sovereignty or to the present government’s rule. However, in reality, NGOs are not simply just service providers. They work with government officials and play a major role in policy making, thereby having an impact on millions of Ethiopians who are attending government schools and who are learning a curriculum that has been influenced and often created by foreign “experts”.

While the Ethiopian government may view the role of NGOs as that of service providers, numerous education NGOs in Ethiopia do have an impact on policy. SC/Norway and Action Aid Ethiopia have been successful in affecting policy by transferring their models into various other contexts (Seboka, 2004). Furthermore, Clark (2000) contends that in recent years NGOs are increasingly being contacted on policy decisions, arguing that the frequency of government-NGO consultation has increased substantially in Ethiopia between 1998 and 2000. The Ethiopian government recognizes that NGOs are important partners in their quest to modernize and is, therefore, attempting to create a climate conducive to ensuring that educational NGOs can help the government meet the MDGs. However, believing that NGOs would be satisfied to merely remain as service providers illustrates either the government's own naiveté or the realization by the Ethiopian government that allowing NGOs an increased role with regards to policy-making would ensure that the MDGs are achieved at a faster pace. The Ethiopian government and NGOs place much faith in international "experts" who can implement ideas "needed" to transform Ethiopian education.

NGOs sell an image of themselves as acting only in conjunction with grassroots aspirations, an image that is of great appeal to the Ethiopian government as the Ministry of Education (2009) has identified community empowerment as one goal for the government. The Ministry of Education has identified this goal in order to allow *woredas* (local government) and communities to take responsibility for providing education, not because government believes that local populations should decide their own education system but because local communities would then be responsible to cover the cost of assuring access to education and not the national government. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education's so-called commitment to participatory decision-making is called into question when one analyzes the extent to which policies are formulated based on a top-down approaches to development. The current guidelines for educational policy in Ethiopia are defined in the General Education Quality Improvement Program (GEQIP), which was first formulated by federal education officials including foreign experts working with World Bank officials before

Thashika Pillay, University of Alberta (Canada)

being sent to regional and *woreda* officials for comments (World Bank, 2008). This belies the concept of participatory decision-making as the process begins at the top and local officials are asked to comment on policy already formulated. There is no inclusion in the decision-making process of local peoples who will be the supposed recipients of these policies. Furthermore, there are no structures in place which would permit local officials to alter central policies. NGOs are used as a tool to sell an image, an image of a government which welcomes participation from grassroots organizations. NGOs that aid the government in undermining the process of participatory decision-making are in fact selling out the very peoples they claim to represent.

5. The Case of Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) in Education Advocacy and Policy Development

In 2007, I accepted a placement in Ethiopia as a volunteer teacher through VSO. VSO had begun its program in Ethiopia in 1997 and chose education as the main sector in need of VSO development “experts”, bringing in “expert” teachers from Great Britain and Canada to train Ethiopian in-service and pre-service teachers. This role of NGOs as service providers is usually in line with the mandate of the government. In 2005, the Ministry of Education stated that it was the mission of stakeholders such as NGOs to “extend quality and relevant primary education to all school-age children and expand standardized education and training programs at all levels to bring about rapid and sustainable development” (p. 5). Furthermore, the Ministry of Education sees the role of NGOs as strengthening and supporting government strategies and activities, not as active decision-makers or policymakers (Ministry of Education, 2002).

VSO Volunteers and Educational Policy-making/interventions

NGOs utilize several methods to influence stakeholders. Seboka (2004) argues that NGOs use various strategies – workshops, field visits, exposure tours and experimentation of successful pilot projects – to illustrate the positive effects of NGO led programs. VSO policy documents

depict advocacy work as enabling NGOs to “draw on their programme experience to show the impact of existing policies on the poor and marginalised, and to suggest improvements” (VSO, 2009c: 9). VSO encourages their staff, partners and volunteers to be aware of the policymaking system in the countries in which they operate, including the formal and informal ways in which policies are formulated at different levels which helps those involved to better understand the opportunities that exist, including so-called “policy windows” (VSO, 2009c). VSO has no desire to remain as an education service provider, understanding modernization has little chance of occurring if NGOs such as VSO cannot influence educational policy. In order to ensure that VSO continues to be able to influence policy development decisions in Ethiopia, it is integral that VSO not alienate the Ethiopian government. Ethiopia is one of the few countries in sub-Saharan Africa in which VSO places volunteers or foreign “experts” in the Ministry of Education. VSO documents clearly state that their core purpose in countries like Ethiopia is the provision of volunteers for the education ministry (VSO, 2009c).

Foreign “experts” working in the Ministry of Education in Ethiopia are best placed to effect policy change. NGOs like VSO understand this. Their main objective is policy development and advocacy; therefore, they ensure that their relationship with government remains conducive to continuing in this policy development and influencing role. In May 2006, the Ministry of Education published a manual for improving English language capability in Teacher Education Institutions. Of the six authors of the document, two – Judith Altshul and Genevieve Holmes – were VSO volunteers working in the Ministry of Education, two were foreign “experts” associated with other institutions, and two Ethiopians. VSO understands that placing foreign “experts” within the Ministry of Education allows them to play an integral role in policymaking decisions. Furthermore, VSO volunteers have become integral members of curriculum writing teams. In June 2008, I attended a Ministry of Education workshop on developing a new English curriculum for all higher education institutions. There were a handful of VSO volunteers present and approximately ten times as many Ethiopian university and college instructors.

Thashika Pillay, University of Alberta (Canada)

The workshop was facilitated by VSO volunteers working in the Ministry of Education. In each of the subgroups, VSO volunteers from universities and colleges facilitated the discussions; they were the “experts”. Volunteers working within the Ministry of Education ensured that volunteers lead the discussions and debates. Ethiopian teachers were still involved in the process; however, this involvement was superficial as it was VSO volunteers who were the primary agenda-setters. In March 2009, the Ministry of Education held a second workshop to discuss finalizing the new English curriculum. VSO Ethiopia head office staff encouraged VSO volunteers to attend by increasing the daily travel allowance given to VSO volunteers from ETB 70 (Ethiopian Birr) to ETB 130. This consideration was not available for Ethiopians planning to attend the workshop, not even when VSO volunteers themselves asked for their increased allowance to be redirected to their Ethiopian colleagues. VSO Ethiopia is well versed on the policy-making structures and ensures that those volunteers working within the Ministry of Education are aware of how to facilitate the inclusion of other VSO volunteers in the policy-making process.

VSO’s Top-down Approach to Development and Education

Daniel Hailu (2007: 53) argues that the Ministry of Education has enjoyed a monopoly over the formulation of the syllabus, a monopoly “largely responsible for the fundamental differences between the worldview and value system of the community and what formal education seeks to inculcate”. VSO appears to be well aware of the fact that it is the Ministry of Education which controls policymaking decisions. During 2007/2008, VSO had 138 foreign “experts” volunteering in Ethiopia. Of those, 113 were involved in the education sector (VSO, 2008). These experts were placed in partner organizations; key partners include the Ministry of Education, the Institute of Curriculum Development and Research, and the Higher Education Institutions, Teacher Education Institutions, Regional Education Bureaus and City or Zone Education Bureaus (VSO, 2009a). VSO partner organizations in Ethiopia are large government organizations. VSO has effectively moved away from working in communities and individual schools as they do not view

such work as sustainable and realize that the Ethiopian government does not welcome community involvement in policymaking. VSO “is playing a pivotal role in the implementation of the recently launched Ministry-developed National Adult Education Strategy ... [and] will start to work with Regional Education Bureaus to translate implementation guidelines into action plans at the regional level” (VSO, 2008: 11). The belief among VSO office staff appears to be that a top down approach to development is the most cost effective and sustainable approach.

While in Ethiopia with VSO, I also worked at Mekelle University as an English Language Improvement Program (ELIP) Coordinator. My duties included providing English language training to pre-service teachers, in-service teachers as well as university instructors. The VSO mandate claimed that improving the English language capability of teachers at the different levels would improve their capability to teach in English as well as to improve the skills of their students. This top down approach to development does not consider the needs of students; it simply assumes that all Ethiopians only want to learn English. Students are invited to participate in decisions at only the most superficial levels as they, for instance, decide on how (approaches) they want to learn English as opposed to being invited to discuss critical cultural and linguistic questions in relation to the importation of English and its potential implications for local languages/culture. The one exception to this rule is with regards to the medium of instruction for primary school students. In the Tigray Region, students learn in their mother tongue until the end of grade eight, learning English as a foreign language. In grade nine, the medium of instruction becomes English. However, regardless of the language of instruction, students are still learning a curriculum that is outside of their context and foreign to the realities of their lives. Using mother tongue as the medium of instruction is sold on the basis that it is easier for students to learn foreign concepts first in their mother tongue before being asked to re-learn these concepts in English. The use of mother tongue is simply a tool to ensure that students are learning the skills they need to be more attractive in the labour market.

Thashika Pillay, University of Alberta (Canada)

This top down market-driven modernization approach to educational/development in Ethiopia ensures that in order for NGOs to continue to influence the development agenda (and their concomitant indispensability), they must seek to influence and remained involved with policy development at the state level. Therefore, it is no surprise that NGOs such as VSO have made strong engagement in top-down education/development policy development their primary development objective.

How VSO Propels an Agenda

The failure to seriously commit to participatory development and decision-making is also made evident in other VSO documents. In March 2009, VSO held a stakeholders meeting to discuss various problems facing Ethiopian teachers. The ensuing report entitled "*How much is a good teacher worth? A report on the motivation and morale of teachers in Ethiopia*" concludes that teachers are undervalued, and want to see improvements in their pay, status and conditions of service. While the report asks teachers about possible improvements to the current educational system, no reference is made to an Ethiopian (indigenous) education system. VSO, in fact, recommends increased NGO influence as well as continued NGO and donor support through training in cluster-based supervision and other "innovative NGO-designed methods" and structures, such as through teacher development². VSO recruits foreign cluster coordinators to facilitate the process. VSO would begin to advocate on behalf of teachers, working in areas teachers and their families are marginalised, such as HIV and AIDS, disability, gender and minority discrimination, all areas in which VSO is already working and which are part and parcel of their overall international development interventions (VSO, 2009b). The solution already exists and VSO owns the solution. There is no need for teachers to look outside of VSO for help in improving their situation; why would teachers do so when not only does

² In Ethiopia, universities and colleges are responsible for providing continuous professional development to all teachers in primary and secondary schools located in specific areas closest to the higher education institutions.

VSO have an answer but also a policy in place to ensure an increase in teacher motivation and happiness. The cluster program recommended by VSO is funded by the World Bank and other inter-governmental donor agencies such as USAID and DFID. The funding has already been guaranteed and is in place; now all that the Ethiopian government needs to do is accept the report and the coinciding policy changes which will allow VSO's recommendations to come into effect. The question that must be asked is whether VSO's solution to teacher motivation is the correct solution or simply in the best interests of VSO in order to ensure continued funding of the cluster program. My experience as a volunteer in Ethiopia has led me to understand that the cluster program has been put into place to westernize the Ethiopian education system, with little concern for the culture and aspirations of local peoples.

VSO policies are not policies which are determined by those at the community level. These policies are determined by those in positions of power. This is in direct contradiction to VSO's own claims and volunteer training programs which emphasize that all work done by VSO employees and volunteers should be participatory and attentive to and inclusive of the local cultural context. In May 2008, VSO Ethiopia held a workshop to create a country strategic plan. Invited members to the workshop included volunteers VSO felt were performing well in their jobs and who were working in sectors which VSO believed should be the focus for their plan. VSO volunteers and Ethiopians from the Ministry of Education were present. Ethiopians invited to join the workshop were mainly those from organizations and institutions which had had a long history with VSO, such as Kifle Gebrekirstos (Dean) from Abi Adi College of Teacher Education, a college in which VSO has been placing volunteers since the start of VSO's program in Ethiopia in 1997 (VSO, 2008). Is the Dean of the college the right person to be invited to a session on strategic planning for the next five years? Does this illustrate community involvement in policy-making decisions? The country strategic plan put into place by VSO has since been used to direct those working with the Ministry of Education.

One result of the country strategic plan was the decision that Ethiopian schools need to learn about

Thashika Pillay, University of Alberta (Canada)

inclusion and special needs education. This has since been transferred to the Ministry of Education which is now requesting that teacher education institutions have a foreign “expert” come in who can teach in-service and pre-service teachers about inclusion. A colleague working at Abi Adi College of Teacher Education has informed me that the Dean of Abi Adi College has made a request for a VSO volunteer who can work in the area of special needs education. As a teacher trained in the Canadian education system, I myself believe that special needs education is important. Would the peoples of Abi Adi believe that their schools should have inclusive education? Is this a priority for these rural schools when many go without desks and chairs for their existing students?

In 2007, the Ministry of Education (MoE) developed a General Education Quality Improvement Package (GEQIP), a five-year plan (2008/9 -2011/12) comprised of six pillars: Civics and Ethical Education, Curriculum, Information Communications Technology, Management and Leadership, School Improvement Programme (SIP) and Teacher Development. One of the development partners is the Department for International Development (DFID). According to a 2008 VSO review report, VSO volunteers based at the Ministry of Education have also been:

directly and indirectly contributing to the development and realisation of GEQIP ... in the preparation of the implementation plans, especially for the components of the Teacher Development pillar, such as the Higher Diploma Programme (HDP), English Language Improvement Programme (ELIP), Continuous Professional Development Programme (CPD), and Pre-service and In-service Teacher Training. (p. 3)

For VSO to increase its influence in Ethiopian education, it must become involved in educational policymaking and in advocacy issues, as has been seen by VSO’s involvement in the Ministry of Education’s GEQIP plan. Stagnancy will signal the beginning of the end for development NGOs such as VSO as continued engagement in service provision will nullify the influence VSO has and its ability to expand within the development sector. NGOs are businesses and like most

business, believe in growth and in securing greater control over their sector and for NGOs, this is the development sector. Furthermore, the NGO mantra that they are attempting to work themselves out of a job no longer holds much truth, if it ever did. NGOs receive over \$10 billion annually in official aid from governments to support and fund development and humanitarian activities. In 2004, NGOs spent over \$23 billion for various projects (Riddell, 2008). Development is a multi-billion dollar industry, and those with power in the industry predictably have little desire to self-destruct. Therefore it unsurprisingly follows that continued NGO survival and growth makes it necessary that NGOs become involved in policy development in order to remain relevant.

6. The NGOization of Education and a Small Question of Ethiopian Sovereignty: Some Concluding Observations/Discussion

The Ethiopian Societies and Charities Proclamation mentioned earlier which came into effect in January 2009 illustrates the Ethiopian government's full awareness as to the influence NGOs can have. However, the Proclamation is restricted to those NGOs working in human rights and democracy issues and does not extend to NGOs working in the education sector. Is this the result of the power of NGOs which work in the education sector or the result of the deeply held belief by the Ethiopian government that a transformed education system is necessary for development? After all, according to modernization theorists, the development of society is a result of "literacy, education, increased communication, mass media exposure, and urbanization" (Huntington, 1971/2007: 63). Policymakers in the global South seem to accept that they are in need of development. Even a nation that has never been colonized by a European power, a nation which retained its sovereignty during the scramble for Africa in the 1800s, is finally falling prey to the known machinations of Western colonization. This colonization of the mind (a mono-cultural modernization of the educational system) has "destroyed all previously established systems of cultural reference [and] ... systematically discredited all previously established

Thashika Pillay, University of Alberta (Canada)

mechanisms that different cultures had created throughout their histories for fostering knowledge and culture” (Ki-Zerbo, Kane, Archibald, Lizop & Rahnema, 1997: 158). Ethiopia, like other sub-Saharan African nations has bought into the notion that it is in need of Euro-determined modern development. This makes Ethiopia unique in that it is a nation which is being colonized psychologically and culturally without direct military conquest and colonial control. The Ethiopian example reminds us that colonialism is not dead and a thing of the past but is very much a trend of the present.

Ethiopia has retained an extremely centralized education system. However, those with the power to design curriculum and policy – both local and foreign “experts” – reside in the capital, Addis Ababa. The decision-makers in power have little understanding of the educational needs of those in rural Ethiopia. “In a world consisting of dominating and dominated cultures, some cultures are bound to be considered more equal than others” (Alvares, 1992: 220). There is no single homogenous group of Ethiopians capable of deciding policy for an entire population of eighty million. NGOs frequently claim that they wish to change policies they believe are bad for the poor, a claim which:

assumes that ‘the poor’ comprise a single homogenous group, that policies affect all poor people in the same way, and [usually] that only the immediate impact of policies is of relevance. They also assume that the [external] policies that affect poor people can be simply identified. In practice, however, the issues are far more complex. ‘The poor’ invariably consist of different groups who are affected by different policies in different ways over different time periods. (Riddell, 2008: 300)

Ethiopia has become a nation where a Westernized education system is being championed by the power-elite and “educated” classes. This is the knowledge that is being disseminated through the national education system. NGOs have been instrumental and complicit in advocating for and helping to shape implement just such a system. NGOs position “themselves as ‘knowledge agencies’, attempting to

enhance their role as intellectual actors and to be more responsive to 'local knowledge', the 'voices of the poor', and the needs and realities of developing countries" (Utting, 2006: 1). However, according to Senarclens (1997: 202), while:

NGOs claim to defend the indigenous cultures and even call for anthropological prudence ... it is easy to see that, under this pretext of respect for indigenous culture, what they are really interested in is to disassociate the indigenous population from their economy based on reciprocity. To achieve this, they define the local ... in Western terms.

This denial of local cultures, beliefs and heritage is leading to the loss of language, culture and ways of living. It is slowly leading to the cultural impoverishment of a diverse people.

Not only do development projects usually reproduce "old power and knowledge asymmetries" (Escobar, 2008: 175), but instilling new values and attitudes leads students to reject their own cultural and personal identity, thereby acquiring a false sense of superiority, turning them away from manual work, and all unschooled people, whom they perceive as ignorant and underdeveloped (Ki-Zerbo et al., 1997; Nyerre, 1968). The imposition of the knowledge of a dominant culture leads to the subordination of other knowledges as fewer and fewer people remain versed in local knowledge systems, threatening the "identity and self-perception of the African student" (Shizha, 2005: 66). Students are taught to value foreign knowledge over local, taught to devalue their own cultures and identities, taught that becoming more like those in the North is the answer to the problems they may face. Development projects in the education sector "succeed" when they have managed to cleanse old knowledges and ways of knowing from education policies, curricula and pedagogical practices. An education system that defies the culture and history of nations such as Ethiopia is put into place by such development. Amutabi (2006: xxvi) contends that:

NGOs create images outside of history, and they do this by doctoring and manipulating local scenes,

Thashika Pillay, University of Alberta (Canada)

images, pictures and annual reports, that often exaggerate poverty and helplessness in order to draw donor attention and to justify their continued presence in Africa. ... therefore, NGOs strategically situate themselves at the door of knowledge in Africa, managing information, releasing and 'unveiling' what they want and keeping out what is not useful to their course. They are gate-keepers, situating themselves between Africans and donors, exercising so-called benevolent hegemony. They are used for the purpose of maintaining and extending Northern material, political, social and cultural influence while promoting a local comprador bourgeoisie, and yet there is no serious critique of these misrepresentations.

The education system that has come into being in Ethiopia is a Westernized system not suited to the ways of the majority of Ethiopians. This externally imposed and constructed homogeneity-project denies the "capacity of people to model their own behaviour and reproduce forms of discourse that contribute to the social and cultural domination" (Escobar, 1995: 94). The belief that an entire nation must be educated in a foreign language and using foreign teaching methodologies and cultural philosophies makes a mockery of NGO-claims to participatory development, grassroots actor and representative of marginalized majorities.

The colonization of Ethiopia is an ongoing phenomenon as the colonizer is no longer only from without but also emerges from within. The dominant elite that has been educated using the colonial educational system continues to reproduce colonial control/designs. "The local notion of development includes the acquisition of those tools of dominant knowledge systems that might empower them to envision and implement a viable future" (Escobar, 2008: 176). The consent of the dominated classes in accepting the hegemonic programs of the dominating classes further marginalizes the dominated classes (Kamat, 2002).

NGOs ironically continue to be viewed as organizations which work with peoples at the grassroots in order to ensure that people continue to have a role to play in the construction of their respective societies. However, as illustrated through the example of VSO Ethiopia which

works closely with IFIs, government officials and higher education institutions in the country, there is almost no contact or conversation with community or grassroots organizations. VSO Ethiopia works primarily with the 18% of the population that is urbanized and formally educated. Furthermore, VSO openly admits that one of its main goals is involvement in advocacy and policy development, in order to ensure their lasting presence and influence, if not indispensability.

NGOs are supported and funded by large numbers of people in the North due to the misconception that they work with and for the grassroots. NGOs such as VSO use this misconception to legitimize their continued engagement in policy development and advocacy. In fact, the policies advocated for by VSO are not policies grassroots groups help create and neither are they in the immediate interests of these groups. Furthermore, these policies are often initiatives created mainly by IFIs and donor organizations which then provide funding to NGOs to operationalize and implement these designs. It is hardly surprising then that NGOs in turn, seek to have maximal influence on education policy development in the recipient countries.

Ethiopians are extremely proud of never having been colonized. The European powers did not create a colony in Ethiopia during the scramble for Africa; however, Ethiopia has not escaped the tyranny of colonization. The difference is that the colonization of Ethiopia is taking place today and there appears to be little opposition to the devastation being wrought by this kind of “neo/colonial development”. The empire over which the sun never set no longer refers to the British Empire but to a world in which NGOs are now aiding and propelling the creation of a global knowledge empire wherein one national educational system will be indistinguishable from another.

Thashika Pillay, University of Alberta (Canada)

References

Academy for Educational Development, (2003). "Partnerships in education: Key findings on the role of NGOs in basic education in Africa." Washington: American Institutes for Research. Retrieved from <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca>

Areaya, S, (2008). *Policy formulation, curriculum development and Implementation in Ethiopia*. Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University: The Book Centre.

Asgedom, A, (1997). "Reported responsibilities and authorities of educational wereda heads in the region of Tigrai", *Institute of Educational Research*, vol. 4, no. 2, pp. 1-7.

Amutabi, M.N, (2006). *The NGO factor in Africa: The case of arrested development in Kenya*. New York: Routledge.

Clark, J, (2000). "Civil society, NGOs and development in Ethiopia: A snapshot view." Washington: The World Bank. Retrieved from <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTRANETSOCIALDEVELOPMENT/873204-1111663470099/20489508/CSandDevEthiopiaSnapshotView.pdf>

Dibie, R.A, (2008). "Introduction: NGOs and human development in Africa: Theory and model for collaboration", in R.A. Dibie (ed.), *Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and sustainable development in sub-Saharan Africa*. Plymouth: Lexington Books.

Edwards, M, (2008). "How NGOs make a difference? From Manchester to Birmingham with an elephant in the room", in A.J. Bebbington, S, Hickey, and D.C. Mitlin (eds.), *Can NGOs make a difference: The challenge for development alternatives*. London: Zed Books.

Escobar, A, (1995). *Encountering development: The making and unmaking of the Third World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Escobar, A, (2008). *Theories of difference: New ecologies for the 21st century*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Hailu, D, (2007). *Implication of formal education for rural communities in Ethiopia: The case of Woyisso-Qancaaro Kebele, Oromia Region*. Addis Ababa: Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology.

Kadzamira, E.C, and Kunje, D, (2002). "The changing roles of non-governmental organizations in education in Malawi". Washington: American Institutes for Research. Retrieved from <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.ezproxy/library.ualberta.ca>

Kamat, S, (2002). *Development Hegemony: NGOs and the state in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Kassaye, K, (2000). "Revisiting Traditional Education", *Institute of Educational Research (IER)*, vol. 7, no. 2, pp. 51-57.

Ki-Zerbo, J., Kane, C.H., Archibald, J., Lizop, E., and Rahnema, M. (1997). "Education as an instrument of cultural defoliation: A multi-voice report", in M. Rahnema and V. Bawtree (eds), *The post-development reader*. London: Zed Books.

Milkias, P, (2006). *Haile Selassie, western education and political revolution in Ethiopia*. Youngstown: Cambria Press.

Ministry of Education, (2002). *National framework for teacher education system overhaul*. Addis Ababa: Ministry of Education.

Ministry of Education, (2005). *Education sector development program III (ESDP III) 2005/2006 – 2010/2011 (1998 EFY – 2002 EFY): Program action plan (PAP)*. Addis Ababa: Ministry of Education.

Ministry of Education, (2009). *General education quality improvement program (GEQIP): Performance Agreement between the Regional Education Bureau and the College of Teacher Education*. Addis Ababa: Ministry of Education.

Mundy, K, and Murphy, L, (2001). "Transnational advocacy, global civil society? Emerging evidence from the field of education", *Comparative Education Review*, vol. 45, no. 1, pp. 85-126. Retrieved from <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca>

Petras, J, and Veltmeyer, H, (2001). *Globalization unmasked: Imperialism in the 21st century* (4th ed.). Halifax: Fenwood Publishing.

Riddell, R.C, (2008). *Does foreign aid really work?* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Thashika Pillay, University of Alberta (Canada)

Schafer , M.J, (1999). “International nongovernmental organizations and third world education in 1990: A cross national study”, *Sociology of Education*, vol. 72, no. 2, pp. 69-85. Retrieved from <http://www.proquest.com/login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca>

Seboka, B, (2004). *Assessment of NGOs/CSOs participation in the education sector development program of Ethiopia*. Addis Ababa: Christian Relief and Development Association.

Shivji, I.G, (2007). *Silences in NGO discourse: The role and future of NGOs in Africa*. Nairobi: Fahuma – Networks for Social Justice.

Shizha, E, (2005). “Reclaiming our memories: The education dilemma in postcolonial African school curricula”, in A.A. Abdi and A. Cleghorn (eds), *Issues in education: Sociological Perspectives*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

StateUniveristy.com, (2010). “Ethiopia - History & background, educational system – overview, preprimary & primary education, secondary education, higher education”. Retrieved from <http://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/463/Ethiopia.html>

Tefera, S, (1996). “Attempts at educational reform in Ethiopia: A top-down or bottom-up reform?” *The Ethiopian Journal of Education*, vol. 16, no. 1, pp. 1-37.

The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, (2004). *Report on the development of education in Ethiopia to the UNESCO Forty-seventh session of the international conference on education 8-11 September 2004*. Geneve, Switzerland.

United Nations Development Program (UNDP), (2009). “Human Development Report 2009: Ethiopia”. Retrieved from http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/country_fact_sheets/cty_fs_ETH.html

van Beurden, J, (1998). “Ethiopia – Country Profile 1998”. Retrieved from <http://www.crdaethiopia.org/Country%20Profile/ethiopia.htm>

Voluntary Service Overseas, (2008). *VSO Ethiopia country strategic plan 2009 – 2014*. Addis Ababa: Voluntary Service Overseas.

Voluntary Service Overseas, (2008). *VSO Ethiopia education programme area plan 2007-08 review report*. Addis Ababa: Voluntary Service Overseas.

Voluntary Service Overseas, (2009a). *Education goal report 2008/2009*. London: Voluntary Service Overseas.

Voluntary Service Overseas, (2009b). *How much is a good teacher worth?: A report on the motivation and morale of teachers in Ethiopia*. Addis Ababa: Voluntary Service Overseas.

Voluntary Service Overseas, (2009c). *Participatory advocacy: A toolkit for VSO staff, volunteers and partners*. London: Voluntary Service Overseas.

World Bank, (2008). *Ethiopia general education quality improvement program (GEQIP): Project appraisal document*. Washington: World Bank.