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Title: Higher education development and knowledge economy optimism in Ethiopia

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Abstract:

Higher education has been assigned new global importance. It is now the vehicle of choice for nations seeking to increase their competitiveness in an expanding knowledge economy. In developing nations, higher education has also been linked to goals to reduce poverty, under the influence of transnational aid agencies such as the World Bank and its knowledge-driven poverty reduction strategies. Drawing on Amartya Sen's capability approach to development, this paper argues that this instrumentalization of higher education produces narrow conceptions of development, poverty and knowledge, and an unfounded optimism in 'knowledge for skills'. The site for this analysis is the development and rapid expansion of Ethiopia's higher education system, with its antecedents in a centuries-old religious education system but with more recent beginnings in the 1950s and, since the 1990s, under the influence of the World Bank. At stake are opportunity and process freedoms and the deprivation of capability (i.e. poverty) resulting from the constraint of these, evident in the nation's higher education system. The paper concludes that without concerted efforts to redress injustices and to protect and expand people's freedom, Ethiopian higher education has little to contribute to national socio-economic transformation agendas.

Keywords: Ethiopia; higher education; freedom; capability; Amartya Sen; poverty reduction; World Bank

Full Text:

## 1. Introduction

This paper is concerned with the development of Ethiopia's higher education (HE) system, particularly its role in the production of knowledge and knowledge workers now seen to be central to the nation's economic development and to the reduction of poverty.

Unlike other African nations and apart from a brief period of Italian occupation (1936-1941), Ethiopia has never been colonized. Its history of governance is of a long-standing monarchy (the House of Solomon) spanning almost 3000 years, followed by a period of military rule and civil war during the 1970s and 1980s, and now a parliamentary democracy (albeit nominal). In the context of sub-Saharan Africa, Ethiopia's continuous governance history--particularly the absence of colonization--meant that the introduction of universities came late, ironically through the acquiescent colonization of its HE system: initially in the establishment of tertiary colleges with academic management by western universities and, more recently, in the rapid expansion of the HE system under the influence of the World Bank (WB).

However, the nation's relatively recent history of political instability, together with its largely subsistence economy and recurrent droughts, continue to frustrate its economic development and the reduction of poverty in particular. Ethiopia is one of the poorest and most aid-dependent countries in the world (OECD, 2012). While per capita income has steadily increased from US\$117 in 2003 to US\$198 in 2010 (IMF, 2010), 77.5% of the population still lives on an income of less than US\$2 per day (World Bank, 2010, p.89). In this context, Ethiopia's HE system is obliged not simply to contribute to development of the nation's economy but also to the alleviation of poverty, through what the WB refers to as a knowledge-driven approach to poverty reduction (Molla, 2013).

In this paper, our analysis and critique of this knowledge economy optimism draws on the capability approach of Nobel Laureate economist and philosopher Amartya Sen, particularly on his theorizing of

relations between development, freedom and knowledge. Key questions guiding our analysis include: How has the knowledge-development nexus framed by WB policy discourse shaped Ethiopia's HE system? What sort of knowledge is valued in Ethiopian HE? Who defines what is valuable and for what purpose? What is lost in this account of national and individual development? In particular, we argue that the connection between HE and poverty reduction conceived by the WB and implemented by the Ethiopian Government, is narrowly defined as skilled labor production and economic productivity, and that individual empowerment and freedom, and participation and agency in poverty reduction and social progress are absent from broad conceptions of capability enhancement. Thus, not only is economic poverty a constant refrain in Ethiopia, so too is a poverty of human capability.

The paper proceeds in three parts. We begin with a brief account of Sen's capability approach, particularly his account of freedom in terms of opportunity and process to set a framework for our analysis of Ethiopian HE. The second section chronicles the origins and early development of HE in Ethiopia. This provides context for the paper's third section, which provides an analysis of the WB's knowledge-driven poverty reduction strategy for HE in developing nations, as this is taken up in Africa and particularly in Ethiopia. We conclude by outlining three shortcomings of this approach to national and individual development and highlighting: the lack of responsiveness to local needs and realities; the deprivation of substantive freedoms; and Ethiopia's persistent low standing on the United Nations' human development index (UNDP, 1995, 2005, 2013). (1)

## 2. Development, Freedom and Knowledge

Sen's capability approach was conceived as a way of rethinking human development and in response to reductionist econometric definitions of wellbeing (e.g. gross domestic product (GDP) per capita as a measure of poverty), often expounded in conservative welfare economics and applied to developing nations. For Sen, wellbeing is a much broader concept, evident in one's capabilities for achieving the kind of life one has reason to value. In this account, resources (e.g. financial, intellectual, cultural, etc.) remain important but (the rate of) access to them does not in itself define wellbeing. Neither does an assessment of life achievements (i.e. the similarities and differences in the lives that people live). Instead, 'poverty' is understood as capability deprivation and 'development' as capability expansion. In sum, a capability approach works with an expanded understanding of wellbeing that is differently targeted: foregrounding human capabilities, in relation to resources and to one's beings and doings.

From this perspective, the focus of development policies and practices should be on 'removing the obstacles to what a person can do in life, obstacles such as illiteracy, ill health, lack of access to resources, or lack of civil and political freedoms' (Fukuda-parr, 2003, p. 303, emphasis added). Similarly, development policies and practices should be assessed on how and the extent to which they expand human capabilities. For Sen, development of this kind means that 'the people have to be seen ... as being actively involved--given the opportunity--in shaping their own destiny, and not just as passive recipients of the fruits of cunning development programs' (Sen, 1999, p. 53). That is, central to development programs is 'agency freedom'.

In *Development as Freedom* (1999), Sen defines an agent as 'someone who acts and brings about change' (Sen, 1999, p. 19) and freedom as 'the real opportunity that we have to accomplish what we value' (1992, p. 31). Thus, 'agency freedom' refers to people's 'freedom to make decisions in matters that affect their lives; the freedom to hold others accountable for their promises, the freedom to influence development in their communities' (Alkire & Deneulin, 2009, p. 30). Hence 'freedoms are not only the primary ends of development, they are also among its principal means' (Sen, 1999, p. 23). The proposition of a capability approach is that sustainable economic and social development requires active engagement of creative individuals and groups and, importantly, that they have the freedom 'to act on behalf of their aspirations' (Alkire & Deneulin, 2009, p. 37).

The importance of freedom in Sen's capability approach cannot be over-emphasized:

Freedom is valuable for at least two different reasons. First, more freedom gives us more opportunity to pursue our objectives those things that we value. It helps, for example, in our ability to decide to live as we would like and to promote the ends that we may want to advance.... Second, we may attach importance to the process of choice itself. We may, for example, want to make sure that we are not being forced into some state because of constraints imposed by others. (Sen 2009, p. 228, emphasis added)

According to Sen (2002, 2009), the opportunity aspect of freedom relates to the development of capabilities. For example, capability through education is expressed in the form of basic capabilities for educational functionings (e.g. literacy, numeracy and practical reason) and expanded capabilities for general wellbeing, which are linked with the role of education in expanding other capability sets and creating opportunities (Terzi 2007; Vaughan 2007). Whereas the process aspect of freedom is associated with the exercise of agency: that is, freedom in the pursuit of desired goals. In the context of national development processes, process freedom is linked with people's political rights (including freedom of expression and association). As Alkire and Deneulin (2009, p. 28) remind us: 'In order to be agents of their own lives, people need the freedom to be educated, to speak in public without fear, to have freedom of expression and association, etc. '

Sen's broad conception of freedom offers valuable analytical tools to problematize in at least two ways the knowledge-development nexus conceived within the 'knowledge-driven poverty reduction' discourse of international development agencies. First, it is important to examine the role of knowledge in expanding people's substantive freedom (knowledge for capability). As a foundational capability, education has constitutive and instrumentalist purposes. It is an essential part of an individual's wellbeing and is a means to economic and non-economic ends (Dreze & Sen, 2002). The human capital perspective underpinning the knowledge driven poverty reduction discourse narrowly focuses on the role of knowledge and skills for material productivity of individuals (knowledge for skills). It does not appreciate the importance of (a) knowledge as a source of freedom to choose a combination of various beings and doings, or of (b) freedom as a pillar of a sustainable development process.

Second, it is essential to understand how and to what extent the knowledge economy optimism can be hampered by a repressive political order that constrains people's political freedom of participation, voice and empowerment, which are crucial for national development processes. The focus on the role of knowledge in economic growth and poverty reduction can overshadow the importance of ensuring political freedom both at individual and collective levels. Regardless of the level of expertise and knowledge people may acquire from participating in HE, a repressive political order can mean deprivation of agency and engagement. Hence, in order for HE to play a key role in the realization of a knowledge economy optimism, there is a need for political freedom. In the human development approach that Sen advocates, individual and collective agency is broadly understood to include the ability to demand, secure and use rights to participate in decision-making. As Fukuda-parr (2003) has rightly noted: 'Democratic governance through political institutions that expand the power and voice of people, and ensure the accountability of decision-makers, is an important condition for promoting human development' (p. 309).

One of the key claims of this paper is that HE and training supports knowledge-driven economic development when such education expands people's substantive freedom, specifically, their opportunity and process freedoms. It is almost impossible to achieve development through knowledge unless that knowledge can release, activate and expand the agency freedom of individuals.

### 3. Knowledge for 'Modernization'

In Sen's terms, the development of higher-level capabilities and the ability to set and achieve goals is an expression of freedom. In Ethiopia, both opportunity and process aspects of freedom--that is, the freedom

to pursue and in the pursuit of HE, and the exercise of agency--has a mixed history. While Western education in Ethiopia--directed at 'modernising' or transforming the nation for a new socioeconomic and political future--has been in place for just over one hundred years, traditional religious (including Judaic, Orthodox Christian, and Islamic) education has been operating for centuries (Habte, 2010; Negash, 1990; Wagaw, 1979). For example, since the introduction of Christianity in the first half of the 1st century and its subsequent official adoption as the state religion in the first half of the 4th century, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church has been providing a multi-level education.

This traditional education system has four distinctive levels: Nibab Bet (the school of reading), Zema Bet (the school of hymns), Qene Bet (the school of poetry), and Metsehaft Bet (the school of books). The last and highest level of the system, Metsehaft Bet, has clear parallels with medieval European universities and is equivalent to HE in the structure of modern education systems (Browne, 2007; Lulat, 2004; Wagaw 1990). Students who reach this level study theology (including the study and interpretation of the Old and New Testaments), church history and monasticism, the lives and acts of saints, religious philosophy, the religious calendar, canon and civil laws, and arts and crafts (including calligraphy, painting, and manuscript making) (Browne, 2007; Chaillot, 2002). Monasteries specialize in one or more of these fields of higher-level study; and students move from one centre (monastery) to another to complete the required level and type of education.

While this multi-level education system is directed at developing a broad range of capabilities in students, it is not without limitations. Apart from the obvious limited opportunities to pursue other forms of education, completing all levels and mastering the religious and other fields of knowledge takes more than 25 years of schooling and few reach the higher levels. Similarly, while an estimated one third of all Orthodox Churches (estimated to be between 30,000 and 35,000) in Ethiopia still have traditional schools, the contemporary monasteries considered to be centres of excellence for higher level studies and specialized fields, are limited in number (Habte, 2010). The question of whether students in this education system are 'being forced into some state because of constraints imposed by others' (Sen 2009, p. 228) is difficult to answer, irrespective of the system in place. What is clear, though, is that the freedom of Ethiopians to acquire an Orthodox education, foundational for the development of other capabilities, is restricted by opportunity at the higher levels.

### Ethiopian HE and Modernization

These opportunity limitations and their impact on the supply of graduates at higher levels, was most evident in the immediate post-WWII period. Even though the primary objective of Orthodox Church education institutions (monasteries in particular) is to produce priests and cantors (debteroch), Ethiopia has long drawn its civil servants--including judges, governors, scribes and treasurers--from this traditional scholarship (Browne, 2007;

Lulat, 2004; Wagaw, 1979). The massacre of most of these civil servants (including those educated overseas) during the Fascist Italian occupation during WWII, left the nation 'bereft of an educated workforce' (Wagaw 1990, p. 131). In post-WWII Ethiopia, the remaining church scholars and the few Ethiopians with overseas qualifications were insufficient to administer the expanding machineries of modern government (Habte, 2010). There was an immediate need to produce as many highly skilled workers and educated citizens as possible to consolidate the modernization process commenced in the late 19th century. This presented quite a challenge. At the time, the annual average number of secondary school graduates was well below 100 per annum and sending them abroad for HE and training was very expensive.

Against this backdrop, in 1949 the Ethiopian Ministry of Education and Fine Arts established a committee charged with founding a post-secondary education institution. The committee proposed and adopted a two-year academic and vocational training program to prepare competent students. Subsequently,

Ethiopia's Emperor (His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I, r. 1930-1974) commissioned Dr. Lucien Matte, a Canadian Jesuit working as a director of one of the secondary schools in the capital, to organize a two-year post-secondary education institution. With the help of Dr Matte, Addis Ababa University College (UCAA) came into existence on 20 March 1950 (Wagaw, 1990; Wondimu, 2003). The first class in a modern Ethiopian HE institution commenced on 11 December 1950 with 21 male students and nine expatriate teachers, in today's Faculty of Science, Addis Ababa University (AAU), Arat Killo Campus (Wagaw, 1990).

With the publication of the university charter in February 1961, UCAA officially became Haile Selassie I University (HSIU). The Emperor played an important role in its realization. As Chancellor of the new institution, he appointed the first Board of Governors in May 1961. He also presented his residence (palace) as the main campus of the new university and assigned an American, Dr. Harold Bentley, as acting University President until he was replaced by an Ethiopian the following year (Wagaw, 1990). Three other HE institutions were also opened over the following decade: Bahir Dar Polytechnic Institute (1963), Kotebe College of Teacher Education (1969) and Bahir Dar Teachers College (1972) (Wondimu, 2003). In 1970, these colleges were incorporated into HSIU, which became the largest HE institution in sub-Saharan Africa with 4636 full-time and 2261 part-time students (Lulat, 2004). In terms of student enrolments, the foundation of the national university was a remarkable success: enrolments increased by 664% (from 974 in 1961 to 6474 in 1973). Between 1958 and 1960, this included 1080 international students, most from other African countries supported under the Haile Selassie I Scholarship Scheme (Wagaw, 1990).

As noted above, behind the introduction of Ethiopian HE was a strong modernization agenda, articulated in the Emperor's speech on 18 December 1961 in the convocation marking the foundation of the nation's first university:

There was a time when strength and endurance, courage and faith, were sufficient to make leadership equal to the task. But times have changed and these spiritual qualities are no longer enough. Today, knowledge and training, as provided largely in the universities of the world, have become essential, and today leadership and advancement, both national and international, rely heavily upon accelerated agricultural development, upon mineral exploitation and upon industrial expansion. Hence survival depends on these, but they, in turn, depend upon the competence of those who have received and who will receive the essential education and training (cited in Wagaw, 1990, p. 122).

In 1974, a military junta (known as Derg) overthrew the Imperial Government and seized power. A period of civil war ensued for almost two decades, waged by various secessionist ethnic groups. It was also a time of devastating famine. However, one aspect that the new government shared with the old was its trust in education as a vehicle for modernization, demonstrated in its reinvigoration of the adult education movement and expansion of the HE system commenced by the Imperial Government.

During the years of military government, the Derg junta launched two mass education programs: the Campaign for Knowledge and Work in 1974, and the National Literacy Campaign (1979 and 1989). The programs resulted in internationally acclaimed success in illiteracy eradication, with the adult illiteracy rate reduced from 93% in 1974 to 50% in 1985 (Bhola, 2008, p. 36). The government also established two new public universities and many junior colleges. (2) In 1977, Ethiopia's first law on HE, the Higher Education Institutions Administration Proclamation (Proclamation No. 109/1977), was enacted. The Proclamation established Ethiopia's Commission for Higher Education and underscored the importance of utilizing HE to support development of the nation's socioeconomic interests. To further consolidate the HE system and promote its role in the nation's socialist development, the School of Graduate Studies was opened in the national university in 1978 (UNESCO, 1988).

Constraints on Modernizing Roles of Ethiopian HE However, the early years of modern Ethiopian HE development were not without freedom constraints. Some argued that the system was highly influenced by

a foreign agenda imposed through aid, that it had become disconnected from the rich history and heritage of its society (Gilbert, 1967; Teferra, 2004) and that its roots were North American or, more generally, Western not Ethiopian (Kebede, 2006; Negash, 1990). Importantly from a knowledge perspective and in relation to Sen's process aspect of freedom, the system's character was shaped by external ideas, models and ideologies infused by bilateral and multilateral actors. This colonisation of Ethiopian HE was recognised as a threat to the values and heritage of the society (Kebede, 2006). As Felleke (2005) notes, under the Imperial Government 'the need for modernization was pitted against the instinctive desire for self-preservation' (p. 526).

Foreign influence also extended to the HE system's academic staff. Despite a policy of Ethiopianization--the progressive replacement of foreigners with Ethiopians--the positive reduction in the number of foreign academic staff from 75% in 1961 to 54% in 1973 in HSIU was disrupted, growing to 79% in 1987. There was also a shift in the source of foreign academic staff. During the pre-revolution period, 63% of academic staff came from the UK and the USA (Wagaw, 1990, pp. 134-135). Throughout the 1970s and 1980s and following the military government's endorsement of socialist ideology, more than 60% of foreign academic staff came from the Soviet Union and other Eastern European countries (UNESCO, 1988, p. 47). (In contrast, the current Ethiopian Government favours Indians and Nigerians, presumably for the labour market advantage (cheaper cost), which meets donor calls for an efficient use of resources.) During the 1960s, Gilbert noted that 'in spite of Ethiopianization, the foreign influence is still so strong that it is impossible to predict the form and shape of Ethiopian education in the future' (1967, p. 8). In Sen's terms, the opportunity to access HE had increased but the process of getting a HE--the knowledge privileged by the system--was constrained by foreign influences.

An important example of the response of HE to external process freedom constraints in Ethiopian history is worth highlighting. In the 1960s and 1970s, the relative academic freedom in public universities and the introduction of a prolonged apprenticeship program led to the formation of a strong student activism movement. In 1964, the national university (HSIU) commenced a new program named the Ethiopian University Service (EUS): a compulsory program in which all students were required to take part before their final year (Korten & Korten, 1966). The program aimed at helping prospective graduates understand the socioeconomic context of their future working environment while at the same time using students' knowledge and skills to serve Ethiopian rural communities (UNESCO, 1988; Habte, 2010; Wagaw, 1990). The program brought students (who were largely from privileged urban families) face-to-face with the extreme suffering and burden of the peasantry under the pseudo-feudal system. Over time, this encounter--coupled with the wave of socialist ideology that swept Africa and with international and regional economic instability caused by the 1970s 'oil shock'--sparked a revolutionary student movement and led to the popular uprising of 1974 that culminated in the demise of the Imperial Government. However, the movement was eventually hijacked by the military, and the repressive political order restored with a greater intensity. Under the military regime, the relative academic freedom in the national university and other HE institutions was totally battered. As a result of the Derg's heavy-handed control of the national university, in the words of Balsvik (2009), 'a suppressive silence descended on the institution' (p. 267); and independent thinking and expression was further dwarfed.

As Sen (2002) reminds us, opportunity freedom (e.g. having fair access to quality education) is unlikely without a reasonable level of process freedom (e.g. access to a participatory political environment and protection of basic group and individual rights). The successive repressive political regimes in Ethiopia--particularly during the 1970s and 1980s--coupled with the absence of a localization of educational practices, also seemed to have constrained the modernization of Ethiopian HE.

#### 4. Knowledge for Poverty Reduction

In the 1990s, the newly established government (that ousted the Derg through an armed struggle) initiated a restructuring of the HE system. At the same time, the WB, in line with its knowledge economy agenda,

renewed its commitment to support HE in developing countries. For Ethiopia, this meant a repositioning of HE and knowledge more generally as instrumental in advancing the nation's economic productivity. In a knowledge-based economy, innovation, technological enhancement and openness to ideas are inherent values. It is an economy that relies on intellectual enterprises and where commodities are manifest in high technology, art and skill (Markkula, 2006). Knowledge is of greater importance than natural resources and physical capital (OECD, 1996). That is, a knowledge economy is driven primarily by the production, distribution and application of knowledge.

Knowledge economy discourse has diverse ideological orientations and patterns of development (Peters, 2010, 2013) but common in them is a link with economic productivity. This human capital formation agenda has largely been championed by global and regional policy actors--such as the World Bank (WB), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), UNESCO and the European Union--and has become a dominant feature in their publications, such as the OECD's (1996) *The Knowledge-based Economy* and the WB's (1999) *Knowledge for Development*.

Central in this discourse is the place of HE and HE institutions (HEIs). In a 2006 Meeting of OECD Education Ministers on HE (in Athens, Greece), Angel Gurría, former Secretary General of the OECD, remarked: 'Throughout the world, it is now understood that a high-quality system of higher education is central to the ability of nations to participate successfully in the global knowledge economy' (OECD, 2007, p. 13). Former University of Nottingham Chancellor, Lord Dearing, has succinctly expressed the knowledge economy optimism in the following way:

Just as castles provided the source of strength for medieval towns, and factories provided prosperity in the industrial age, universities are the sources of strength in the knowledge-based economy of the twenty-first century (2002, cited in Wilson, 2012, p. ii).

The World Bank--the largest external source of educational funding in the developing world (Jones, 2007)--has played a key role in infusing this knowledge economy narrative into African HE policy arenas (Molla, 2013). After two-decades of intentional negligence over HE in Africa, the WB conceded that its rate-of-return analysis, which advocated HE as primarily a private interest, was indeed a mistake (World Bank, 1994). In proposing a new approach in which 'knowledge is valued for its strict utility rather than as an end in itself or for its emancipatory effects' (Peters, 2002, p. 148), the WB indicated that HE is a driving force for national development and poverty reduction. This convergence of the WB's poverty reduction strategy with its new-found knowledge economy optimism has resulted in a 'knowledge-driven poverty reduction' approach that now guides the WB's financial and policy involvement in HE policy processes in sub-Saharan Africa, including in Ethiopia.

In *Knowledge for Development*, the WB highlighted that in the competitive global economy, knowledge acquisition, adaptation, production and application have become major production factors (World Bank, 1999) and associated poverty with a lack of higher-level skills and knowledge. It contended that:

Poor countries--and poor people--differ from rich ones not only because they have less [economic] capital but because they have less knowledge (World Bank, 1999, p. 1).

The WB echoed this same message in another of its publications--*Constructing Knowledge Societies: New Challenges for Tertiary Education* (World Bank, 2002)--in which it advised governments to restructure their HE systems to meet the economic needs of their societies. It argued that without an innovation system supported by quality HE, poor countries are destined to remain marginalized and disadvantaged in the global knowledge-based economy (World Bank, 2002).

In its more recent 2009 HE policy report, *Accelerating Catch-up: Tertiary Education for Growth in Sub-Saharan Africa*, the WB again underlined the pivotal role of HE for knowledge intensive economic growth and poverty reduction and emphasised the necessity of quality human capital formation in the



region. The report calls for governments to be committed, through their HE systems, to supporting innovation and creativity. In making its point on the importance of knowledge for African countries, the WB claimed that:

A more knowledge-intensive approach to development is ... possibly the only route that could permit sustained, outward-oriented development (World Bank, 2009, p. xxii, emphasis added).

What has made this narrative influential in national policy discourses is its strong association with development aid that African countries receive from major donors such as the WB. The Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) championed by the WB and by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) are predicated on skilled professionals and a productive labour force. Similarly, education development aid programs emphasize that in order for poor countries to effectively reduce poverty and participate in the competitive global economy (whether benefiting from international trade or attracting foreign investment), they need a well-trained, flexible, creative and competent labor force (World Bank, 2009).

### Knowledge-driven Poverty Reduction in Ethiopia

In Ethiopia, the WB justified its investment in HE (3) in these same knowledge economy terms:

Poverty alleviation in Ethiopia requires sustained economic growth, good governance, and political stability in order to be effective.

Growth derives from skilled human resources and national productivity increases leading to greater country competitiveness in the regional and global economy. Productivity gains are generated by national innovation systems in which tertiary education institutions play a fundamental role. [...] Therefore, if poverty is to be reduced, Ethiopia's tertiary institutions will have to improve their performance and expand their service delivery (World Bank, 2003, p. 3, emphasis added).

Reflecting the influence of this knowledge economy optimism and external discursive policy imposition, poverty reduction strategies (4) and education sector development programs in Ethiopia include human capital formation as a development pillar. This is consistent with the policy consensus in African nations, that poverty alleviation through economic growth cannot be attained without a well-functioning HE system that produces knowledge workers with high levels of human capital.

In the second phase of its Education Sector Development Program (ESDP II), the Ethiopian Government maintained:

To implement the Poverty Reduction Strategy successfully, the economy shall need substantial additional skilled and trained manpower at all levels--top, middle, low levels. Expansion of the road infrastructure, education, agriculture and health services shall demand substantial number of trained manpower. Thus, responsibility for training the required additional skilled manpower shall substantially fall on the tertiary and TVET sub-sectors of education (MoE, 2002, p. 19).

In the early 2000s, the knowledge-driven poverty reduction discourse of the WB coupled with the urgency of tackling the long-standing problems of the HE system resulted in a new initiative to revitalise HE in Ethiopia. In major development programs, including the National Capacity Building Program (2001), and the second poverty reduction strategy paper (2002/032004/05), the government identified HE as a key policy focus. In 2003, the government ratified the Higher Education Proclamation (No. 351/2003, revised in 2009, No. 650/2009) that sets the legal framework for policy-based and institutional restructuring in the system.

This HE policy reform has been accompanied by extensive systemic expansion. By upgrading existing colleges, merging different institutions and establishing new ones, the Ethiopian Government increased the

number of public universities from two in early 1999 to 32 universities in 2012. As a result of the large-scale expansion at all levels, full-time undergraduate enrolment in public universities grew from around 20,000 in 1999 to over 250,000 in 2012 (MoE, 2000, 2012). Ethiopia now has the third highest average annual growth rate of HE enrolment in the world, after Lao PDR and Cuba (UIS, 2009).

The Ethiopian Government, with support from donors, has invested in the expansion of the HE system in the belief that it will support efforts in poverty reduction and economic growth through producing a competent and productive labour force (MoE, 2002, 2005, 2010; MoFED, 2002, 2006, 2010). Further, with the liberalization of the economy, privatization has been encouraged in the education sector. As a result, the first private HE institution emerged in the mid-1990s, and as of 2009/10 academic year, there were about 44 accredited and pre-accredited private HE institutions enrolling about 18% of the total full-time undergraduate enrolment (MoE, 2011).

### Limitations of the Knowledge Economy Discourse

As welcome as this expansion agenda is, there are limitations to the knowledge economy optimism and the role of HE in realizing these expectations. Even though knowledge is foregrounded, the poverty reduction strategy superficially frames the problem of poverty in mere economic terms: as low income at household and national levels resulting from low levels of knowledge acquisition. Critics have argued that the poverty reduction agenda of the WB is inherently one of neoliberal market fundamentalism, as the policy prescriptions primarily aim to avoid the risks that poverty generates for markets' stability and growth (Ilon, 2002; Klees 2002, 2008). As such, its proposed policy changes and strategies fail to challenge structures of disadvantage in society and social development goals remain poorly addressed or totally ignored. This reluctance to appreciate deeper social challenges significantly undermines development efforts in general: 'Lack of progress in reducing the disadvantages of the deprived cannot be "washed away" by large advances--no matter how large--made by the better-off people' (UNDP, 1997, p. 15).

The knowledge-driven poverty reduction narrative puts emphasis on increasing economic growth and output, which is assumed to trickle down to the poor through market mechanisms. However, development is not limited to economic prosperity per se. Rather, as Sen has argued, the goal and expression of development should be freedom and the development of capabilities that individuals can use to improve their social and economic standing (Sen, 1997, 1999). If the key objective of development aid is to eradicate poverty and if poverty is a deprivation of capability (Sen, 1999), it is logical to argue that poverty reduction strategies of national governments need to address the problem of exclusion from HE as a major development concern. The capability of a person depends as much on social arrangements (e.g. public policies and programs) as on personal characteristics (Sen, 1999).

Moreover, in a knowledge economy, values lie in ideas, innovation and entrepreneurship. These attributes require a conducive social and political environment that safeguards and expands people's freedom and nurtures creativity. Limits on opportunity and process freedoms contribute to capability deprivation (i.e. poverty) (Sen, 1999). Thus, alleviating poverty requires expanding people's freedom. Yet, the current phenomenon of 'development without freedom' underway in South East Asian 'developmental states' (Thornton & Thornton, 2008) has come to be a model for Ethiopian polity. The late Ethiopian Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi, who engineered the nation's economic development programs during his two-decade rule (1991-2012), was a strong adherent of the developmental state paradigm. For Zenawi, the legitimacy of a developmental state primarily stems from the ideology of 'accelerated development' rather than respect and protection of basic human rights and assurance of social justice and freedom. He explicitly argued that a developmental state does not necessarily require a democratic process that safeguards and expands people's freedom:

An autonomous state, whether it is democratic or not, will have to build some sort of consensus on its development agenda if it is to be a developmental state. Whether it builds such a consensus in the context

of a fully democratic order or not does not determine its characteristics as a developmental state (Zenawi, 2012, p. 170).

This trust in 'prosperity under control' is problematic, to say the least. First, there can be no linear transference of 'best practices' as context plays a key role in shaping the course and outcomes of development policies (Mills & Gale, 2011). There is also no guarantee on the sustainability of 'development without freedom' as the experiences of South East Asia are still in their early stage and hence any conclusive claim cannot be made at this time. Most importantly, knowledge that can drive innovation and growth stems from free, systemic and critical thinking, and is not compatible with control and repression.

In the case of Ethiopia, the deprivation of its citizens' freedom has had direct consequences on the development and contributions of the HE system. One major feature of the last four decades has been the exodus of the Ethiopian intelligentsia, mainly due to political persecution. In 1993, as an expression of its intolerance to opposing voices, the newly established government of Mr. Zenawi purged 42 high-profile academic staff from AAU for their critical views on the policies and strategies of the government and, to further silence its critics, it banned university-based publications on current affairs (Yimam, 2008). In a nation with only a handful of professors, these acts have had negative consequences for the development of the HE system, which has continued to be dependent on inexperienced staff and expatriate personnel.

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper we have argued that, from its inception, the construction of HE in Ethiopia has constrained the opportunity and process freedoms of its citizens and that this has limited the nation's development, particularly the development of its citizen's capabilities to live a life they have reason to value. In particular, we noted the limits on opportunities to access higher learning within the traditional education system of the Orthodox Church, which to some degree has been alleviated by the rapid introduction and expansion of Ethiopia's modern HE system, thereby creating more opportunities for Ethiopians to access HE, although not uniformly. Ethiopians from disadvantaged backgrounds continue to be under-represented in Ethiopian HE (Molla & Gale, 2014). We also drew attention to the limits on process freedoms associated with HE in Ethiopia, which in our view has come to characterize the system. Throughout, we implied distinctions between internal process freedoms and external process freedoms, evident in our analysis of Ethiopia and its HE system. The first refers to what happens after students gain entry to HE, specifically the limits imposed by the privileging of 'foreign' knowledge and of 'foreign' workers as bearers of this knowledge (Connell, 2007). The second refers to whether people are able to exercise their agency to actively participate in society and apply their knowledge freely to support the modernization and poverty reduction agendas of the country.

We concur with Alkire and Deneulin (2009) that 'an essential test of development is whether people have greater freedoms today than they did in the past' (p.31). It is difficult to say that Ethiopian HE has passed this test. On face value, there is now greater opportunity freedom for Ethiopians to access HE than ever before. However, one of the key insights of Sen's work is the focus on substantive/effective freedoms people have rather than 'paper' freedoms championed by governments and transnational agencies. Substantive freedom necessitates practical removal of tyranny and repressive social structures. The underlying assumption is that sustainable economic and social development requires active engagement of critical thinking individuals and groups, and that in order for people to be active and creative, political and knowledge freedom is a necessary condition. Sustainable development has a social dimension expressed in equity, empowerment and participation of individuals and groups in society. Without concerted efforts to redress injustices and to protect and expand people's freedom, HE has little to contribute to national socio-economic transformation agendas.

Even so, the knowledge-driven poverty reduction approach of the WB continues to generate a great deal of

optimism. Our critique in this paper is that knowledge and poverty in this context are narrowly conceived in economic terms and that Ethiopian HE has been structurally hampered from playing a significant role in the modernization and poverty reduction agendas of successive governments and donors. There are three major reasons for this mismatch between expectations and actual performance of Ethiopian HE.

First, the Ethiopian HE system lacks responsiveness to local needs and realities. As the succession of foreign powers that have played roles in the establishment and development of the system shows, the purposes, curricula and pedagogical practices of Ethiopian HE have been far removed from the rich intellectual culture and history of the nation. The system was established on 'guest models' imported first from North America, then from Europe, and later from Soviet Russia and other East European countries. This reliance on foreign models has continued with little attention to adjusting it to Ethiopian values and heritage. Further, from its commencement, expatriate academic staff have dominated Ethiopian HE. Theoretically, because Ethiopia has had no sustained colonial history and because its religious education system did not produce the kind of intellectuals required by a modern HE system, it had to develop a system from scratch. Yet, for many reasons, the HE system has not been founded on the values of Ethiopian society and has failed to localize itself. This has negatively affected the possibility of shaping the system with a particular national identity and building an intellectual community that can sense the closer context and produce, organize and disseminate knowledge applicable to the real problems and issues of importance to Ethiopia.

Second, the optimism about the value of knowledge in the nation's development has been undermined by repressive political regimes that deprived the peoples of Ethiopia of their substantive freedom to exercise their agency and actively participate in decision-making. In its transition from the Imperial Government to the military regime and then to the current 'Revolutionary Democracy/Developmental State' orientation, Ethiopian HE has increasingly been subject to various forms of repression and control. The socio-political structures have impeded free thinking that nurtures creativity and innovation. Hence, despite the policy optimism, the link between HE and national development plans remains weak and problematic.

Finally, Ethiopia has a very low rate of educational attainment and this makes the knowledge economy expectation problematic, if not misleading. Ethiopia has one of the highest adult illiteracy rates and the lowest HE enrollment rates in the world. A recent international survey shows that over half of its adult population cannot read and write (UIS, 2013), and in 2011, less than 6% of the relevant age cohort had access to HE (UIS, 2012). Also, the breakneck speed of expansion of the HE system has considerably compromised its quality. As a result of the ambitious expenditure on HE, public investment has been skewed to HE at the cost of lower levels of education, affecting the pool of qualified students who aspire for HE. Further, the number of qualified teaching staff does not match the exponential expansion of the HE system. At the end of the 2009/2010 academic year, about 51% of the teaching staff in Ethiopian public universities had no graduate level training. And it is also worth noting that despite the overall increase of student enrolment, the inequality problems of accessing and succeeding in HE has persisted. As a concern of both social justice and human resource development, inequality in HE undermines poverty reduction efforts.

In the context of 'imported' educational models, repressive political regimes, unaddressed structural factors of educational inequality, high adult illiteracy, poorly prepared university entrants, and under-qualified teaching staff, it is improbable for a HE system to make a meaningful contribution towards the knowledge-driven poverty reduction agenda. This is mainly because it is hard to get the 'right' knowledge that drives innovation, productivity and growth and, under a state of fear and control, people's creativity and active engagement in development processes is circumscribed. In such conditions, the knowledge economy optimism of the WB remains a false expectation.

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## NOTES

(1.) Despite the expansion of basic and higher education, Ethiopia's rank in the human development index has improved very little in the last two decades: ranked 171st out of 174 countries in 1995; 170th out of 177 countries in 2005; and 173rd out of 185 countries in 2013.

(2.) Founded by an Italian Missionary group in 1958, Asmara University (AU) became a public university in 1979. However, with the secession of Eritrea as an independent country in 1993, AU was removed from the Ethiopian HE system. In May 1985, Alamaya College of Agriculture (established in 1954) became independent of the 'national university' and was upgraded into the Alemaya University of Agriculture (AUA) (UNESCO 1988; Wagaw, 1990). A number of other colleges were established: Awasa College of Agriculture (1976), Wondogenet College of Forestry (1977), Addis Ababa College of Commerce (1979), Ambo College of Agriculture (1979), Jimma College of Agriculture (1979), Jimma Institute of Health Sciences (1982), and Arba Minch Water Technology Institute (1986). Thus, by the end of the 1980s, Ethiopia had three public universities, about sixteen colleges and six research institutions.

(3.) It has been with this assumption and commitment that the WB financed the Education Sector Development Project (1998-2004), with a 16% tertiary education component; the Post-Secondary Education Project (2005-2009), with an 88% tertiary education share; and the General Education Quality Improvement Project (2008-2013), with a 12% tertiary education component.

(4.) Between 2000 and 2010, Ethiopia implemented three poverty reduction programs: Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper, IPRSP (2000/01-2002/03); Sustainable Development and Poverty Reduction Program, SDPRP (2002/03-2004/05); and a Plan for Accelerated and Sustainable Development to End Poverty, PASDEP (2005/06-2009/10). Currently, the fourth five-year development plan, Growth and Transformation Plan, GTP (2010/11-2014/15) is underway. Replacing the infamous Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) that dominated the region throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the strategy papers were introduced in cooperation with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The papers constitute the WB's strategic development framework. They are usually prepared by national governments in consultation with representatives of transnational financial institutions. Governments can define their own policy priorities based on the general framework (made available in a form of a Sourcebook by the WB) and in consultation with experts from these institutions. The PRSPs have been used as preconditions to get access to debt relief and concessional loans from the WB and the IMF. In short, the poverty reduction strategy is a development policy devised for the world's poor by leading neoliberal agencies.

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