

# THE CHALLENGES OF RE-ESTABLISHING SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION AT ADDIS ABABA UNIVERSITY: A PERSONAL REFLECTION

**Wassie Kebede, Ph.D., Addis Ababa University, School of Social Work**

*This narrative describes the challenges of re-establishing social work education graduate degree programs at Addis Ababa University through the lens of my personal experience. Both the challenges and successes experienced by the author are directly related to the development of social work as an educational discipline and as a profession as it was re-established and re-invigorated in the first years of the 21st century in Africa.*

*"Yetsinat Firew Tafach New." Translation: "The Fruit of Endurance is Sweet."*

Until 1974, social work education in Ethiopia was limited to an undergraduate degree program at Addis Ababa University (AAU) led by the late Seyoum Gebreselassie and Andargatchew Tesfey. When the socialist junta came to power in Ethiopia that year, they shut down the social work education program and opened a new independent institute, to train political cadres: the Yekatit 66 Political Institute. The academic leaders of social work education were transferred to the Department of Sociology, along with other academic staff members. For the next thirty years those professors tried to integrate social work courses within the sociology curriculum. Thus, many people who graduated with degrees in sociology also attained some social work knowledge and skills. I was one of these students who graduated with the basic skills of social work, although my field of study was sociology.

Early in the twenty-first century, Professors Seyoum and Andargatchew, along with a few other academics from Ethiopia and abroad, recognized the need to re-establish social work education in Ethiopia. To demonstrate the need, they participated in an international assessment study conducted in 2001/2002. The assessment explored the potential demands for trained social work professionals by surveying service agencies across the country. The conclusion of that assessment was that there was high demand for social workers in the country. It also

revealed that because there were no professionally educated social workers, in their place, paraprofessionals and others with training in a variety of related and unrelated fields were functioning as social workers.

At the time of the re-establishment of the School of Social Work at Addis Ababa University in 2004, there was not a single social work professor in Ethiopia who had the capacity to establish or develop the school on a full time basis. Professors Seyoum and Andargatchew were retired and were unable to assume leadership. Thus, Dr. Abye Tasse, a French-educated sociologist and social worker, who came to Ethiopia for another assignment, took the responsibility to become the first Dean of the school. His effort was supported by Dr. Melese Getu, an anthropologist and faculty member in the College of Social Sciences at Addis Ababa University, who became the first Associate Dean.

In order to ensure the long-term sustainability of the school, it was important to think strategically. Thus, Drs. Abye and Melese; and Professor Alice, K. Butterfield from University of Illinois at Chicago, Jane Addams College of Social Work determined that the first step toward building an internationally recognized academic program would be to build the internal capacity of the new school by attracting professors from the international community of social work education who would volunteer to teach at

Addis Ababa University. The basic concept was to grow the cohort of professional social workers by first establishing an MSW program and then, once that class graduated, offering them a Ph.D. program. The faculty were volunteers recruited from academic programs in Europe, U.S. and Australia. The curriculum and administration of the school were anchored by a partnership between AAU and the University of Illinois at Chicago, Jane Addams College of Social Work (the SWEEP Project: Social Work Education in Ethiopia Partnership). Funding for social work education was obtained from the World Bank and Department for International Development (DFID).

The first class of forty students admitted to the MSW program were recruited from those people who worked in non-governmental organizations providing a wide variety of community services. Two years later, in July 2006, 39 of the 40 originally admitted as candidates for the MSW program graduated successfully. In the same month, the school initiated the first Ph.D. program in Social Work and Social Development in Ethiopia and the entire region of East Africa. The school accepted eight candidates from 17 applicants from the first MSW graduates. As the first step toward building internal academic capacity, all of the Ph.D. students became lecturers in the school.

I was a member of the first class to receive the MSW degree at AAU and I was among those first matriculating for the Ph.D. in social work. My experience was typical: I had an undergraduate degree in Sociology from Addis Ababa University. My classmates got their first degree from disciplines such as public health, agricultural engineering and psychology.

#### **Prior Work Experience as a Social Work Practitioner**

Many members of that first class also had significant experience in community-based social service delivery. I had spent over 11 years as an untrained social work practitioner. I worked with orphans and vulnerable children, with persons affected and infected by HIV, with poor urban dwellers and with street

children. I realized then that my training in sociology did not give me sufficient knowledge or skill to deal with such challenging populations. Although I had long experience working in the field, I did not have a full range of professional skills. Therefore, I found it difficult to help my clients, I realized that formal training in social work would allow me to become more effective and more competent in my work with disenfranchised community groups. However, in the years prior to 2004, professional social work education was not available in Ethiopia. During that period, I did try to get training out of Ethiopia, but I was unable for reasons related to lack of financial support and sponsorship. Thus, the announcement that AAU was establishing an academic MSW program was the most important information in my life. Upon admission, I did not hesitate to quit my job.

#### **The Successes and Challenges of My Social Work Education**

I joined the MSW program in 2004 as a member of the first cohort of MSW students. I was also a member of the first Ph.D. class. The leadership of the school, supported by the international social work community, designed a very aggressive three-year Ph.D. curriculum including one year of course work and two years of research to complete the training.

When we first began our Ph.D. program, the limitations of Ethiopia made it challenging to complete such a compact and intense program within such a short timeframe. Access to the Internet for students was very limited. In addition, the professors in social work who served as advisors for dissertation projects came from universities outside of the Ethiopia, which made access to advisors limited. Further, the school had no clear guidelines for follow up evaluation for the doctoral students.

To counterbalance the lack of in-country resources, the School arranged for the students to be exposed to international Ph.D. students through exchange visits and attendance at international conferences. Many of us, as doctoral students, got the opportunity to participate in exchanges and conferences. For example, upon successful completion of my

coursework and qualifying examination, I attended the International Council for Social Development (ICSD) symposium in July 2007 held in Hong Kong where I met outstanding Ph.D. students from around the world. I also made my first exchange visit to the Institute of Social Work in Tanzania in July 2008 where I learned about social work practice at the grassroots level. During my exchange in Tanzania, I met Dr. Theresa Kaijage, who shared her experience of completing her Ph.D. in Social Work in the U.S. Dr. Kaijage advised me that, despite the shortage of academic programs and research projects in Africa, pursuing educational and research opportunities in Africa has advantages and strengths, especially the depth of contextual knowledge to be gained and the value of research performed by Africans, for Africans and about Africans. I have found this to be true in my educational career.

Attaining a Ph.D. in Africa also has many challenges. There is an almost universal shortage of qualified African faculty. Other resources are also limited; for example, accesses to libraries and to the Internet remain significant challenges. At the time of the opening of the School of Social Work, there were no relevant books at Addis Ababa University. What library books existed were collected by international professors gathering books from their own shelves and from those of colleagues.

Depending on foreign faculty also created challenges. For professors from the West, it was not easy to contextualize their teaching syllabus to the African situation in general and to Ethiopia in particular. There was no local research database in social work in Ethiopia at the beginning of our Ph.D. study, making it difficult to identify an appropriate subject for further research. Ultimately, based on knowledge gained during my work experience, I chose to study adolescent social networks and sexual practices by applying mixed methods research. It was not easy to organize the literature on social networks and sexual practices from an Ethiopian perspective. To compensate for the lack of prior research, I defined local reality by conducting an exploratory study, prior to conducting the larger

project which was the focus of my dissertation. The time and effort required to define and then to expand the work was significant.

For our class in particular, there were other significant challenges. Everything we did was for the first time, and so, for example, the school had not developed formal guidelines to evaluate the progress of students. It was necessary for the school leaders to take on-the-spot action for each phase of the Ph.D. training. The school had no established evaluation system for our qualifying examinations, our proposal defense, or for the defense of our doctoral research. As a result, the first cohort of Ph.D. students was the first for whom new evaluation systems were developed and refined.

Being first also had advantages: the school paid great attention to us as individuals and as a class, and appropriated all available resources to assure our success. This dedication was compensation for the lack of systematic rules and the lack of strongly developed models upon which to base our education and our research. My own experience, as the first member of the class to defend my dissertation proposal, was filled with challenges, but greatly sweetened by the success of the effort when I became the first Ethiopian to receive a doctoral degree in Social Work from an Ethiopian University.

I will continue on this pathway, helping to pioneer Ethiopian social work education and research for Ethiopians in Ethiopia. My teaching and research continue to focus on social network analysis, community development, action research and social research methods. In addition, I hope to continue to contribute to the professional development of African social work, since August 28, 2010, I was elected Secretary of the African Schools of Social Work Association (ASSWA).

Wassie Kebede, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor at Addis Ababa University, School of Social Work. Comments regarding this article can be sent to:  
[bethlehem2001@yahoo.com](mailto:bethlehem2001@yahoo.com).

Copyright of Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping is the property of Cleveland State University and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.