

PM WORLD TODAY – VIEWPOINT – FEBRUARY 2010

Professional Associations: From Nonexistence to
Hibernation

By Getachew Teklemariam Alemu

It was a difficult time for citizens of the culturally wealthy horn of African nation, Ethiopia. The flavor of socialism, in its distorted version, has filled the environment. Though a spark of hope had been witnessed at the start of it all in 1974, the centralization of all economic and political activities has made the hope of change so dim. The overthrow of the century old monarchical administration would have been considered an achievement in some sense, had it not been replaced by an even bloodier military government, the Derg.

The centralization of the economy and the subsequent nationalization of private assets summed up with corruption have thrown the country into the quagmire of indebtedness and structural stagnation. The people, on the other hand, were left to poverty, disease, illiteracy and, beyond that, to serial killings. By then, speaking what one feels might get him/her a capital punishment. Creating associations, out of the permit of the governing council, is considered to be an act of treason and a trail of coup d' tat. The only associations that were allowed to recruit members and spread the "golden" words of Marxism were those satellite Men and Women associations of the governing council, which functioned as instruments of ideological baptism for it. Smart minds of the poor nation were pushed to the edge of forced exile. The air was filled with suspicion, hopelessness, sorrow and fear.

With time, however, the sorrow that was accumulated in the hearts of the faithful citizens of the nation resulted in another revolutionary movement, which grew up to attain extra-ordinary public support. The grand cause that was raised by some enlightened university students acquired momentum and overthrew the arguably largest military force in East Africa. The year, 1991, witnessed the winning of endurance over military might, noble cause over falsehood, and hope over shortsightedness. Democracy found a place in the life of Ethiopians, while the commitment to it was painted in the supreme law of the land, the constitution. With that, freedom of association was recognized. Professional associations, which were nonexistent during the previous regime, came to the scene.

In a country where skilled human power is scarce, poverty is prevalent, basic human needs are still not met for millions of people, and democratic culture is in its infancy, the contribution of professional associations is immense. They play a critical role in setting the stage for policy debates, maintaining standards of production lines, undertaking development research, facilitating technology and knowledge transfer, coordinating

sectoral efforts, consulting the government, creating mass-consciousness, mainstreaming professional disciplines, and underpinning international competitiveness. Yet, those professional associations that had been established and acquired legal certification since 1991 are not doing considerable things, aside from organizing annual conferences. If we wish to see the nation be a middle-income economy in the next 20 years, as per our national vision, then we should reactivate the hibernating professional associations to research, innovate, educate the public, and lead our toddling agrarian economy.

That being the rhetoric, though, what made the many professional associations hibernate at this critical developmental time? And what should be done to reactivate them, to get them to contribute to the ongoing development of the nation?

In my opinion, three factors have pushed the associations to idleness. These range from political to economic and on to socio-cultural in dimension. The accountability for this, in the same way, dwells on the shoulders of the triad: the government, the associations themselves and society at large.

The political face of the problem has a long history. At some point, the incumbent and some professional associations were too close friends that they were joining hands and crossing fingers, praising each other as saints with good faith. At another point, the relationship was sort of a rivalry, with each of them accusing the other for the poor performance of the associations. Provided that the hangover of the previous era of socialism has yet to be mopped out, acquired behaviors like distrust are not so far out of the scene. As can be witnessed from the widespread blame game on the Ethiopian blogosphere, some former members of professional associations point their fingers at the government for their failure.

The role of the government, however, would not go that far as portrayed in the blogs. Its foremost role is to create a conducive regulatory environment, for which the constitutional article 31 and subsequently legislated procedures show the government's commitment. The other role of government in this regard is to create leveled operational space. Though many claim that there are hurdles in this regard, they would not reflect the failure of the government to institutionalize and standardize the overall process. The so called "cases" being narrated, to this end, seem rather individual cases not collective denouncements from the incumbent. Thus, caution has to be taken in putting them together and printing a generalized picture.

Nonetheless, this does not mean that the government has delivered what is expected to strengthen professional associations. The culture of undertaking evaluative research through the associations (think thanks, in its jargon) for policy design and reclamation is not yet developed. Collaborating with the associations for planning and implementing sectoral development programmes is missing. Partnerships of the associations and sectoral government agencies in capacity building and human resource development is

not a common scene. A latent mistrust of professional associations being instruments of political interest groups is still prevalent. Beyond that though, the culture of considering professional associations as partners in development is not as such developed. These all show that there are many holes to be filled and dirt to be scrubbed to make the play field smooth enough for associations to play constructive roles in the development of the nation.

The economic side of the problem stems from the poor financial capacity of professional associations to execute their plans. Most professional associations are weak in adopting strategies for local and international resource mobilization and fund raising. They rather rely on the diminutive membership fee that members pay, which would not even cover the coffee and tea expenses of their futile annual conferences. In most cases, the so-called “leaders” of these associations, with their de facto name of president, chairman, director or so, assume their place for the mere reason of personal pride. They are not active enough in putting the agenda of their associations forward. Their communication ability, as a direct manifestation of lack of comprehensive communication strategy, is stumpy. Most of them don’t even have the time or the courage to carry the flag of their association.

Worse than that, though, most of these associations do not have a clear road-map as to where they fit in the national development endeavor. Moreover, they fail to network themselves with similar international associations, interest groups, research institutes, non-governmental agencies, higher education institutions and what have you. Not least, they have limited their communication platform to the traditional means of communication and avoided recent developments on the internet as alternatives. With that all in place, let alone striving to reach at their fuzzy vision that they state in their inaugural publications, they fail to hang about actively. What remains to tell the story of their mere existence is their birth certificates, abstract logos and unrewarding annual conferences.

The root of the problem, however, seems to lie in the socio-cultural dimension of the problem. Modern education has spoiled the very Ethiopian culture of working together. At this time, professionals working in different disciplines have become accustomed to the culture of stepping up the ladder through information asymmetry. Information and experience sharing is seen as equal to losing authority. Short-term benefits have overshadowed the struggle for long-term vision. The character of saying “it is not my business” has become the fad of the time. Shouldering voluntary responsibility is being seen as backward. Individualism is considered as the modern lifestyle. Thinking globally and striving towards international competitiveness is not yet mainstreamed. Hence, professional associations are found to be too weak to recruit members, work towards establishing professional standards, set a stage for policy dialogues or enhance the country’s international competitiveness.

Whether we like it or not, globalization is transforming the world into a little village. Competitiveness is becoming so fierce that only the fittest will survive. As the saying goes “as strong as we are united, as weak as we are divided” poor countries like Ethiopia could ensure their survival only through letting the few knowledgeable minds work together. Since professional associations are the hubs of the meeting, we have to do our utmost to reactivate them. It is only then that we could stand firm against the tide of the time, global competition.

About the Author:



Getachew Teklemariam Alemu

*Author
International Correspondent
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia*



Getachew Teklemariam Alemu is an International Correspondent for PMForum and *PM World Today* in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Mr. Alemu is also an Infrastructure Projects Expert in the Development Projects Department of the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development, government of Ethiopia. Getachew is responsible for monitoring, appraising and reporting on public sector infrastructure projects financed by the Ethiopian government and bilateral/multilateral donor agencies. He has a Bachelor's of Science degree in Land Resources Management and Environmental Protection from Mekelle University in Ethiopia. He has also been educated in macro economic development, infrastructure development in developing countries, national economic development and project management. Getachew is currently studying at Addis Ababa University for a Masters Degree in Regional and Local Development. More information about Getachew Alemu can be found at <http://www.pmforum.org/pm%20forum%20team/index.htm#5>. Getachew can be contacted at getdem2006@yahoo.com.