

How I fall in Love with the Blue Bus



By Iyassu Ephraim : Addis Ababa : Tahisas 1 2006

Addis Ababa civil service bus

Even if my topic is not personal, it would be beneficial if I were to say a few lines about myself, which may help the reader to see through my lens.

Almost a year has passed since I left my London life to move to Addis. In fact I have had a long journey to transform myself and my life from the life I used to know, almost half of my life. A journey from been part of the diasporas, which has its own blessing and curse, to becoming a local boy again is not as easy as it seems. Because of so many factors, internal, external and other complexities, the Diaspora life in Addis is more complex and challenging. Some give up easily and walk away again.

In fact it was not an easy decision to leave a country which transformed my life and provided me with absolute security, certainty and dignity, my second homeland, the UK. Unlike popular belief, the UK and England in particular is the best place to live in so many ways. It is a place of history, knowledge, security and future. This may be the reason why my decision to move to the homeland. But my action has raised so many questions amongst family, friend and acquaintances. Even people whom I came to serve and help were not only curious about my motive to return to my country but they welcomed me with unexplainable hostility, God bless their ignorance. Their hostility and my boss's extreme abuse did not deter me but gave me more reason to stay in my country to observe and be part of the new change. This is the story of one's change.

As the title of this article indicates, here I do not have the pleasure to discuss the story of my metamorphosis, from been a member of the Diaspora to a local boy. I can only promise that one day I will be back in book form to tell the tale. Now I have to move on to my intended topic, the Blue Bus, or Civil Services Bus, which I fell in love with.

In fact the Blue color is not new for us, I am not talking about the sky, and in fact scientifically the sky is not blue. I am talking about the blue uniform. It is not too long ago, anyone who lived at the time of Derg regime or EWP (a^c) can remember that all civil servants who earned above 500.00 Birr, at that time a middleclass income, were forced to wear blue color clothing including the leader Col. Mengestu Hailemariam. Whatever their reason, the Derg regime forced civil servants to wear the blue color cloth. The regime may have argued it was on good intentions but it was imposed by force, without choice. That kind of action is the manifestation of a dictatorship regime, which always says, my way or the highway; we do not forget the bullet.

Any government who does not consider its citizens fundamental rights will always impose its will by force. It does not matter how well meant that will can be, without the consent and blessing of the citizens any good deed always will produce an undesirable result. The Derg blue uniform may be a good example of the lack of good governance and democracy. The reason I mention the Derg blue uniform is not for people to remember the darkest time in Ethiopian history but to make a small comparison with the Blue Bus revolution, what I have been observing here in Addis and have become a customer of.

Before I move to my main point I would like to say a few words about good governance. Here the concept good governance emerged as a development agenda by the World Bank twenty years ago. The Bank defined good governance as “*the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country’s economic and social resources for development*”¹. In addition, *the concept centers on the responsibility of governments and governing bodies to meet the needs of the masses as opposed to select groups in society*.² One way of implementing good governance is the equitable distribution of national wealth. This can be done through different public projects which directly benefit society, such as social housing, free education and health services, and affordable public transport so on. In fact depending on national wealth some countries can go beyond that, such as in the West countries provide direct financial help to those who are not well off, in the form of income support, pensions and so on, even the Queen is entitled to universal child benefit. This form of good governance can only be possible when a political system embraces democracy. Some of my redress might raise a few eyebrows about the issue of good governance and democracy in Ethiopia. However what the writer has been observing on the ground has given him the confidence to say that there is a seed for good governance and democracy in the country. If we look at the core concept of good governance, *to meet the needs of the masses as opposed to select groups in society*, this is exactly happening in Ethiopia. I shall pick one attribute which can boldly support my point, the Blue bus, or civil service bus.

Hostile work environment and extreme abusive boss, almost psychopathic nature, has not deterred me to stay here in Addis. After a year interminable abuse and harassment I left the menacing work environment and join a new office and found the friendliest immediate boss. Now I am working for one of the highly respected and promising government offices. As I am enjoying my new job and position, the same time I am tailoring my lifestyle accordingly. Now I am in the process of transforming myself from Diasporas to a local boy. Here I am truly taking the challenge to be an Ethiopian again, to live, to work like others. This is where the blue bus story fits into.

Those who live in or visit Addis Ababa recently can be a witness for a new form of public transport, a transport service designed for civil service workers, the Blue Bus. This service is providing free of charge transport to all public workers, from East to West and North to South in all directions. Since I have moved to my new residence near Kality and my work place on Bole road I have no option but to commute to work every day. That is why I acquainted with the blue bus services. Before that to travel from home to work and from work to home I have used the city minibus. Using the capital city minibus or taxi services has list of disadvantages. In fact our capital city taxis services have so many problems to name some them: overcrowding, unwanted odor related to personal hygiene, changing taxi two/three

¹ Good Governance on the Ground in Ethiopia: by [Fekadu Nigussa](http://www.theglobaljournal.net/article/view/1151/) NOVEMBER 8, 2013: <http://www.theglobaljournal.net/article/view/1151/>

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Good_governance

times for a single journey, pick pocketing and more. As result of that traveling by Addis minibus or taxi is the same as commuting from hell. Apart from that, the majority of minibuses are on the road with the help of God, most of them are meant to end up for scrap yards or Somali Terra. I do not have any clue how the transport authority has issue MOT or BOLO or road worthiness certificate for such ,minibus or taxi, how they manage to pass the annual road test is a puzzle, only the Devil knows. There was a time totally wrecked minibus broke done in the middle of the ring road and all passengers were forced to push for jump start. Unfortunately that was the last taxi to home, so there was not any option except push.

The introduction of the Blue Bus service, for the hardworking civil servant is one of the most welcoming government actions ever; using this opportunity here I raise my hat to my government and to those who have come up with such a brilliant idea. The blue bus service is the answer to those who have suffered as a result of the transport problems faced in the city. Even if the city transport problems will be short lived, this service is the most important and timey answered question for the hardworking civil servants. This is almost a door to door service, from my experience I can say that I pick the bus from my door and get on the next connection to my office door, in fact the organizer inform that there is other direct service from my location to my office. No pushing and no pulling, no bad odor, not risk of breakdown, no late arrival for work and so on.

Those I spoke to about the service share the same sentiment. It is not only about getting a free service, even if it is taxpayer's money, but being free from all minibus illness and hassle is worth a lot more.

In fact some have said, this bus service is even better than the new salary structure by comparing resent civil service salary adjustment. The main argument for that is when the salary increased so inflation. But this service is inflation proof and brought indirect financial benefit for hardworking civil servants. Apart from the usual convenience, the service directly saves not less than 3000.00 Birr for each household annually, if couples are both using it they can save not less than 6000.00 on average. This saved income is not affected directly by inflation as their salary does. This additional disposable income can be used as the family wishes.

When I say this disposable income is inflation proof I mean that when the government makes salary adjustments so do the merchants, they increase rent and the price of other commodities. However in this case Merkato's merchants are more or less oblivious to the Blue buss effect on income. So the merchants do not have strong ground to increase the price of commodities on the basis of the Blue bus services. In fact the government also working on rent and school fee issues, sooner there will be a cap on them. That is another step in the right direction.

If we would like to see the financial impact on household we need to computer each saving by 100,000³ service users, the figure is purely based on assumption; we come up with 300,000,000.00 Birr. In other words this money is directly injected into the economy. This is one way of wealth distribution and this can attribute for good governance too.

Apart from the direct and indirect economic benefits, the Blue Bus service has also enormous social, political implications. From my observation, on the bus there is a control mechanism totally operated by

³ The number is purely based on assumption

the users. In order to use the service the user has to display their ID, so far this is the case; I heard there will be a change. But now when a new passenger board on the bus he/she has to display their ID, which is inspected by the ones already on board. I observe that this control mechanism works perfectly, which shows me that the sense of belongingness, ownership and responsibility and all in all of citizenship responsibility.

One of the issues associated with an unreliable city taxi service is struggling to get to work on time. For example one of my former coworkers has always come to work late; her excuse is taxis, from Addissu Gebeya where she lives to Bole (by Bole Printing area) where she works she has to use at least three taxis. In fact it is just an excuse, because from Kality, where I live to Bole Road where I work I use two taxis and reach the office at 1:30. It is all about culture and attitude to work. Let put that argument one side and accept the lousy excuse forwarded by a lazy worker for now.

In fact following the city's expansion and transport problems, to be late for work is becoming an acceptable culture for most civil servants. On average most civil servants reach work around 3.00AM⁴ or 3.30AM or even later than that for a work which is started at 2:30. Lateness has enormous impact on productivities, work relationship and morality; we will see this in detail later, for now let see the financial or economic implication of lateness for work. If we assume the following figure for the sake of our calculation:

- 45 minutes an average time taken out from working hours per worker
- 100,000 worker force in the civil service
- 10% of them late for work twice a week

If we compute the figure we can get the following result: $10,000 * 2 * 45 = 900,000$ minutes per week, which translates into 15,000 working hours per week, 780,000 working hours per year, which is multiplied by 52 weeks. Now let move to the next calculation and assume each worker's productivity measured in money⁵, let assume that the average worker generates 100 Birr per hour for the economy. Now let compute that with the total hours which we has lost as a result of being late for work. From that calculation we can get 78,000,000.00 Birr. That is what we lose as a result of being late every single year. So if the Blue bus service makes lateness for work history, the service is not only creating a new culture but puts the same amount of money into the economy which we could lost it as a result culture of lateness .

While I compos this document my recent boss has advice me to look above scenario in different perspectives, using the average wage. First I thought it is difficult to find the exact figure. Even if we acquired the figures to compute exact average wage need detail analyses which is beyond the scope of this document. Despite all discrepancies it is better to use existing fact. We assume the result may give more realistic picture. To find the wage index I consult a website and found a following site which contains the wage structure of most Ethiopian offices, www.mywage.com/ethiopia. From the given

⁴ Ethiopian time

⁵ This is not an academic study , so all figures are based on assumptions

website we select the Ministry of Transport and Communication⁶ wage structure as sample. According to the website the Ministry has fifteen wage ranks or grads, the lowest wage start from 570.00 Birr and the highest wage start from 8743.00 Birr. The climax or ceiling of this wage structure is the lowest can be 1222.00 Birr and the highest can be 13919.00 Birr. By using these figures we can come up that the average hourly wage for Ethiopian civil service is 26.00Birr. So when we compute this figure with the total hours we lost we can find this (780,000*26.00 = 20,475,000). We can argue that this is unrefined indicator; however it can be good indicator for the net financial loss we are facing. So what we would be the figures if we look nationwide case combine with other activities which make us away from work?

Being late for work is not only affecting productivity directly but indirectly has a domino effect on the entire institution. Let see the following article on the issue:

Productivity Loss⁷

An employee who isn't working when he's supposed to is an immediate loss of productivity. Routine interruption may throw other employees off, particularly those who rely on the late employee to do parts of their jobs. Frequently, late employees hinder productivity on a bigger level than an employer might initially realize. For example, an employee working on a project who is late 10 minutes each day for a week loses nearly an entire hour of work. If another employee needs the late person to do his project part, he may lose nearly as much work time despite being punctual.

Negative Morale

Frequently late employees may lower everyone's morale. The late person isn't following the rules and may lead other employees to feel angry about the unfairness of the situation. The morale of immediate co-workers may plummet because the employee's lateness puts stress on them, especially if they have to cover for the late employee or fall behind in their own jobs.

Customer Dissatisfaction

Late employee disruptions affect time-sensitive areas of the job, such as customer service. If an employee is late and doesn't make a delivery to a customer on time, for example, the customer may end the relationship with the employer. A late employee who is supposed to open a location at a specific time may lose customers if she's not there when she's supposed to be. Multiple incidents of poor customer service will affect the employer's reputation and may discourage potential customers.

Management Problems

Allowing one or more employees to come in late frequently can undermine the employer's management team. Other employees may begin to feel as if the rules don't apply to the late employee and come in late themselves. When management consistently lets someone slide, other employees may lose respect for the people in charge.

I believe that citizens have the right to enjoy the fruit of their labor. Citizens do not only have obligations but they have rights too. Any government who recognizes this fundamental principle is truly a democratic government indeed.

Citizens used to be forced to wear a blue uniform, now they have the choice to travel by the blue bus for free, what a contrast. I love the blue bus.

⁶ <http://www.mywage.org/ethiopia/home/salary/public-sector-wages/ministry-of-transport-and-communication>

⁷ The Effects of Being Late for Work on Employers: by Anna Assad, Demand Media: <http://everydaylife.globalpost.com>

