

“Educating Ethiopians to Develop Ethiopia”

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Recently I have been to Ethiopia for a visit. When I was there I had the chance to see what a local NGO called EYES together with an overseas NGO called A-CET is doing to help educate local communities in the environs of Mekelle. EYES (acronym for Ethiopian Youth Educational Support) is a local NGO in Mekelle and works in collaboration with OSSA and governmental bureaus. Its main funds come from A-CET (acronym for African Children's Educational Trust), but also accepts funds from other foreign donors and from locals. I was inspired by what they were doing and felt I should write what I saw for others to know.

This is how I came to know about EYES/A-CET in short. When I was studying in the Netherlands, I came across a Dutch family who were involved in the EYES/A-CET project. They told me that they were upgrading make-shift schools to standard schools with full facilities. Both the husband and wife are school teachers and raise funds in their schools to help upgrade schools in Tigray. They are also trying to create a link between those schools and their school in Netherlands in other ways. At one time, they even have taken some thirteen elementary Dutch students to Ethiopia for a cultural exchange with the students of the schools they are upgrading. Now they have established a foundation (see www.fikrealem.nl, it is in Dutch) to help raise funds for EYES/A-CET. They feel close to Ethiopia because they have adopted a beautiful child from Ethiopia. We became very good friends over time. So when I told the family that I was going to Ethiopia for a visit, they asked me to meet Bisrat Mesfin, the manager of EYES in Mekelle.



When I was in Mekelle, I called Bisrat Mesfin and met him in his office. We had a talk for about an hour. He talked with zeal and compassion. Bisrat is a young man with vision and purpose. He seems one who has understood the value of education for an individual's life and for community and national development. During our meeting I got to know that EYES/A-CET was helping about one thousand vulnerable young children go to school through a modest direct scholarship. Some of their students have reached higher levels of academic study (bachelors, Masters and PhD's) and are already giving back to EYES/A-CET. Other than that, Bisrat also told me that they have upgraded many local make-shift schools to standard schools with facility since 2005. They are also currently working on some similar projects of upgrading. At the end of our meeting, he offered me to see the schools they have upgraded. I accepted the offer.

Bisrat sent me to the schools with a person who knows the schools, and what I witnessed was very inspiring. EYES/A-CET have upgraded seven make-shift schools. I visited four of them: Dansa (on the Mekelle-Samre road), Hagere-Selam (in Wejarat), Gumsalasa (near Adi-Gudem) and Ziban-Albe (near Hiwane). All these were make-shift elementary schools with low student enrollments high drop-out rates. Now the first three schools have two blocks of class rooms, one block office/library, and one

toilet each. In each school, one block of class rooms is built by the community except for some materials like windows and doors, etc. which the locals can not afford by themselves. The fourth, Ziban Albe, is under construction and is a big 5-block school intended to be a high-school. In some of the schools (specially Hager-Selam) the community is building residential houses for the teachers. The school has also become a beneficiary of electricity recently, thanks to EYES/A-CET and a local flour-mill owner. And in Gumselasa, EYES/A-CET have installed a solar-powered computer lab. Just somewhere in the middle of a countryside, a 15-computers solar-powered lab seems bizarre and unthinkable, but I have seen it and tried it myself and it works :)

During my interviews with the locals, teachers and students, I have realized how this upgrading of schools have empowered the local communities, increased student's enrollment and encouraged teachers. The community are empowered because they had a share during the upgrading and thus the sense of ownership is really high. EYES/A-CET's criteria for selecting a school for upgrade is community participation. The community must have first showed readiness and interest by first upgrading some part of the school in order for the school to be selected for help by EYES/A-CET. That way, EYES/A-CET takes the roles of helping instead of let-me-do-it-for-you approach. This type of approach creates two things: first it inspires the community for they develop confidence in themselves, and second it creates a sense of ownership which helps a continued support and maintenance for the future.



I have talked to the directors of Dansa and Hager-Selam and saw student statistics. Student enrollment has more than doubled, specially girls enrollment increased dramatically. Particularly in Hager-Selam, 3/4 of its 500 students are females. The increase in enrollment is because of the community empowerment and awareness (they now send their children to school), the attraction of students that would otherwise go to far-away schools or quit (all schools were up to fourth grade, now they teach until 8th grade), and the presence of good teachers (before teachers refused to stay there and teach for they had no offices and classrooms). The school directors said there is almost zero drop-out rate.

There are things to learn from what EYES/A-CET is doing. For example, in each school they have introduced cement-blackboards. This is just a cement-sand structure made in the shape of a blackboard on the classroom wall and finally painted with cement paint. This is good for 1) it does not fall down and does not wear and tear. 2) all it needs for maintenance is painting it again. The amount of money EYES/A-CET receives from donors and spends on upgrading the schools is small, but they are spending it in the wisest and most sustainable way. The most sustainable way to help a person is to educate and empower the person. And an educated and empowered person can support family, community and country, a realization of EYES/A-CET's motto "Educating Ethiopians to Develop Ethiopia". The community-participation-approach can be employed in many other similar endeavors creating community awareness, empowerment and ownership. What EYES/A-CET is accomplishing is impressive, and they deserve recognition and encouragement. They also appreciate support and involvement. Please see their websites for photos, projects and how you can help.



EYE's Website: <http://www.e-yes.org>

A-CET website: <http://www.a-cet.org>

Fikre Alem website: www.fikrealem.nl