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ABSTRACT

Africa is beset with problems that range from natural calamities to civil wars and epidemics such as HIV-AIDS. Ironically, countries like Ethiopia, which badly need trained manpower, continued to lose highly skilled professionals, both military and civilian, to Western Europe and the United States. Ethiopia, for instance, loses more than a third of all its students who were sent for further education to Europe and the U.S. This is in addition to those who leave the country for various reasons but refuse to return home and those educated Ethiopians who became refugees in African countries. One of the consequences of the outflow of highly educated Ethiopians is that today there are more Ethiopian professionals, including MDs, working in the U.S. than in Ethiopia. However, not all Ethiopian professionals are successful in practicing their profession. Among these professionals, highly trained military officers constituted the largest group. They end up being taxi drivers and security guards; they represent the worst case of brain drain—brain hemorrhage. My paper will examine the causes and processes of migration of highly educated Ethiopians to the U.S. and its impact on higher education, both military and civilian, and health institutions in Ethiopia—a country with the least developed higher education establishments, even by African standards, and one of the worst HIV-AIDS affected areas in the world.

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INTRODUCTION

Africa in general and Ethiopia in particular have been noted for political tremor, drought, and famine for the past three decades. The scenario in Ethiopia seems to be even worse. The country’s population of 72 million, which is the second largest in sub-Saharan Africa, has a per capita income of $110.00, one-fourth the average for the continent. Its education sector, at all levels, indicates the lowest participation rates in the world, and even in Africa: 30 percent at primary, 13 percent at secondary, and less than 1 percent at the tertiary levels (World Bank 2001). The country’s health sector (all the country’s medical colleges are attached to hospitals), too, is in no better condition. Health expenditure between 1990 and 1995 was 1.7 percent of the GDP. In the same period, population per physician ratio was 35,051, while population per hospital bed was 4,141. Life expectancy at birth is 49 years. The country has been identified as one of the highest HIV-AIDS affected parts of the world. According to a report during the latter part of the 20th century, there were 9.3 HIV positive individuals per 100 adults (World Bank 1998).

In spite of this bleak reality, Ethiopia has been providing the Western World and parts of Africa with highly educated professionals. How did this happen? This paper examines the causes and processes of migration of highly educated Ethiopians to the Western World, mainly to the U.S., and its impact on Ethiopia’s institutions of higher education. It also assesses the possibility of “brain gain” from the Ethiopian immigrant community in the U.S.

CONTEXT OF MIGRATION: THE DEVELOPMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN ETHIOPIA

Apart from its traditional educational establishment, which was primarily based on the teachings of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Ethiopia did not have a Western modeled institution of higher learning until the 1960s. Nevertheless, it does not mean that the country has never had a Western trained and educated professional until that time. Since the mid-19th century, Ethiopian emperors had been trying to introduce Western education into the country. The purpose, however, was very limited. For example, while Emperor Tewodros II (r. 1855-1868) wanted to educate Ethiopians so that the latter could build weapons for him, Menelik II (r. 1889-1916) and his immediate successors sought Western educated Ethiopians to serve as interpreters in the royal court. Emperor Haile Sillassie I (r. 1930-1974), on his part, needed Western educated Ethiopians to fill his “modern” bureaucracy, which was also partly intended to neutralize the nobility. Therefore, it was Haile Sillassie’s