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Policy-Practice Gap on Participation of Students with Disabilities in the Education and  
Training Programme of Ethiopia: Policy Content Analysis

Abebe Yehualawork Malle, Raija Pirttimaa and Timo Saloviita

### **Abstract**

This study explores the extent to which the issue of special educational and training needs for persons with disabilities is addressed in the education and training policy of Ethiopia, with a specific focus on technical and vocational education and training (TVET). Focus-group discussions and interviews were used to assess the content of the policy and related strategic documents, as well as legal frameworks and implementation instruments, in terms of the principle of inclusion. A pair of focus group discussions involved twenty-two members of the management and governance of four networks and eight indigenous, disability-focused, non-governmental organisations. Moreover, 14 high-profile experts from the ministry were interviewed. Most participants agreed that the issue of disability was not addressed appropriately in issues of strategy and prioritisation. Six recommendations are presented for enhancing the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in education and vocational training.

**Keywords:** persons with disabilities, Ethiopia, policy development and analysis, inclusion, technical and vocational education and training.

Disability is an issue and a reality in any society. According to the definition adopted by United Nations (2006) in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, persons with disabilities “include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others” (p. 4). It is estimated that more than a billion people, or about 15% of the world’s population, are living with a disability, and 80% of them reside in low-income countries (WHO and World Bank, 2011, p. 29). Of the total population of Ethiopia, 17.6% are estimated to live with some sort of impairment (WHO and World Bank, 2011, p. 272). It has been confirmed that the main challenge of persons with disabilities is related not necessarily to their specific impairment, but to their lack of equal access to various rehabilitation services such as health care, education, employment or social and legal support systems (United Nations, 2011).

Education and vocational training are recognized as important elements of human rights, as endorsed by several documents on human rights (e.g. United Nations, 1948, 1966, 1983b). The World Declaration of Education for All (EFA) was accepted in the UNESCO meeting in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990 as a starting point for a global commitment to providing basic, quality education for all children, youths and adults (UNESCO, 2014). The achievements of the EFA were evaluated ten years later in Dakar, Senegal, and new goals were set (UNESCO, 2014). The first Dakar goal was “Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children” (UNESCO, 2014). Aside from such general goals, the educational needs of persons with disabilities have attained specific attention through several international declarations (United Nations, 1983a, 1983b; UNESCO, 1994) and conventions on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006), as well as through national

legislation and other national policy documents.

However, little has been done in developing countries so far to help persons with disabilities to participate in regular education and vocational training, and a clear lack of progress toward the stated goals has been observed (Peters, 2007). According to UNESCO's 2010 Education for All Global Monitoring Report, most of the poorest countries of the world were not on the right track to achieve the 2015 Millennium Development Goals, including achieving universal primary education (UNESCO, 2010). In particular, there was a failure to provide the special educational needs of marginalized groups, especially persons with disabilities. A 2011 UN report confirmed that in developing countries, 90% of children with disabilities still do not have the opportunity to access education (United Nations, 2011).

### **Development in Ethiopia**

Ethiopia, a country located in the Horn of Africa, is one of the poorest countries in the world. However, its economic development during the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been noteworthy (International Monetary Fund, 2014). In Ethiopia, the traditional approach towards supporting persons with disabilities has involved social welfare and socio-medical models that emphasize medical and financial assistance. This orientation has been reflected in most policy and legislative instruments. Alongside the overthrowing of the military government in 1991 and the emergence of a new political system, the Government of Ethiopia introduced several policy and legislative instruments at federal and regional levels, with the objective of addressing the educational and training needs and rights of citizens. These policy and legislative instruments were inspired by the political intentions of the newly emerged transitional government of Ethiopia, and addressed the special educational and vocational needs of persons with disabilities as well (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1994). The shift in policy encompassed the expansion of both primary education and vocational

training in line with the EFA goals (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1994; Lasonen et al., 2005, p. 30). The policy stated that the Government was committed “to enabl[ing] both the handicapped and the gifted to learn in accordance with their potential and needs” (p. 9). In the overall strategy, it was stated that “special education and training will be provided for people with special needs” (p. 17). However, the physical fitness requirements of the teaching profession (p. 20) prevented some individuals with disabilities from becoming teachers. This policy did not recognize, for example, the pedagogical advantage of children with hearing impairment being educated by teachers who use sign language themselves.

A follow-up study confirmed that Ethiopia has made some progress towards the Dakar EFA goals (Lasonen et al., 2005, p. 10). For example, primary-school enrolment tripled during the late nineties and early 2000s. However, Ethiopia was still found to be among the countries with the lowest enrolment rates, with nearly half of all children remaining out of school (Lasonen et al., 2005, p. 10).

In 2012, the revised Special Needs Education Program Strategy (Ministry of Education, 2012) was issued, with the objective of updating and bridging the gaps identified regarding the special education sector. Its overarching objective was “to build an inclusive education system which will provide quality, relevant and equitable education and training to all children, youth and adults with special educational needs and ultimately enable them to fully participate in the socio-economic development of the country” (p. 14). More attention was given to the participation of persons with disabilities in technical and vocational education and training (TVET) in this strategy than in previous plans. However, the 2012 revised Special Needs Education Program Strategy (Ministry of Education, 2012) and the 2011–2012 Annual Abstract of the Ministry of Education revealed that only 3.2% of school-aged children with disabilities could get access to education and that the participation of

students with disabilities in the TVET programme was still insignificant.

Some criteria have been presented in scholarship for the purpose of evaluating the validity and efficacy of policies. First, it has been recommended that policies should state their goals, objectives and means of implementation as clearly as possible (Torjman, 2005). Second, it is suggested that policies should be developed in consultation with the stakeholders concerned and with meaningful participation and contributions from communities (Northern Territory Government of Canada, 2000; Smith, 2003). On the basis of this recommendation, Disabled Persons Organisations (DPOs) should be considered to be partners in the formulation of disability policies. This principle is confirmed in Articles 21, 29 and 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), which detail the rights of disabled people to be involved and to be able to express their opinions for consideration in policy formulation and public affairs.

The aim of this study is to explore the extent to which the special educational and training needs of persons with disabilities are addressed in the education and training policy of Ethiopia, as well as the extent to which DPOs have been included in the process. The development of the 1994 Education and Training Policy (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1994) is reviewed and evaluated through interviews with some high-profile Government professionals. Second, the following questions were asked in focus groups with people working in DPOs: 1) how do the participants evaluate the current status of vocational education for individuals with disabilities? 2) How do they evaluate the inclusion of disability issues in Government policies? 3) What do they think the role of disability organisations is within the process of policy formulation?

## **Methods**

## **Participants**

A total of 14 high-profile policymakers and experts were selected for interview using purposive and snowball sampling. The participants were individuals who possessed particular, relevant responsibilities in generating policies and strategies within Ethiopia's education and vocational training sector – Government members and professionals in different departments and positions at the Federal Ministry of Education and the TVET Agency. Some of them were already retired. The informants had relevant experience and qualifications in various disciplines, nine of them being qualified in special needs education (see Table 1).

For the focus-group discussions, 22 individuals were selected from various organisations working on the issue of disability. They were chosen for their seniority and current roles in leading the disability awareness movement in Ethiopia. These discussants were qualified and experienced in different professions and with adaptive skills, such as special needs education, social work, human rights, history, sign language and deaf culture, and gender studies. Some of them were renowned disability awareness activists. The groups were organised into two sessions: the first group consisted of high-profile members of secretariats (management) and the second group comprised Government representatives (managing boards and General Assemblies), as well as representatives of networks and indigenous non-governmental organisations (see Table 1).

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Table 1  
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## **Data Collection and Analysis**



One-to-one and face-to-face interviews were conducted with the participants. All interviews were carried out by the first author, together with an assistant who was knowledgeable about, and familiar with, the local context – including Amharic, the language used for the interviews. During the interviews, a friendly approach was applied in order to probe the interviewees' external realities (i.e. facts and events) and their internal experiences (such as feelings and meanings) (Silverman, 2005). All interviews were held at the interviewees' offices, thus offering them a comfortable and practical setting. The data were elicited from the participants with their informed consent and any pieces of information they gave were kept confidential. A three-page guide to the interview questions was prepared and used to maintain interview consistency and quality. Each interview lasted an hour on average and was recorded on an audio-digital recorder with the interviewee's consent.

In the focus-group discussions, participants were divided into two groups, in line with their various roles. The first group consisted of administrators from non-governmental organisations that were responsible for managing day-to-day project activities and administrative issues. The second group consisted of board members of these organisations. Again, the question guide was used and discussions were recorded on video- and audio recorders simultaneously. Each discussion lasted for an average of three hours. During the course of these focus-group discussions, sign-language interpreters and assistants were assigned to facilitate the communication and mobility of participants with hearing, visual and physical impairments.

The question guides for both the interview and focus-group discussions were prepared in English and then translated into Amharic, facilitating the contribution and active engagement of the participants in the study. The guides were prepared in an open-ended format and were organised to contain what, where, why and how questions in order to probe the informants'

ideas effectively.

The ideas, views and narrations gained from the respondents through the interviews and focus-group discussions were transcribed into an 86-page document and then categorized by thematic issues, which were then described and, finally, analyzed (Bryman, 2008).

## **Results**

### **High-profile Interviewees**

The interviews with high-profile experts and Government members provided a general picture of the process of policy planning. The overall preparation of the draft policy was carried out by different task forces, established by the ministry. The members of these task forces were recruited from various departments of the ministry, from Addis Ababa University and from civic societies (such as the National Teachers Association) and line ministries. It was estimated that nearly 200 professionals, policy experts and consultants took part in the overall process. Among them were experts in special-needs education.

A number of platforms were organised by the Ministry of Education to facilitate discussion between the task forces and the compiling of their findings into a single draft document. A situational analysis was also carried out via a baseline survey and through reviews of the experiences of other countries. The results of the survey enabled the experts to map out the core drawbacks of the former regime's education and training system. Two interviewees stated that the survey results revealed the former education and training system to be poor in "quality/relevance, efficiency, coverage and justice, and it was highly centralized, with the absence of a systematic approach and strategy to ensure the principles of equality and equity". They intimated that in the former education system, issues relating to gender and to pastoral and special-needs education were not addressed properly. The

interviewees argued that the baseline survey contributed to the inclusion of special educational and training needs in the policy because it revealed the existing shortages.

Six interviewees considered the issue of disability to be addressed effectively by the new policy. According to one participant, this was evident because the issue of disability was cited as one of the policy's specific objectives. However, all except two interviewees believed that the content of the 1994 Education and Training Policy remained limited with regard to the basic and special educational and vocational training needs of persons with disabilities. Of 14 interviewees, nine asserted that one of the shortcomings of the policy was that needs assessment was not conducted at community level. One expert in special needs education confirmed that there was strong pressure to include the requirement for teachers' physical and mental fitness in the policy.

The interviewees stated that while the policy documents of the former military government were used as guiding instruments, the 1994 Education and Training Policy changed the country's education and training system radically. Specifically, the new policy transformed a highly centralized arrangement into a federal administrative system.

### **Focus-group Participants**

The participants in the two focus-group discussions stressed that the Ministry of Education had a responsibility to ensure the equal participation of all citizens in education and training programmes. They expressed the unanimous opinion that the issue of disability was mentioned in the policy only as a "passing remark" and using the traditional, and in most cases derogatory, terminology of "handicap".

They also argued that the treatment of special educational and training needs in the policy did not corresponded explicitly with the core thematic statements of the policy, such as curriculum development, student measurement and examinations, and quality education.

They felt that the issue of disability was handled vaguely in the policy, in a way that was open to negative interpretation. They suspected that the policy statement may not be compatible with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

The participants agreed that the presence of the issue of disability in the 1994 Education and Training Policy was more-or-less the result of a donor-driven initiative. They argued further that if it had been a home-grown initiative, the country could have achieved more tangible change and progress in providing accessible educational and vocational training opportunities and facilities to persons with disabilities.

Of the participants thirty believed that human rights principles were not taken into account in the policy with regard to the educational and training needs of persons with disabilities. The use of the term “handicap” in one of the specific objectives of the 1994 Education and Training Policy document was presented as an example of this argument.

The participants presented several possible reasons why disability issues were not addressed properly (according to them) in the policy; first, attitudinal and cognitive factors (including the influence of the traditional socio-medical model on the understanding of disability and a lack of commitment to, and awareness about, such issues). Second, there were organisational reasons (such as the absence of a responsible ministerial department with the capacity to influence policy experts to consider the issue of disability in policy statements). It was also cited that individuals with disabilities lacked opportunities to be involved in the preparation of the draft policy, and DPOs were not invited to take part in consultative workshops and meetings. The high-profile interviewees also agreed that DPOs were not given the opportunity to participate in the process of preparing the draft policy. Finally, participants mentioned that there was an absence of a united voice among disability policy organisations and special needs education professionals.

### **Common Findings**

Almost all the participants stated that they were familiar with the concept of inclusion in matters of disability. They all claimed to have appropriate knowledge about environmental, attitudinal and institutional barriers in the country's education and training sector. Only a minority of participants (20) were conscious of restrictions concerning the participation of persons with disabilities in technical and vocational education and training programmes.

All but three participants expressed that Ethiopia's 1994 Education and Training Policy did not address the basic and special educational and training needs of persons with disabilities fully and adequately. Hence, the policy should be revised, with the objectives of revitalizing the internationally recognized educational and training rights of citizens with disabilities and making the policy statements compatible with the principles of special needs education. In light of this idea, these participants (particularly the members who took part in the focus-group discussions) argued that the issue of disability should be one of the policy's priority actions, with a view to promoting and enhancing the educational and training needs of children, youths and adults with disabilities.

### **Discussion**

The opinions of the two groups of participants in this study differed in many respects; the representatives of disability organisations were more critical towards the disability policy than the high-profile Government representatives and professionals in the field. It was agreed that the role of disability organisations was minute in terms of the formulation of the 1994 Education and Training Policy, a document used as a precedent for the preparation and development of legislative and implementational instruments. The representatives of disability organisations and the majority of the high-profile interviewees concurred that the

issue of disability was not addressed adequately in the 1994 Policy. According to those participants representing various civic disability organisations, there was a lack of awareness about the issue of disability among the policy experts and policymakers involved in the process of preparing and developing the policy. In this respect, the fact that DPOs were not invited to take part in the preparation process was an evident drawback.

As the results of the study showed, a genuine disability-inclusive policy that recognizes the special educational needs of persons with disabilities is required by the Ethiopian education sector. The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994) highlights that states should “adopt as a matter of law or policy the principle of inclusive education, enrolling all children in regular schools, unless there are compelling reasons for doing otherwise” (p. 9). The declaration explains further that an inclusive approach in the education and vocational training sector is “the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all” (p. 9).

As confirmed by the opinions of participants in this study, the 1994 Education and Training Policy needs to be revised in order to guarantee unambiguous policy formulations that promote the educational and training needs and rights of persons with disabilities. In this respect, the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994) calls upon states to “give the highest policy and budgetary priority to improving their education systems to enable them to include all children regardless of individual differences or difficulties” (p. 9).

Based on the gaps in policy uncovered by this study, the following major areas of focus can be recommended to improve the participation of students with disabilities in the country’s regular education and training system, especially in the field of technical and

vocational training and education:

1. Revise and rescind the discriminatory provisions cited in the policy and related implementation documents, in line with the declaration and principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.
2. Exert pressure on the TVET Agency and line regional agencies to mainstream the special training needs of persons with disabilities in their directives, recruitment criteria and other related instruments, or develop a disability-specific strategic document that provides reasonable and clear direction on which specific fields of study should be accessible to those with particular impairments.
3. Establish a strong and practical horizontal relationship between the TVET Agency and the Special Support and Inclusive Education Directorate within the general education stream at all levels of the system in the ministry, with a view to exchanging information and responsibilities via a partnership that promotes the vocational empowerment of disabled people.
4. Enhance the awareness of policy experts and other relevant professionals, including high-profile positions in the ministry in general and in the TVET Agency in particular, by implementing consecutive lobbying dialogues and other mechanisms.
5. Promote the contact of DPOs with the ministry and the TVET Agency by strengthening their involvement in the overall activities of the sector.
6. Prepare and submit alternative policy ideas that could serve as source documents for the development of instruments that ensure the participation of persons with disabilities in the country's TVET programme on an equal basis with others.

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Table 1 *Profiles of the Participants of the Study*

Characteristics	Focus Group Discussion (n = 22)	Interview (n = 14)
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	14	13
Female	8	1
<b>Age</b>		
18–30	5	1
31–45	9	1
46 +	8	12
<b>Qualifications</b>		
Diploma	2	-
Degree	8	3
MA	12	10
PhD/Professor	-	1
<b>Position</b>		
Managers	12	4
Experts	-	5
Deputy Ministers	-	2
High Government Profile		
Members of Governance	10	-
Retired	-	3
<b>Work Experience in Years</b>		
1–15	6	-
16–30	15	3
31 +	1	11
<b>Type of Impairment</b>		
Visual Impairment	11	-
Hearing Impairment	2	-
Multiple Impairments	1	-
Physical Impairment	-	-
Nondisabled	8	14

Focus-group Discussion Participants represented the following organisations: NETWORKS: the Federation of Ethiopian National Associations of Persons with Disabilities (FENAPD), the Network of Organisations for the Visually Impaired and the Blind (NOVIB), the Community Based Rehabilitation Network Ethiopia (CBRN-E), the Ethiopian National Disability Action Network (ENDAN), INDIGENOUS NGOs: Ethiopian National

Association of the Blind (ENAB), Yemsrach Center, Ethiopian National Association of the Deaf (ENAD), Help for Persons with Disabilities Organisation (HPD-O), Ethiopian Center for Disability and Development (ECDD), Information and Development for Persons with Disabilities Association (IDPDA), Special Needs Education Professionals Association (SNEPA) and Ethiopian Women with Disabilities National Association (EWDNA).