

PERSPECTIVES IN ACCESS AND EQUITY TO AND IN HIGHER EDUCATION TOWARDS EFFECTIVE POLICY AND IMPLEMENTATION

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As many of you may know and saw in your respective countries, higher education throughout the world is experiencing unprecedented development and transformations. Of the several policy, research and intervention related challenges of the sector, access and equity continue to be major concerns internationally/globally and nationally. As explained in the previous presentations, the issues of access and equity are complex and multifaceted but critically important in our effort to transform higher education and society. I will try to attempt to highlight only a few critical aspects of the issues as they relate to policy and implementation. My intervention would mainly be on developing countries, but most issues are undoubtedly applying to the developed and developing countries alike, that are grappling with the challenges.

Imagine a beautiful young girl from a rural village in Africa who has bravely overcome the complex societal, family and individual challenges knocking at the doors of our universities. Imagine that this potential future leader, expert and scientist denied of access or even if provided with the entry is pushed to leave in the backdoors without completing her education. I hope we all would visualize what this would bring in the shattering of individual aspirations, as well as the resultant social fabric, in contributing to the stifling of efforts of promotion of democracy, personal and national development endeavours, and the creation of a fair global village.

The most basic questions relate to how much we understand the issues of access and equity and how much we have fostered common understanding to address equitable access objectives. I am afraid our understanding is not with the required clarity and in a way that promote common understanding that could muster common vision and actions. The underlying point here may be the need to further clarify the interchangeably and sometimes confusingly used concepts of access, equity and equality.

I am in no way claiming to formulate clearer definitions, but would offer to stress the need for the effort. Many would agree that ACCESS may refer to the provision of space or to the scale and volume of participation places available. EQUITY may mean fairness and equality of opportunity and treatment without hindrance through prejudice and discrimination practices. EQUALITY could mean sameness where all must be on the same platform. In essence equality is the end while equity is the means to achieve the end and access the process to the goal.

EQUITY is also understood as policy and procedures for enabling and encouraging groups in society at present under-represented to gain access to and demonstrate successful performance and transition to the world of work. Furthermore, it refers to extending opportunities for suitable qualified people, irrespective of any specific considerations and without discriminations.

Although dependent on socio-economic, cultural and political contexts, widely recognized equity groups include:

- Women and girls,
- People with disability,
- Ethnic and other minority groups,
- People with poor socio-economic status, and
- Mature age groups.

The under-represented, marginalized or disadvantaged groups of society have important implications to the overall political, economic, social and cultural aspects of nations/countries. This calls for national governments, institutions of higher learning, regional and international agencies and other stakeholders to put them high on socio-economic and cultural development agendas and democratizations processes. Not only be on the agenda but issues of access and equity need not be diminished by other considerations, such as quality and efficiency or cost effectiveness by governments or universities or international agencies, such as UNESCO.

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One critical aspect is that challenges and remedial interventions are not fully embraced and integrated within the long-established traditions of higher education institutions/universities. The policy to open up admission procedures and to expand access to achieve equity goals are usually sidelined or resisted by university communities on the basis of academic tradition of exclusivity and elitism, and in the name of academic freedom and excellence.

Structural diversity and flexibility (more course options, greater and targeted support and guidance, flexible scheduling, etc.) would increase equity through numerical increase of places and a range of progression mechanisms. However, as you may all agree, there is a lack of diversity and flexibility that accepts and value differences in our higher education systems.

Although with some achievements, most universities in Ethiopia, as elsewhere in many developing nations, have established offices to look after and follow-up issues of disadvantaged groups such as female students. But these are not fully functional due to problems of ownership, leadership and resourcing (financial and human). Proactive institutional leadership is lacking and there is poor engagement with the groups and other stakeholders.

There is also a lack of coherence and integration of policies and implementation on the part of governments in addressing issues of equity and access. The efforts are treated in isolation at the level of higher education, usually lacking integration and synergy with the other levels of education [EDUCATION EQUITY CHAINS] and also with other related cross-sectoral agencies.

Efforts to improve participation of girls to higher education in many African nations are commonly poorly successful as they do not give the necessary focus to the required interventions at the secondary and primary education levels, societal attitudes and values and do not relate to works done by other governmental, civil and non-governmental organizations.

Effective recognition of the issues and efforts for sustainable commitments have much to be desired, both from governments and higher education institutions. Policy making is largely characterized by a mere reaction to crisis and pressure. Although these have brought about changes, they have proved to be unsustainable and long lasting. Recognizing and improving the inter-relatedness of all stages and levels of education is longer term policy goal, that achieving equity in higher education depends on effective policies and supportive measures at the lower levels of education.

Many countries have started to give high considerations for expansion of access while development partners usually try to dictate the shift in priorities towards adoption of policies and strategies of improving quality and efficiency of the existing systems rather than opening widening opportunities. Though these recommendations are not bluntly made, pressing questions of prioritization for primary education, good governance, etc. These usually blur and misdirect priorities set by the countries themselves and thus resulting in lack of ownership and commitments.

Another critical set back in policy and practices are the lack of continuity and follow-through to ensure equity improvements. This may be related to poor commitments in implementation and weak ownerships of the agenda for change, which are advanced as an-add on rather than an integral element of institutional (intellectual, cultural, social and economic) purposes or missions. These setbacks are demonstrated by high levels of attrition, drop out and poor progression/completion rate. That is the reason why my title explicitly refers to: "...access and equity **TO** and **IN** higher education...".

The affirmative action of entry to higher education institutions in Ethiopia, as in many other developing countries, has succeeded in providing access to almost all female students who have the minimum passing marks. However, these students are not provided with the required support and encouragement to progress in their education and complete graduation. Most have been dismissed in the first year of their education ("transition period from secondary to tertiary") in a number of universities. This is just like entering and exiting in a revolving door. There are success stories where proactive leadership, institutionalization of the agenda and ownership are characteristics of the universities. In some cases female students have been consistently top ranking distinction students.

Ensuring equity and access need to be an important and central element of national and global policies and strategies of interventions, and in the overall performance, quality and efficiency of higher education systems and institutions to strengthen democracy and advancing socio-economic development. Decisions of nations can be informed and benefit a lot from international experience and expertise of development partners, but it shall not be pressured and dictated by them if countries are to succeed in implementation of policies with ownership and effectively achieve equity

goals and objectives. Although there are several achievements, the challenges are still enormous, barriers to opportunity and difficulties in progression and success in completing education remain to be overcome, and effort to systematic research/study and evaluation are warranted with solid commitment.

Let me try to conclude my intervention in form of questions to provoke thought for reflection and further actions.

1. Are we all prepared to galvanize our efforts of research and development works in forging common understanding, vision and action to resolve challenges of equity and access?
2. The most effective strategy for achieving equity goals and objectives is expansion or widening of access. This can happen either through vertical or horizontal diversification and opening of institutions and programs. But,
 - are we ready to prioritize higher education expansion in national policies and strategies, obviously without compromising other basic service (primary education, health, etc.) provisions?
 - are opportunities still not unequally distributed, considering the continued emphasis on merit principles, lack of geographic distribution of institutions, traditional structures and organization of programs and courses, poor attitude and behaviour of individuals and groups?
3. Policy coherence and integration across education levels and wider society is critical to achieve equity goals.
 - What are our readiness and capacity in understanding the nature of challenges and required actions in the Education Equity Chain, with due consideration that interventions are not piecemeal fixes?
 - Should we continue to promote policy making as a mere reaction to crisis and pressure?
 - Within different contexts, how should the higher education systems be proactive in becoming more diversified and flexible to address equity issues?
 - Are we convinced and ready to support the effort to achieve equitable access goals with financial, material, technical and human resources, as one of the priority items in our development agendas and nation building strategies?
4. New policy frameworks require informed decisions, commitments and clear recognitions of actions with sharper focus on effective, accountable and results-based implementation. However,
 - do we generate reliable, comparable, monitorable and sufficient data to assist in charting the future and a new direction of policy and implementation (as governments, researchers or international organizations)?
5. Shared responsibilities and concerted actions of governments, institutions of higher learning and the international or regional agencies need to be clearly defined. However,
 - Is there the readiness and capacity to proactively pursue these requirements within the frameworks of national priorities and defined objectives?
 - Could there be a common vision with equal partnerships to achieve the challenges of access and equity, particularly in the relationship of so-called “development partners” and developing countries?

Let us not forget that young girl: She does not deserve to be excluded from equal opportunity to lead healthy, prosperous and competitive life, and be denied of her vision to contribute to nation building. Not only girls and women but also the other disadvantaged or under-represented groups of society need to get attention in national and institutional policies and implementation strategies in terms of opening access and widening opportunities for entry and success. Researchers, development partners, national governments and international agencies have the responsibility to focus on issues of access and equity **TO** and **IN** higher education for these under-represented groups. It is great to recognize that the developed countries are doing a lot in furthering this cause, but could do and I believe are willing to do more. True and mutually responsive partnerships based on principles and actions of equality are essential to succeed in this effort.

THANK YOU