The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Program
Foreign Assistance Series

TASSEW ZEWDIE

Interviewed by: Marcia Bernbaum
Initial interview date: November 22, 2022
Copyright 2024 ADST

TABLE OF CONTENTS

AID Development Specialist	1995-1997
Cognizant Technical Officer/Education Programs Manager	1997-2000
Senior Education Advisor/Cognizant Technical Officer	2000-2002

Southern Sudan, CARE International   2002-2006
        Deputy Chief of Party, Sudan Basic Education Program(SBEP)
        Institutional Capacity Building Advisor/Team Leader (SBEP)

Southern Sudan, CARE International   2006-2007
        Chief of Party, Sudan Basic Education Program (SBEP)

South Sudan/Tanzania, Creative Associates International, Inc.   2007-2012
        Senior Associate
        Project Director
        Acting Chief of Party

Zambia, Creative Associates International, Inc.   2012-2017
        Chief of Party: Read to Succeed (RtS) Project

Zambia, Creative Associates International, Inc.   2017-2018
        Senior Associate and Country Representative

Ethiopia, Creative Associates International, Inc.
        Chief of Party, READ II Activity   2018-2024

INTERVIEW

Q: Today is Tuesday, November 22, 2022, and I have the pleasure of initiating a series of oral history interviews with Tassew Zewdie, who is from Ethiopia and has had a fascinating career with USAID (United States Agency for International Development) as well as carrying out consulting assignments with USAID afterwards.

Tassew, welcome, and I'm going to turn it over to you.

ZEWDIE: Thank you, Marcia, for this interview.

My name is Tassew Zewdie. I was born on May 5, 1954, near a rural town called Holeta Genet, a rural village called Otto. I have a brother and three sisters. My father was a farmer with a decent income to support the family. My immediate elder sister and I were the only children in the family who went to a primary school. We started our education with a priest as a teacher to facilitate a religious education and thereby, of course, literacy.

My elder sister got married and did not continue her education in a formal school. My parents were kind enough to host the priest in our house and children from the

neighborhood used to come to our place to attend. So, I started my literacy education in the form of a religious study at home.

When I was at the right age for school, I wanted to join a primary school - a formal school. But unfortunately, there was no primary school near our village at that time. I would have to walk about one and a half hours away from home if I were to attend that formal school. Given my age, my parents refused to let me go to school because they felt I could not make it, walking to and from school, as it was quite a long distance.

However, I have a story one day that changed the situation. Two boys in my village who were much older than I had joined the primary school. They were introduced to the English language, and other basics. One day, I was playing with them in the field, and they started to utter some English words by way of communicating between them. I was offended and took it as an insult since I was not part of the interaction. I wanted to learn English and be a part of their conversations.

That day, I insisted and strongly requested my father to take me to school to register, but he refused. The next day, I snuck out from home and followed those two village boys and went to the school and asked the teacher to register me. The teacher refused and asked me to bring a family member, an adult, to sign for me. It was the policy of the school for an adult to sign for a minor to register formally.

Q: How old were you, Tassew, at that time?

ZEWDIE: I think I was eight. But fortunately, because my father was concerned, and he knew I was serious about my education, he followed me to the school, without my knowledge, and he was there.

The fact that I was determined convinced my father to sign for me and I got registered and officially enrolled. That's how I started my formal education in a school called Dejazmach Mengesha Yilma primary school, forty-five km, west of Addis Ababa. Because I was in a priest school at home, I was able to read and write. I was also able to do some basic numeracy.

My first-grade teacher was convinced that I could attend grade two instead. So, after attending grade one for only one week, I was promoted to grade two. So, that was a motivation for me because those two boys who were enrolled in the previous year were in grade two. I joined their class and started to study hard to catch up with what I had lost in the previous year. I did make it and pursued my education to grade eight in that school.

In between, I was given a double promotion from grade six to grade eight without attending grade seven based on my results in the six-grade national examination. I was not the only one who was given that promotion. There was one girl as well, a very intelligent girl who was given that promotion.

In grade eight, I had to do two things. One, I went through the lessons in the textbooks for grade seven on my own in preparation for the grade eight national examination which would include all the way through from grade one to grade eight. I knew the grade seven contents would be difficult unless I had good preparation. I studied grade seven on my own and with the assistance from my teachers and completed the upper primary and enrolled in a secondary school far from home. The primary school I attended was a one and half hours walking distance- two hours to and from school. The secondary school is even farther than the primary school, about 130 kilometers away from home. I stayed with a relative and continued my secondary education for a year (grade nine) and opted to stay with a friend in a rented facility the next year. Even though they are not educated, my parents were supportive, paid the rent and provided the necessary support.

As the last born in the family, I was the only child with my parents. All my three sisters and my brother were married when I was in school. My parents were getting old, and they needed support.

Q: How about your brothers and sisters? Were they able to go to school?

ZEWDIE: No, I am the last born and I'm the only one who went to school. My elder sister was educated by a priest at home with me, but before she joined the formal school she got married, so she stopped her education. Therefore, I am the only child in the family who got the opportunity for education.

And then I thought about it, even though my secondary school friends insisted I shouldn't do it. I decided to join the primary teacher training institute to become a primary school teacher so that I could get a job and get paid and support my parents before it is too late. So, that's what I did.

I knew that many of my friends were disappointed because they expected me to complete the secondary education through grade 12 and pursue my higher education straight away. But I didn't do that because of my parents. I joined a teacher training institute, and I got my teaching diploma for primary school and was employed by the Minister of Education as a primary school teacher.

Q: Is this equivalent to a secondary education?

ZEWDIE: Yes. Secondary education plus professional studies in teaching primary school children. I left secondary school after I completed grade ten. The teacher training program included subject matter equivalent to grades eleven and twelve plus professional studies and pedagogy courses to become a teacher. A trainee who completed the teacher training program used to qualify for a diploma and certified as a primary school teacher. After the training, I taught in primary classes for four years.

Q: So, your classroom, was it multi-grade? You had children of all different ages that you were teaching?

ZEWDIE: It is both, I had different age groups in one class, and I also teach at different grade levels. I was not assigned as a self-contained teacher to teach all subjects in one class. I taught the same or different subjects at different grade levels.

Q. Where was the school located? Was it a rural or urban area? What were the characteristics of your students?

ZEWDIE: It was a rural school in a rural setting, very far from Addis Ababa, about 440 km to the zonal town and takes about eight hours to drive. I had to ride on the back of a mule for one day from a zonal town to where the school was. On the way to the school, I had to cross very large rivers but without any bridges whatsoever. We were scheduling our movement during the dry season, when the waters reduce as we could not cross the rivers during the rainy season as the waters increase. It was an experience.

After I taught for two years and supported my parents for some time, I began to plan for my future. I wanted to leave primary teaching and pursue my undergraduate studies. To realize this plan, I sat for the Ethiopian School Leaving Certificate Examination (ESLCE) privately, which was a requirement to enroll in tertiary education.

Before I registered for my undergraduate studies, however, the country experienced political turmoil. That's where Emperor Haile Selassie was brought down by the military regime, the Derg. When I was about to enroll in one of the universities , the government declared a national service for all students including students in grades eleven and twelve and all students in tertiary education, to participate in a national service - go out to rural areas and preach the doctrine of socialism to the villagers and farmers.

Therefore, all students were forced to go for national service. As a result, all colleges and universities were closed at the time, and I could not register for any undergraduate program. Instead, I stayed in the teaching profession and waited until the national service was over. In total, I served for four years as a primary teacher. When the universities reopened, I got registered.

I did my undergraduate program at the Academy of Pedagogy, in Bahir Dar, Amhara region. It was sponsored by UNESCO and exclusively established to produce professional educators. It was an independent institution. However, it was later on renamed as Bahir Dar College and became one of the colleges under the auspices of Addis Ababa University. I graduated after it had become Bahir Dar College under Addis Ababa University. Bahir Dar College is now a full-fledged independent public university.

I finished my undergraduate program with the highest academic record in the group and was fortunate to be employed as a graduate assistant. This was a great opportunity for me to get government scholarships for post-graduate studies and grow in my profession and career.

While I was at the college as graduate assistant and letter on as lecturer, I continued to learn from my professors, colleagues and from reading. I was also appointed as a registrar

at one point and served for some time until I was transferred to the Addis Ababa University main campus in Addis Ababa. While teaching at Bahir Dar College, I started to conduct some action research individually as well as in teams with colleagues. I also prepared teaching materials for courses I taught.

Q: I'm not sure if I heard correctly. You did some action research?

ZEWDIE: Well, when I was referring to action research, I am talking about research that focuses on solving a problem or informing individual or community-based knowledge in a way that impacts teaching and learning. I did those with my own students, very simple research to answer simple research questions to start with.

With Bahir Dar College, I stayed for about four years. Then I was transferred to Addis Ababa University main campus in Addis Ababa, up on my request. Addis Ababa University was then the largest university in the country. Since my wife and my son were in Addis Ababa, it was really a good opportunity to be with my family and continue my work at Addis Ababa University. And at Addis Ababa University, I was holding two positions. On the one hand, I was a teacher and on the other I was part of a research institute at the University, Institute of Education Research (IER). IER is one of the research institutes of Addis Ababa University dealing with research in education, both externally funded or funded by the university itself. So, that gave me an opportunity to get connected to some organizations that would need services in conducting research and evaluation.

Five years after my graduation with an undergraduate degree, I was still looking for opportunities to do graduate studies. Graduate degree programs were very limited locally then and there were none in education. Fortunately, I did get an opportunity to go to India sponsored by Ethio-India Cultural Exchange Cooperation to pursue my graduate program. I did my graduate study in teacher education and instructional systems in India.

Q: May I ask why India was selected as your place to receive your graduate education?

ZEWDIE: That's a good question. At that time, Ethiopia was a socialist country run by a socialist regime. It was easier to go to Russia, East Germany, or Czechoslovakia for further studies, but it was not easy to go to countries that were not socialist oriented at that time. As I mentioned, to get to Western countries to pursue postgraduate studies in the English language was very difficult at that time. India was one of the few countries we were allowed to go to where courses are offered in English.

I got scholarships to go to East Germany and/or Russia, but I didn't really agree to go to those countries because I did not want to study in a new language. I was not sure if I would be successful in getting whatever I wanted to get out of my postgraduate program and return to teach my students in English. So, I was encouraged to go to India because of the language of instruction in Indian universities, and it was the right decision. I was assigned to a very good university, Panjab University in Chandigarh, where most of the

professors were Indians who studied in the U.S. or in the UK and were well qualified professors. I enjoyed being with them and sharing their experiences.

Well, when I went there, I was scheduled to do my postgraduate for two years, but when I arrived, I was given two options, looking at my undergraduate academic records, either to continue a stream that will take me two years to complete my postgrad, or a stream that can take me only one year to complete. Since I qualified for a one-year postgraduate program, I was happy because I left my family back home and I wanted to return quickly, so I completed my postgraduate in one year.

At the end, I was also given another opportunity, an opportunity to pursue my PhD research directly. Normally, Indian Universities require what they call a research degree after your postgraduate degree, MPhil, Master of Philosophy, before you register for a PhD research program. I was exempted from that, and I was allowed to continue my PhD research right away, and I accepted the offer.

I started to work on my research proposal before I returned home, and in three months I got all my research topics and synopsis approved. Deliberately, I planned my research to be conducted at home, back in Ethiopia. So, I returned with an assignment and thanks to my colleagues at Addis Ababa University, who gave me more time for my research while teaching, I completed the field research and returned to India to complete my research and attend some seminars. PhD research in India, it could be true also in the UK, does not require research scholars to take courses, but one must do some seminars and present some pieces of research findings to research scholars here and there, but basically it is a research degree.

Q: What was the topic of your research?

ZEWDIE: It was on Teachers' Classroom Teaching Behaviors using Flanders System of Classroom Interaction Analysis as a tool. Flanders' interaction analysis system is an observational tool used to classify the verbal behaviors of teachers and pupils as they interact in the classroom. Flanders considers teaching as an interactive process. Interactive means participation of teachers and students in the process of teaching and learning. In the Flanders' ten category system, all events that occur in the classroom are classified into three major categories: Teacher-Talk, Student -Talk, and Silence and Confusion.

I completed my PhD work and returned to Addis Ababa University in 1992 and continued working as an assistant professor at the Faculty of Education as well as a researcher at the Institute of Educational Research.

In early 1993, I was contacted by some researchers from the U.S. They were from the former Academy of Educational Development (AED). USAID outsourced the research activity to AED. The title was *Demand for Education in Rural Ethiopia*. The lead researcher contacted me to participate in that demand study. She got my contact address from a publication of a school effectiveness study I was involved in. The school

effectiveness study was an interesting qualitative study sponsored by the World Bank. The aim was to identify factors that contribute to school improvement titled –"How Schools Improve".

The study was mainly focused on effective schools. The sample schools were pre-identified through desk reviews. Our role was to visit those effective schools and look for factors that contributed to their effectiveness. These factors could include strong school leadership, strong parent and teacher association, strong community support, or other factors. The findings of that study were published in a book. The lead researcher and others from AED happened to see that research document, and they got my name on that document, and contacted me to be part of the USAID sponsored study - Demand for Education in Rural Ethiopia. I was not sure if the coordinator was from USAID-Washington or an independent consultant at that time, but she has become my long-time mentor, a close colleague, and an advisor to me in my personal and professional growth. We worked together for a long time until recently.

Q: Who was this person?

ZEWDIE: Do you know Karen Tietjen? She is a very strong educational research and M&E specialist. Fortunately, I happened to start my career with her. In truth, she's the one who attracted me to international development before I joined USAID/Ethiopia and met Ron Bonner. And based on that research that we did together with her and findings from other sector analyses, USAID developed the Basic Education System Overhaul (BESO) program. After the project was approved, USAID sought applications for a senior management development specialist position - FSN (Foreign Service National). I didn't see the announcement. A colleague of mine saw the announcement and encouraged me to apply. I was not interested at the beginning since I love my teaching profession the way it was. He insisted and I applied.

Through the screening process I was able to get that position and joined USAID in April 1995. Fortunately, I was mentored, advised, guided, and trained by an able supervisor Ron (Cameron) Bonner. He is the first supervisor I met at USAID, and I was fortunate. He shaped my professional career as an international development specialist, and he guided me how to deal with education issues, interact with people, and negotiate with government officials and work with different teams with different experiences, background, and expertise.

The first project that I managed as an FSN was the USAID 'Basic Education Systems Overhaul" (BESO) Project. BESO was designed immediately after the fall of the military regime, "the Derg regime'. During the military regime, the education system in Ethiopia did collapse, so it needed overhaul. That's why it was called a systems overhaul project. I remember that time the USAID's motto was *"Back to the Future"* because Ethiopia's education system was much, much better before the military regime than it was at the end of the military regime.

Q: It would be useful for the reader and for me to know what were the factors that affected that collapse.

ZEWDIE: Well, the factors were many. The education system was changed to a socialist education system during the military regime. The socialist system education was in the making and was not fully implemented. Many of the qualified teachers left the teaching profession because of the political turmoil and unqualified teachers with no professional training replaced them. Education was also not adequately funded because the military regime was engaged in an ongoing conflict and war with factions, therefore there were less resources allocated for education. The quality of education was poor, as was the quality of the teaching force. Gender inequality was significant. And variation between rural and urban was huge.

I remember, when we did the demand study, most of the schools were found only along the main roads. A factor was resource constraints, villages outside and far from the main roads were without any primary school. This was coupled with a poorly prepared teaching force and education managers. The government was engaged in continuous war and did not focus on development, across all sectors. So, that affected the education system; it indeed needed a major overhaul at that time.

***

Q: Today is Monday, December 12, 2022, 10:00 a.m., and I am entering into our second interview with Tassew Zewdie. Please continue with your fascinating story.

ZEWDIE: Okay. Thank you, Marcia.

Well, today I am going to cover my engagement with USAID. I joined USAID in April 1995 and before that, as I told you, I was with Addis Ababa University, particularly working at two divisions, at the Institute of Educational Research, as a researcher and at the Faculty of Education as an assistant professor.

Throughout my career, I was a teacher until I joined USAID Ethiopia. So, the move from the academic world to USAID as a development specialist was quite a change. As an academician you focus on knowledge acquisition, conceptual analysis and then package that to transfer it to your students or do research that informs actions or policy decisions. Being a development specialist is different and requires a new set of skills in addition to what you have as an academician.

My network in the development world was narrow but expanded after I joined USAID because my position allowed me to interact directly with USAID partners as Cognizant Technical Officer (CTO) or Agreement Officer's Representative (AOR) and with the Ministry of Education to engage and facilitate negotiations and establishing positive work relationships.

When working with implementing partners, I interacted with the technical and policy advisors deployed by the implementing partners, and the interaction and the learnings went beyond national experiences and knowledge as most of the advisors were expatriates, most of them Americans, with extensive experiences working in many developing countries. So, that opened my horizon of experience and continuous learning. I learned a lot from them. And in fact, they became my close professional colleagues after those interactions.

The major technical assistance contract to implement BESO was awarded to the former Academy for International Development (AED) and the implementation of the community action grant component was awarded to World Learning in the Southern region and to Tigray Development Association (TDA) in Tigray. BESO I had two major components driven by a heavy external advisor- model. There were twelve senior technical and policy advisors deployed in the federal Ministry of Education, regional education bureaus and at teacher training institutes.

The first component was budgetary support in response to the government's actions to undertake agreed policy reforms. For that, USAID had planned to provide budgetary support to go directly to the treasury. What it meant was that USAID and the government jointly establish conditions and conditionalities for the government to fulfill. In return, USAID agreed to transfer a certain amount of funds to the government. USAID had identified critical reform areas to rebuild the education system and they were reflected in the project document. Our role was to engage the government to make sure they understood the conditions and conditionalities to be implemented during each implementation year and knew their roles and obligations and monitor progress of implementation.

At the beginning of every year, we entered into an agreement around a list of identified priority policy issues and in return, USAID would sign and promise to provide and transfer a certain amount to the central treasury on verification of government's performance in fulfilling the intent and letter of the conditions and conditionalities annually. Three Federal Ministries were responsible for moving the reform agenda forward- Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Education and Ministry of Planning and Economic Development. I used to manage the implementation of the agreement and the progress was reviewed every quarter by a coordinating committee called BESO Central Coordinating Committee (BCCC), It was a coordination committee, chaired by the Deputy Minister of Education, and co-chaired by USAID's Director of Human and Institutional Development Office. The current USAID's Education and Youth Office was called the Human and Institutional Development Office at that time.

At the end of the year, the government submits a progress report showing the agreed conditions and conditionalities are met to the letter. Government's submissions were carefully reviewed and verified before USAID released funds. The government used to get the money, and the benefits of the reform. and USAID achieved the project goal in the process of reforming the education system.

If I may mention some of the reform agenda in the education system; the first was budget allocation for education. The budget for education, as compared to the GDP, was very small. Before BESO, it was about 2.5%. I don't really remember the exact figure, but what the education system used to get was very small as a share of the GDP. BESO, using its budgetary support mechanism, was monitoring the increase in the share of budget allocation for education based on an annual target agreed upon between USAID and the government.

We were also monitoring the proportion of the education budget going to primary education. Within the primary education budget allocation, we were also looking at the proportion going to capital and recurrent budget, and then to non-salary budget allocation from the total recurrent budget. A large portion of the primary education recurrent budget was used for salaries leaving very small for non-salary expenses.

Q: Two questions; What were the targets in terms of percentage of the government budget? In terms of distribution of budget, were there targets for distribution for, say, construction versus teacher training versus other uses?

ZEWDIE: We were targeting a small margin of increase in budget allocation to make it feasible for the government to meet the conditions, say between annual increases of a half to one percent increase in the share of the GDP for overall education budget. We were targeting to raise the share of GDP going to education to about 4% by the end of the project. We were also monitoring allocations of the budget within the education sector. For example, we encouraged the increase in the proportion of the education budget allocated to primary education. The primary education budget was in the upper forties' percentage of the total education budget when BESO started. We were working to raise it to at least 60%.

The other aspect we were trying to affect was the proportion of budget allocation for capital and recurrent expenditures. At the time, education development meant mainly construction of beautiful schools and a large portion of the allocated budget was used for infrastructural development leaving very little for recurrent budget. Moreover, the small recurrent budget was also used almost exclusively for salaries leaving very little for non-salary expenses, for example for textbooks, stationeries, school supplies, etc. that are very essential to run a school and support teaching and learning. The very small non-salary budget was usually used for printing textbooks, and nothing was left for other non-salary expenses.

Another area of our focus was the teacher training institutes, how they were managed and operated. There were two areas of interest to us. One was to work with the government to increase their autonomy, to make sure that they select the training curriculum and trainees on their own with reduced control and pressure from the education bureaus. The second area was to advocate for adequate budget allocation to operate as training institutes. The teacher training institutes used to get their trainees identified by the regional education bureaus, or previously by the ministry of education. The idea was to give autonomy to teacher training institutes to identify their trainees, develop their curriculum, train the

trainees, and certify them. As you can see, the two issues were interrelated- we were trying to encourage the government for more and adequate budget allocation and increased operational autonomy to the teacher training institutes.

I would like to talk about capacity building. BESO budgeted to send fourteen Ethiopian educators abroad for their post-graduate studies. We sent two educators to the USA, and they returned after they completed their studies. However, some medical doctors who were sponsored by another project in the health sector stayed there. This brought an issue that if additional individuals were sponsored by BESO, they might stay there which would be a loss.

So, instead of sending individuals abroad, we decided to establish a post-graduate program involving Addis Ababa University and the State University of Buffalo. It was a joint program organized as a combination of distance and in-person delivery mechanisms. This delivery model allowed those education officials who could not attend the course full time because of their busy schedules. The program was less expensive compared to the cost of sending individuals abroad. Using the budget, which was meant to sponsor 12 individuals abroad, BESO was able to support about 96 individuals to complete their post-graduate studies. It was a real success.

The other area of our involvement was increasing parental and community engagement in conversations about their children's education through "Community Action Grant Program". The government announced a free primary education policy. Prior to the policy, parents/guardians used to pay school fees which could cover expenses for basic school supplies. The policy was enacted without any other means to cover the basic expenses schools had to incur. Parents/guardians discontinued paying school fees because it was declared as a free education. So, the schools were under-resourced, if not completely without any resources, much more than they were getting before the free primary education policy was enacted. Apart from the policy issues, there was a lot of distrust at the community level for the whole education system. That affected communities' engagement in school affairs.

We wanted to see more and increased community engagement in the affairs of their children's education. So, BESO came up with an innovative program called the Community Action Grant to encourage communities to develop an action plan to improve the quality of education for their children. Orientation was provided to explain what quality of education meant to BESO and what it takes to improve quality education. Communities formed committees, most of them utilized the already existing structures called Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) to prioritize activities and developed action plans. The grant was organized in three phases.

The first grant, which was USD 500, was given to all school communities who developed action plans acceptable to BESO to implement the action plan and encourage them to engage in school improvement efforts. The second and the third phases (USD 1000 and USD1,500 each) were increasingly competitive. About 50-60% of target schools who participated in the first phase would get the second phase of the competitive grant based

on their performance and about 25% would receive the third phase award. In the first phase, it was amazing to see that contributions from the communities were four times higher than BESO's USD500 grant. The initiative demonstrated that there were huge resources within communities to support primary schools.

Q: The contribution was in the form of money, labor, goods?

ZEWDIE: Community contribution was a combination of local materials and labor. I recall that a contribution in the form of cash was there, but it was very limited, it was small.

Q: Very interesting.

ZEWDIE: So, the last tranche, the third phase of the competitive grant was about USD1,500, and only about 25 percent of the schools from the second phase would go up to that level. Because the criteria to get to the third phase was a bit tough, a small number of schools qualified for the third tranche. Organizing the grant structure and investment structure strategies that way was really very helpful because it created a competitive environment among schools and communities, and in the process, they saw that quality related inputs are more important than physical improvements for student learning.

We learned that the fact that many schools could not reach the third level did not mean they were discouraged. We saw some of the schools who did not get the second and the third tranches, did continue their improvement efforts. The communities valued the initiative and continued their support, even though they couldn't make it through the second and/or third tranches.

At the end of BESO I, the government recognized the value of community outreach activities, and community support to schools, and decided to promote community mobilization for school support nationwide. To date, community outreach activities to engage communities in school affairs are used across all regions both by the government and non-governmental organizations.

Q: Where did this idea originate from?

ZEWDIE: Well, I think it must have been from the project design team led by Mr. Bonner. I am not certain because I was not part of the design team. I was hired to manage implementation of BESO, I was not part of the design team. The project was designed before I joined USAID, so I suspect that Mr. Bonner and his colleagues and the consultants he engaged could have come up with this beautiful idea.

Q: Do you know whether this concept has been picked up in other countries?

ZEWDIE: In truth, I haven't had a similar experience in other countries. I haven't observed that experience in other countries the way it was designed and implemented in Ethiopia. I tried to transfer that idea to South Sudan because I was coordinating the

community outreach activities of the Sudan Basic Education Program (SBEP) - a USAID-funded project. I advised the community outreach coordinator to structure it that way. But unfortunately, because the community at that time did not have any resources, they were still in a fighting mode, a similar design wasn't found feasible. The time was when the peace negotiation was in progress in Nairobi. So, most of the resources had to come from the project instead of from the community. However, raising communities awareness about the importance of their children's education was possible.

I would also like to talk about another area of BESO's interest. Building a system for pre-service and in-service teacher training and support programs. We were supporting both pre-service teacher training and in-service teacher training programs.

Our pilot regions were selected for several reasons. Tigray was selected to pilot BESO in a region that uses only one language of instruction, and not known as multiethnic and multi-language compared to the situation in the Southern Region. They use only one language, Tigrinya. USAID wanted to test how different it would be to implement a project in a region with only one language of instruction compared to a situation where many languages were used as media of instruction. Another factor was the capacity of the local administration to help implement the project faster. Tigray was a relatively stronger region at the time and there was a political will to facilitate implementation. So, quick implementation and showing results were promising.

The other BESO pilot region was Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples Region (SNNPR) where over forty-five languages were spoken and about ten of the languages (I do not recall the exact figure) were used as media of instruction at that time. The region represents a hard to work environment with limited transportation and relatively weak administration.

BESO's support to preservice training was piloted in three institutes, two in the southern region and one in the Tigray region. Apart from getting more and more autonomy in their administration and operations and more funds to operate, BESO was strengthening the teacher training institutes' institutional and human capacity. BESO deployed an expatriate advisor at each of the three teacher training institutes to enable them to improve the pedagogical skills of instructors, improve the curriculum, select able trainees, etc.

BESO also provided support to improve the delivery of in-service teacher training and support. The project goal was to bring in-service teacher training delivery close to schools. We thought the cluster system would help. The cluster school model was helpful to provide in-service teacher training support in a meaningful and structured way.

To introduce a school cluster model, BESO sponsored government officials' visits to some African countries where the cluster model was being pretested. Two delegates from the ministry of education and the regional education bureaus were sponsored and visited Namibia and Uganda. Namibia and Uganda were piloting the cluster system that time. So, we send our colleagues from the ministry of education and regional education

bureaus to Uganda and Namibia to learn how the cluster system works and learn about its advantages. They came back very excited. The groups were requested to share their observations and learnings with the then Minister of Education. By then the minister was Genet Zewdie and she was convinced that the cluster system might be helpful.

Following the adoption of the school cluster model by the ministry of education, the two BESO pilot regions clustered primary schools, keeping five or six schools in one cluster based on their proximity. One of the schools was identified as a cluster center school. The distance between the cluster center school and the satellite schools (schools in the cluster other than the cluster center school) was limited to a maximum of two hours walking distance. Even that was challenging. The number of schools in a cluster used to vary depending on the distribution and locations of the schools and the distance between them.

BESO used to encourage monthly cluster meetings for exchange of experiences and in-house training among cluster schools. This was meant to allow subject teachers to come to the cluster center and share experiences and learn from each other. That was a good experience at many cluster centers despite some challenges. In some cases, the monthly meeting was difficult because teachers wouldn't want to walk one hour or two to the cluster center to attend the experience sharing meetings.

BESO also proposed that one person should be designated to support the cluster so that at the experience sharing meeting, a senior person would facilitate and make the experience sharing productive and worthwhile. Assigning a dedicated position as a cluster coordinator, or cluster supervisor for each cluster center embedded in the cluster center school was later adopted by the government. Deploying cluster supervisors at the cluster center meant that a manageable number of schools had one supervisor nearby to provide technical and professional support. This idea was materialized during the second BESO and is operational to date. The cluster model is one of the BESO initiatives that has been sustained to date.

What pleased me, when I returned to Ethiopia, after eighteen years, was that many elements of BESO initiatives in the education system were sustained and are part of the current system. I found that the ministry of education is more open now compared to those days.

One of the many things that challenged BESO at that time was that the system was rigid and was not open for change. For example, when policy advisors talk about policy implementation options, they were told that the education policy had already been approved and there was no need for policy discussion. Talking about policy implementation options was a difficult agenda. It was misunderstood as if the project was attempting to change the government's policy. So, managing the relationship and bringing discussions on policy issues to a common understanding was difficult. It was through hard work and maintaining positive relationships with senior experts at the Ministry that BESO was able to achieve some of its objectives.

Q: My understanding was that BESO was designed with a minister of education, a woman, who was very talented and capable, and it was a very collaborative process. Did this minister remain throughout this period, or was there a change in leadership?

ZEWDIE: Yes, she was the minister of education for the entire life of BESO I. She left the position during the early stage of BESO II, when she was appointed as an ambassador to India. She retired from government offices after India.

Q: How important was her leadership in this process?

ZEWDIE: I would say that the minister was supportive of USAID's assistance through BESO. She was comfortable with the way BESO operated. There was a resistance to change everything which was politically motivated. Most of the senior officials tended to stick to what the government and their party told them to do. In the case of our project, I think there was a sense of trust between Ron Bonner and the Minister. This is probably because of Ron's unique personality and his approach to building positive relationships. Even though she was sometimes reluctant to agree straight away, she generally provided positive guidance to facilitate implementation of our plans.

Q: So, let's talk about the broader context. Who were the other donors at that point, bilateral and other donors, and what were they doing?

ZEWDIE: Well, during that time, UNICEF, World bank, Irish Aid, British Council, Sweden, and other donors were very active in education; were more active than they are today. USAID was more influential at that time, particularly with Ron's engagement in donors' coordination meetings. Donors established what they called Education Discussion Group for Ethiopia, known as, in short, as the "EDGE" Group. The EDGE was a forum where donors and government representatives exchange technical and policy related issues, practices, and experiences. Monthly EDGE meetings were held to discuss issues on thematic areas such as curriculum, teacher education (in-service or pre-service), community engagements, etc. The monthly meetings were held at the Ministry of Education to encourage the Ministry to participate and to inform them of the agenda the donors were promoting. Educators from donors, and/or implementing partners used to volunteer to make formal presentations and facilitate discussions on a range of thematic areas/issues. Donors used to provide refreshments at the monthly meeting on rotation. Key stakeholders including INGO representatives and division directors, assistant directors, and senior officers from the Ministry of Education used to be invited.

The forum was very helpful to influence the Ministry of Education officials to advocate for policy and strategic reforms, but more importantly to coordinate and harmonize what different donors were doing.

Q: Were the other donors involved in very different areas or were they involved in similar areas? For example, you were focusing on primary education in certain regions; were other donors also focusing on primary education in those regions?

ZEWDIE: Yes they did. Many of them were involved in primary education, others in secondary and higher education. UNICEF, the World Bank, Swedish Cida, IRISH AID, and others were active in the education sector. The World Bank was supporting infrastructure building while the Government of Germany was more in technical and vocational training. Irish Aid was active in supporting the integrated capacity building program at woreda (district) level. There were some overlaps, duplication, and complementarity. For example, when USAID BESO introduced the cluster model in Tigray and SNNPR, UNICEF was introducing a similar cluster model in the Harari region.

Q: Did you encounter any situations where USAID and other donors had different perspectives?

ZEWDIE: Well, we were always entertaining different perspectives. I can't give a specific example now, but there was a sense of competition in the work environment. There were differences in strategic approaches, which were untold. Every donor had its own priorities, organizational culture to follow, and strategic approaches. Implementing partners also had their own organizational culture, creating a competitive work environment. Donors' priorities differed and what they would want to get out of their projects also differ. So, different perspectives were there.

That is why forums such as the EDGE group meetings were needed, to harmonize some of the different approaches. The EDGE meetings helped to create common understandings to some extent. Bringing the different donors' perspectives and consolidating and harmonizing strategic approaches was somewhat possible because of the understandings established during EDGE meetings. At the EDGE meetings, we shared information, we talked about problems encountered, and the opportunities available to use, etc. In some cases, there was collaboration in implementation. As a donor group, we knew who was doing what and where and how.

Q: Were any of the donors working under conditionality?

ZEWDIE: The World Bank normally did. When they give money to any country, they have their own milestones that they set, and expect the government to deliver those to get continued funding from them. But USAID's conditionality was different. We are totally dependent on the reforms that the government needs to make on soft programs, like making policy reforms, taking actions, increasing funding for education, etc.

Q: Were you involved in the design of BESO Two?

ZEWDIE: Yes, I was involved. Much of the information and data that informed the BESO II's project document came from BESO I. I was instrumental in sharing and writing the relevant information that project development teams referred to when they prepared the project document. Lessons learned from BESO I informed the design and implementation of BESO II.

Q: One of the things I'm curious about is, to what extent were the lessons learned from BESO I followed into the design and implementation of BESO II?

ZEWDIE: When BESO II was designed, we looked at which aspects of BESO I were successful, productive, well implemented, and accepted by the government for consideration to scale up. BESO I focused on thematic areas that had a greater potential to expand; those areas proved viable for integration and streamlining within the education system by the government. The BESO I designs and implementation on teacher training- the pre-service and in-service teacher training program were outstanding. Therefore, USAID thought that it was wise to continue supporting teacher training, scale up the effort to other regions and be part of the BESO II support. The other area that was recognized by stakeholders as a success was the community outreach program- the community support to schools, the school grant program was also suggested to be part of BESO II as well to promote school improvement and effectiveness.

We also thought support to curriculum development and implementation, including textbook production and distribution was the right thing to do in Ethiopia as part of BESO II. So, the curriculum work was also included. The work around policy analysis and reforms, as well as improving the Education Management Information System (EMIS) was given less attention by BESO II. USAID decided to minimize its support to the improvement of EMIS and policy analysis and encouraged the government, the Ministry of Education, to take on more responsibilities and roles in those areas. During BESO II, the Ministry of Education and Regional Education Bureaus did take increased responsibility, with less technical assistance from external sources. All long-term planning and policy analysis technical advisors deployed in the Federal Ministry of Education and the target Regional Education Bureaus were dropped from READ II.

The budgetary support I mentioned earlier was cut off because of the war between Eritrea and Ethiopia. It was put on restriction towards the end of BESO I and was not included in BESO II . Direct transfer of funding to the government was not encouraged at the time. This happened after Ron Bonner left and I was working with Kevin Mullaly who was the office director replacing Ron. To answer your question, yes, I was involved, and lessons learned from BESO I informed the design and development of BESO II.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

Q: Today is Tuesday, December 27, 2022, and we are continuing with the oral history of Tassew Zewdie. We're now focusing on Tassew's career post-AID. Thank you for joining us.

ZEWDIE: Thank you, Marcia. Well, in August 2002, I left USAID and moved to Nairobi to manage a USAID-funded Sudan Basic Education Program (SBEP) which was meant to support children in South Sudan, just before the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed between the Sudan Government in the north and the South Sudan political leaders and fighters in the south. By then, South Sudan was not an autonomous country. There was a process of negotiation that led to the signing of the CPA between the Sudan

and South Sudan. When I started as deputy chief of party and Institutional Capacity Building Advisor of SBEP. Southern Sudan did not have a functional Ministry of Education, or operational education structure. Many children were without access to education. Therefore, the purpose of the project was to provide access to hundreds of thousands of children in Southern Sudan through non-formal education and rebuild the dysfunctional system.

Unfortunately, most of the teachers, who used to teach in the primary school in Southern Sudan left their teaching profession and joined the fighting force. Therefore, we had to identify those former teachers who were in the army, but for some reason had retired from active fighting. We trained and prepared them to serve as teachers in the post-conflict environment. When we started SBEP, the fighting was on a temporary pause and the project was trying to initiate an effort to rebuild the education system that could provide access to the many children who were denied their right for education during the war.

In the absence of the Ministry of Education in the south, the Sudan People Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) had established an Education Secretariat headed by a commissioner to coordinate efforts to rebuild the education system for South Sudan. SBEP was working closely with the Education Secretariat under the guidance of the commissioner and the undersecretary. The commission was operating out of Nairobi, Kenya. The Commissioner and his volunteer staff are all based in Nairobi. So, they used to coordinate the education activities from Nairobi—in exile.

The commissioner was assisted by the undersecretary to help him on the day-to-day coordination of the efforts of INGOs and CBOs. Both the commissioner, the undersecretary and the volunteers were not paid as there was no public funding. Therefore, implementation of the project was challenging. To engage the volunteer education officials and teachers, the project had to support them to survive by covering the cost of their meals, transportation, accommodation, which used to serve as a means of minimal support for their families. The entire education operation at that time was supported by non-governmental organizations and communities. SBEP, for example, was working with twenty-eight community based organizations to mobilize communities to send their children to learning centers– be it an old school structure, a temporary school put up by communities, or schools built and operated by INGOs/CBOs.

We also used these twenty-eight CBOs to construct schools using locally available materials and materials procured and imported by the project from Kenya. The size of the schools constructed by CBOs were very small - one classroom or two. All the necessary inputs to start teaching and learning were provided by the project. SBEP was a unique project. It was designed as a development project, but its initial implementation approach was like education in an emergency until it gradually emerged as a development program.

While trying to respond to the immediate needs, the project was also engaged in long-term system building. SBEP supported the development of the primary education curriculum, renovation of schools and educational institutions, and institutional

strengthening of former teacher training institutes, and building South Sudanese with education background in strategic planning, and system management. The project also built the capacity of teacher training trainers and trained teachers for primary schools. More importantly, the organizational structure of an ideal Ministry of Education for South Sudan with all its divisions and sub-divisions was prepared in anticipation of the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) and the eventual birth of South Sudan as a new Nation. Capacity of volunteer education officers was built to fit senior and mid-level leadership positions in the ministry. The project also assisted the Commission of Education to develop a roadmap of education governance and framework for strategic planning and resource mobilization.

The impact of USAID's investment through SBEP was visible after the CPA was signed and the new Ministry of Education of South Sudan became officially operational. The organizational structure developed with the help of SBEP was adopted and those officials trained by the project were appointed to relevant offices in the new ministry. The roadmap developed for planning and resource mobilization was adopted as a foundation for further discussion and improvement.

When I recall my experience with SBEP, many things come to mind. The first one is about building a new education system with a new Ministry of Education. I found it interesting. Compared to working with an established Ministry of Education, it was relatively easier to inject new ideas and new structures for a new education system when you have nothing on the ground to change. Before the conflict, South Sudanese were using the Sudan education system from the north. Establishing a new and independent Ministry of Education was not supposed to make any reference to the Sudan education system. Instead, South Sudanese wanted their own system. The Education Secretariat was open to new ideas and experiences from neighboring countries and elsewhere. They used to value experts' advice. Therefore, resistance to new ideas was relatively less as the task was not to change or reform an existing system. There was no fear of change when you start a new system of education.

Second, there had been flexibility from USAID and other donors to allow implementing partners to align implementation strategies with the changing situations. SBEP was a cooperative agreement with some flexibility. But USAID was more open to adjust the architect of the project and its implementation plans depending on the progress in the peace negotiation and the new developments thereof. Flexibility contributed to the success of the project.

Third, involving the informal and formal structures of beneficiaries was very useful. The project worked very closely with the Education Secretariat, volunteer education officers and teachers in response to their immediate needs and long-term development gains. Despite the absence of strong formal structures, all beneficiaries at different levels were part of consultations, discussions, and joint decisions in the process of rebuilding the education system. They felt acknowledged, recognized, and included in the process and as a result there had been a strong acceptance of what has been put in place by the project towards rebuilding the system and establishing the new ministry of education.

Fourth, coordination of efforts of different actors was not that difficult. The fact that there weren't many strong international development partners at the time made coordination relatively simple. There was less competition and more collaboration unlike in a situation where many development partners create multi-actors and competitive work environments. It was only towards the end of SBEP that other implementing partners joined the rebuilding efforts. After the CPA was signed, AED (now FHI360), DFiD, the World Bank, EDC, etc., started to support South Sudan in a big way. UNICEF, Norwegian Church Aid (NPA), and many other international NGOs were part of the effort way before the CPA, some of them including during the war.

It was a very interesting experience for me - moving from working for USAID and with an established Ministry of Education in Ethiopia to working with a weak establishment and informal groups in a very different context was quite an experience. There were many learnings. My stay in South Sudan was rewarding.

Q: Fascinating. I have a couple of conceptual questions. There was a Ministry of Education in Sudan before, for the whole country, so there was an education system in place. Not in South Sudan when it broke off?.

ZEWDIE: Right.

Q: To what extent did the Sudanese people value education even before the war began, and how much importance was given it and what were the general statistics on education in general?

ZEWDIE: Apparently, there has been an education system in South Sudan because it was part of North Sudan. The concept of an education system is not new to them. But it had become dysfunctional in the south because of the war. There were some educated South Sudanese still in the country who were former education officials, many with postgraduate degrees and others with PhDs. During the war, some South Sudanese also left the country and got an opportunity to further their education abroad. Some of these South Sudanese had returned home. Also, many of them were still in Khartoum, and continued their education. Former teachers and education officials who did not join the army were still in their communities. They had the experiences on how an education system is managed, but the system was totally dysfunctional. So, the efforts were to rebuild the system using these existing human resources.

To answer your question, the South Sudanese used to value education and there was a high demand for education, but supplying the services was a real challenge as they lost all material resources during the war. I do not recall the figures, but I remember there were a significant number of primary age children and many youths who missed primary and secondary education requiring attention.

Q: I can speak to Kenya. In contrast to my experience in Latin America, in Kenya education was valued very, very much by people and they would go to extraordinary

lengths if they could get their children not just in primary but also secondary school. I wonder if that sort of tradition of a high value placed on education was in existence before the war began and, in Sudan.

ZEWDIE: Given the post-conflict context, it was difficult to expect a higher value placed for education by the general population as there were other unmet lifesaving needs as priorities. So, it is not fair to compare the Kenyan situations with those of South Sudan during the immediate post-war period. Before the war, schools in South Sudan used to follow the curriculum developed by Khartoum, and the medium of instruction was Arabic-reflecting Islamic orientation. Considering that most South Sudanese were Christians, they prefer secular education. Hence, the demand for education in general was low and the supply of the education services was also limited. During the postwar era, South Sudanese adopted what they call the Juba Arabic as a language and developed a new curriculum. They did not want to continue with the old curriculum.

As most of the South Sudanese refugees were in neighboring countries such as Kenya, Uganda, and Ethiopia, experiences from these countries informed the content and features of the new curriculum for South Sudan. They also sought technical assistance from these Eastern African countries when they developed the curriculum. The development and the piloting of the new curriculum happened before the CPA. The Education Secretariat worked hard to rebuild the education system and there was a strong desire for education among the South Sudanese, including those children and youth who missed education during their right age because of the war. The emphasis attached to rebuilding the education system by SPLA/M towards the end of the war and what was accomplished by the Education Secretariat represented the value placed on the importance of education.

Q: As you indicated, there were a variety of NGOs that were there working in education. The program that you were working on, did you have relationships with those organizations? Were you operating parallel, were you collaborating?

ZEWDIE: There had been a lot of collaboration, collaboration in many ways. Without collaboration in that post-conflict context, you could not do business in South Sudan. You must collaborate with other organizations to get transportation, accommodation, communication, and other logistics. Whenever you travel within South Sudan, you will be hosted by these organizations with all logistics support. You might have to pay some service charges, but they would make the services available to you. This was because there weren't public and/or private service providers at that time. In return, whenever project personnel from other organizations paid visits to our location to support their programs, SBEP would host them. The collaboration was built on mutual benefits and understanding. There was collaboration to facilitate development and implementation of programs too. Whenever an organization organizes a workshop or a training event, other organizations participate and share experiences. For example, those organizations working on teacher training came together to assist the Education Secretariat to develop the teacher training curriculum.

Q: It makes for a very fascinating case study when you have a series of conditions like you have described and how you were able to operate. Thank you.

So, shall we move onto your next assignment?

ZEWDIE: Yes. Well, I was working for CARE USA when I was managing the South Sudan Basic Education Program from August 2002 to March 2007. After I completed my assignment in South Sudan, I joined Creative Associates International in April 2007. As a Senior Associate at Creative and based in Nairobi, I continued to work for South Sudan. I was managing a small, but interesting USAID-funded project implemented by Creative that combined education and health. It was a community-based project aimed at serving communities in what were called transitional areas - areas between the North Sudan and the South Sudan, Abiye, South Kordofan and Blue Nile. The Health, Education and Reconstruction (HEAR) project provided access to quality basic education and through education it attempted to package delivered basic health messages and develop basic health skills. The project was operating in the absence of any education system and with communities in resource poor environments. Working directly with communities, the project used to combine both service delivery and capacity building. It built the capacity of community leaders, learning center managers and teachers to provide education and basic health to the most vulnerable children.

My role on this project was an oversight as a Project Director. I was not on the ground but had a very strong local and regional project staff. The project started with $3 million for three years and grew to a seven-year $8.5 million activity. Working in three separate transitional areas with very different political landscapes and contexts was challenging. Communication and transportation, and overall logistics were very difficult. There was no easy land transportation to these areas. Project personnel fly on UN flights from one area to the other to coordinate and support implementation. Therefore, even though the project had staff on the ground, it was very difficult to coordinate and implement activities. But somehow both the beneficiaries and USAID were happy with what the project had accomplished with the given work environment.

While I was managing the HEAR Project in South Sudan, I was also engaged in new business development. I was coordinating with the Business Development Division at Creative home office and used to assist in intelligence gathering from time to time. Towards the end of the HEAR Project, I was assigned to serve the Tanzania Twenty-first Century (TZ21) project that Creative was awarded as a project director. I worked on TZ 21 for about one year from 2011-2012. TZ21was a $48 Million five-year project emphasizing on integration of information technology in education. While the integration of technology was the main feature of TZ-21, it focused on early grade reading and mathematics in grades 1-4 of the primary cycle in Zanzibar and Mtwara regions of Tanzania. The startup was challenging as Zanzibar and Mtwara did not have the necessary ICT infrastructure to support implementation of such a project. It struggled and took over a year to establish the infrastructure before TZ 21 started to deliver contents utilizing tablets-laptops given to the primary children. A huge amount of learning took place. After a year or so, recognizing that it was not the right time for technology

integration, the project was pivoted to a conventional early grade reading and mathematics project.

It was an important learning form TZ21. Whenever a donor and a host country develop a program for funding, scanning of the work environment, contexts and feasibility assessment are important. At the outset, technology integration was an interesting aspect of the TZ21. However, it was learned that the ICT infrastructure was weak and lacking to implement the project as designed. Moreover, over fifteen organizations were involved and the coordination of all the organizations was a nightmare. We all agree that utilizing technology to educate children is a useful strategy and is the call of the era, but the context within which such projects are implemented matters.

Q: At this time, you were also managing the project in South Sudan.

ZEWDIE: Yes, the project in South Sudan was ending, but I was managing that as well. In March 2012, Creative won the Zambia early grade reading activity. I was the candidate for the chief of party position and was asked to move to Lusaka, Zambia following the ward. Therefore, I left the TZ21 and moved to Zambia to start the new project called "Read to Succeed". It was an early grade reading project, supporting primary teachers and students in six Zambian provinces. It was about building the capacity of school leaders, teachers, and community leaders to deliver quality early grade reading instruction.

Zambia had a long story in implementing early grade reading activity with DFiD. Read to Succeed (RtS) was considered as a continuation. I had very strong project personnel with strong connections with the Ministry of General Education. The startup was very fast and straightforward. RtS was successful in realizing its objectives and became popular in Zambia. There were many education projects implemented by many other implementing partners along RtS. USAID alone had sponsored three large education projects, STEP UP, implemented by Chemonics, Time to Learn, implemented by EDC and Read to Succeed, Implemented by Creative Associates. In addition, we had UNICEF, the World Bank and many international NGOs implementing projects in education. This presented a unique multi-actors' work environment in the education sector.

The most challenging factor in the international development world is a competitive work environment created by implementing partners. Sometimes they adopt similar strategies with different names or similar approaches but call them by different names. Instead of building the capacity of the host country, they usually get Ministries confused. For example, in Zambia, RTS introduced a package on school level reading performance improvement plan called Learner Performance Improvement Plan (LPIP). At the same time, and at the same schools UNICEF also introduced a school improvement plan called School Learner Improvement Plan (SLIP). LPIP of RTS and SLIP of UNICEF are similar despite the differences in their scope. While the RTS LPIP focused on improving early grade reading, the scope of the SLIP of UNICEF was broad and included protection, child protection, child health, quality education, etc. LPIP was the subset of SLIP. Should the development of the plan be coordinated to satisfy both parties, the two plans could

have been combined into one plan instead of having two improvement plans per school. It took a while to agree on one or the other. This is only one example, but there are many other examples showing how multi-actors' work environment affects sustainability and effectiveness of project implementation.

I would also like to talk about my experience in promoting a Public-Private Partnership program in Zambia. This component was supported by a small private firm - Dan O'brien and Associates. The project identified common interests appealing to both RtS and the private firms including insurance, banks, and mining companies. We came up with the idea that banks and insurance companies need literate communities who can write and read to sell their services. So, we approached them to help, to create literate communities in rural Zambia, if we get more reading materials for them to practice reading. The messages were appealing to banks and the insurance companies. Through their corporate social responsibility units, pledged funding to print reading materials. The mine companies also wanted to establish positive relationships with communities in the mining areas, because they interact with communities in many ways (including taking the communities' land, etc.). They were also pleased to establish a partnership with RtS. As a result, the project was able to leverage nearly $400k to produce reading materials. So, we learned from RtS's experience that PPP is about bringing two interested parties together for mutual benefits.

That is all that I wanted to talk about my experience in Zambia. I was in Zambia from 2012 to 2019. After Zambia, I took my current position in Ethiopia in March 2019. I returned to Ethiopia after seventeen years. I left Ethiopia in 2002 and I came back in 2019 and I found the Ethiopian education system different. When I left the country in 2002, the Ethiopian education system was expanding, but it was small with about twenty million students and about fifteen thousand schools and education institutions. The system has tremendously expanded, from a very small number of students, probably no more than 20 million students in the system, to more than 40 million students, almost double now. And the number of teachers in the teaching profession has grown at a similar rate. In 2002, there were eight public universities. There are now forty-seven public universities. While the system has expanded tremendously, the quality of education at all levels has gone down and has become the major public concern.

On the positive side, when I came back to Ethiopia, I found some good practices that BESO I had introduced have been sustained. In-service teacher training through a cluster of schools model has become part of the delivery system. BESO advocated for a dedicated cluster supervisor position then. Cluster supervisor's position was created, and each cluster center has a dedicated cluster supervisor. BESO was also advocating for school block grants to schools. It is pleasing to know that the government started to allocate funds for school block grants as part of its annual planning and budgeting process. Parental and community support to schools, which was introduced during BESO I has grown over the years. So, this is the context I started to work on this new project.

I took the new position to serve as the Chief of Party for a USAID-funded Early Grade Reading and Writing Activity called (Reading for Ethiopia's Achievement Developed

(READ II) Activity. It is an interesting, but challenging project. When I was still in Zambia, I served as an interim COP for the first month of the startup period while the arrival of the assigned long-term COP was awaited. Fortunately, I was also part of the proposal preparation team, and it was not difficult for me to understand the architect of READ II to lead the startup activities. The remaining period of the first year was managed by the assigned long-term COP. He was an experienced project manager with a sound background in education. He made significant progress in establishing project implementation and operations systems, built strong project teams and positive relationships with the client and host country counterparts before he retired at the beginning of project year two. I inherited a strong team with a strong start.

For the first three years, READ II was an early grade reading activity supporting school directors and teachers to promote and improve evidence-based reading classroom instruction. The project was successful in working through the government system and assisted in the establishment of a teacher mentoring program and a feasible local education monitoring approach (LEMA) coupled with building the capacity of school directors and woreda (district) education officers to become instructional leaders. Communities were mobilized to establish reading camps (community reading centers) and made child readers (supplementary reading materials) available to children at the reading centers and schools. As a reading project, it was a good program showing potential successes. The project supported seven mother tongue languages and English in seven regions.

In March 2020, COVID -19 started to constrain implementation. This was the time when READ II's implementation as an early grade reading activity reached its climax. All interventions were rolled out to all target schools and locations, implementation of some elements of the project started to show early successes/impact. Unfortunately, all education institutions were closed because of COVID and READ II's direct support to students and teachers was suspended.

In the absence of in-person direct service delivery, the project team adopted virtual support. READ II supported the regional education bureaus to change the primary curriculum contents which were prepared for in-person delivery (face-to-fact delivery) to a radio format and broadcast the lessons through radio. Some video literacy episodes developed prior to COVID-19 were also broadcast on TV channels. Moreover, READ II also kept its interactions with beneficiaries using its Mobile Hotline platform to deliver IVR and text messages to parents, teachers, and school directors during that time. All these mechanisms were useful to those who had access to radio, television, and mobile phones. They helped children to continue learning and remain active while at home during the school closure. However, one could not claim that these delivery mechanisms were useful for all children. Unfortunately, students are not at the same level of economic status, and may not possess radio, television, or mobile phones to access the lessons and messages shared by the project.

In early October 2020, the government announced the reopening of schools and educational institutions. READ II reengaged all its beneficiaries and started the new

school year in the post-COVID-19 new norm. In not too long-a time, the Northern Ethiopia Conflict started on November 3, 2020. The conflict created a new demand and impacted project operations significantly. We continued to implement the project as early grade reading for some time but did not continue for long. In April 2021, we were asked by USAID to refocus the project and redirect resources to Tigray, to support Internally Displaced People's children. In response, the project established temporary learning centers in six IDP sites in Mekelle and Adigrat, in the Tigray region. Two programs were supported, primary education for grades 1-4 students and early childhood education for preschool children. These programs were again interrupted when the TPLF forces regained and controlled Mekelle, the capital city of the Tigray region at the end of June 2021. In July 2021, the conflict expanded to Amhara and Afar.

In response to the new demand, the project was again advised to revise its original program which was development in nature and pivot to an Education in Crisis and Conflict (EiCC) approach. So, we had to close all the offices in other regions and shift our focus to the conflict affected parts of the northern regions. In the process, we experienced many changes in relation to the northern Ethiopia Conflict. To respond to the rapid changes, READ II had to make over six pivots. Shifting from a development program to that of EiCC was a major departure and required hard decisions. Aligning the staffing structure to meet the new project needs was one of the challenges. Project staff on the early grade reading program possess a set of skills relevant for literacy. On the contrary, we needed a different skill set for EiCC. Those project personnel who could be re-trained to support EiCC implementation received intensive training and continued to serve the project. Those who were not relevant for the new program were let go.

As an EiCC program, READ II was renamed as Education Recovery Activity. READ II ER was organized around three key packages of interventions, support to at-risk and vulnerable populations to return to learning, reducing the risk of school related gender-based violence, and promoting child protection and wellbeing. The interventions supporting these key objectives were organized in three ways- provision of materials- including scholastic materials, recreational materials, school supplies and other teaching-learning materials, training to build the capacity of service providers– including school directors, teachers, and community leaders on Psychological First Aid (PFA), Psychosocial Support (PSS), and Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), and provision of ongoing support through supervisory and routine monitoring.

The material provision was extremely helpful to encourage and attract children to return to learning. Parents lost their property because of the war and lost their ability to support their children to go back to school. Schools were damaged and their supplies were looted. They needed resources to restart. Students, school directors, teachers and communities at large were traumatized by the direct experience of the war. All beneficiaries needed at least basic PFA and PSS at the minimum. Teachers were required to interact with their students differently in the post-conflict period. They needed to learn the concept of and develop skills in Social Emotional Learning. Delivering all these components made the READ II ER a life sustaining activity. It is well received and supported and emerged as one of the high-profile projects.

READ II ER team frequently used the Collaborative Learning and Adapting (CLA) process. Learnings from the implementation process were helpful. Findings from the routine monitoring were used as agenda items for Pause and Reflection sessions. The project expanded external collaboration with other organizations to share and learn from their experiences. READ II organized experience-sharing workshops and invited experts from other organizations. After Action Review (AAR) sessions were also organized to answer questions such as "What are the things that we did well? What are the things that we were challenged with in the field? What did we do wrong? What are the aspects of the project we can improve?" In Summary, the CLA process was very, very useful for continuous growth and improvements.

In managing the implementation of READ II ER as a life sustaining activity, I learned many things. Among these are the importance of being flexible in planning and implementation depending on the changing work environment, being open to new information from colleagues and other implementing partners, expanding internal and external coordination and collaborations and continuous transparent communications.

So, that is it.

Q: Thank you, Tassew, for a fascinating and very informative interview.

End of interview