

A Central Pillar of Nation-Building and Development



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Last week, Eritrea Profile featured an excellent article presenting an overview of social services in Gash Barka (“Social Services in Gash Barka Region” – 13 September). Authored by Milka Teklom, not only was the article interesting and well-written, it was enlightening, replete with details, and informative, ultimately shedding important light on one of Eritrea’s most beautiful regions. In addition, however, the article was immensely significant and worthwhile for its illustration of Eritrea’s commitment to social justice.

Social justice is a central pillar of nation-building and development

At the same time representing a long-term process and a standalone goal, social justice mainly has to do with the notion of fairness. Basically, it is the view or belief that all people within an institution, community, society, or country should have equal opportunities, be afforded the same rights, and receive the same treatment, regardless of their specific race or ethnicity, socio-economic status, gender, age, religion, mental and physical ability, or other particular distinction. A relatively recent concept (unlike justice in the broad sense) and a term that has become increasingly prominent within general discourse, social justice is

undergirded by several fundamental principles or pillars. Among others, these include human rights (which involve the fundamental dignity and the inherent value of all persons); equality; diversity; respect; access; and participation.



In Eritrea, social justice constitutes a central guiding concept and anchor for nation-building and development. The country’s National Charter (February 1994) declares: “Equitable distribution of wealth, services and opportunities, and special attention to be paid to the most disadvantaged sections of society.” Across the past three decades, Eritrea has crafted a broad spectrum of policies and adopted a variety of legal instruments to help address the specific needs of and catalyze progress for vulnerable groups, such as the poor, women, children, persons living with disabilities, nomadic populations, and those residing in extremely remote or hard-to-reach areas. These vital interventions continue to play a critical role in cultivating peace and unity within Eritrea’s multi-ethnic, multicultural society, aim to mitigate disparities and create a level playing field on which all citizens have a genuine opportunity to excel, and seek to ensure that each and every individual is empowered and able to enjoy the fruits of inclusive socio-economic growth and social progress.

Reflections of Social Justice

The recent article offered several powerful reflections on social justice in action within Gash Barka. One had to do with education. Education is internationally

recognized as a basic human right and it is indispensable for the exercise of other rights. Moreover, it is one of the most powerful instruments for reducing poverty and inequality, and it sets the foundation for sustained socio-economic growth and development. The United Nations explains that “Education is the key that will allow many other Sustainable Development Goals...to be achieved. When people are able to get quality education they can break from the cycle of poverty. Education therefore helps to reduce inequalities and to reach gender equality.”

However, worldwide there continue to be massive inequalities and disparities in education, both within and between countries. Hundreds of millions of children around the globe are out of school and millions of people of all ages remain illiterate. When social injustice pervades education systems, it serves to dramatically undermine the great potential, overall capacity, and general well-being of a nation’s people, particularly its most precious and valuable resource – its youth and children. Ultimately, all of society is impacted, indeed hurt, when its people, especially children, are unable to get educated.

In Eritrea, education is regarded as a fundamental right to which all citizens are entitled and it remains a central pillar of society. The country’s national policy provides for equitable access to education free-of-charge to all, extending from primary up to and including the tertiary level. (In recent years, spending on education has averaged approximately 14 percent of the national budget. Moving forward, the plan is to increase this to about 22 percent by 2025.)

Two specific examples of social justice related to education in Gash Barka are the adult literacy and outreach program, as well as the mother language policy. As the author details, the adult literacy and outreach program in the region has steadily expanded, with a large percentage of participants being women. Over the years, it has promoted literacy and provided learning opportunities for historically marginalized groups and those who may have been missed by the system.

In terms of the mother language policy, as explained by the author, “there are two elementary schools that teach in Saho, five in Bidawiet, 21 in Nara, 32 in Kunama, 56 in Arabic, 90 in Tigre and 129 in Tigrinya languages. Like elementary schools, preschools also give services in all ethnic languages except in Saho and Bidawiet.” The far-reaching importance of this policy should not be overlooked.

Eritrea is a country that is blessed with rich cultural diversity, and it is home to a colorful array of ethnolinguistic groups. This great diversity is central to the country's national identity and is deeply cherished as one of its greatest assets and strengths. Developed and implemented by the Ministry of Education, the mother language policy is a critical tool for protecting human rights, preserving diversity, culture, and tradition, and fostering peace, tolerance, and respect for others. In addition, the policy helps to increase access and ensure inclusive, quality education for all, particularly through reducing dropout rates, improving academic results, fluency, and literacy, and leading to greater family and community involvement.



Another strong example of social justice that the article alludes to is the multifaceted support extended to a variety of vulnerable populations, such as families of martyrs, the disabled, people living with HIV/AIDS, and low-income families. A large body of empirical work from settings and contexts around the world indicates how these populations are often at significantly greater risk for unemployment, poor physical health, poverty, social exclusion, stigma, ostracization, or discrimination, reduced life chances, and a range of other challenges or issues. However, the array of programs and services aimed at these populations in Gash Barka, rooted in social justice and a belief in the inherent worth or equality of all, helps to advance dignity and empowerment, promote inclusion, and create opportunities for dignified lives.

Finally, social justice is also reflected in the overall focus on rural or historically lesser-served areas throughout the Gash Barka region. Over the years, discussions of development or developing countries have tended to overwhelmingly focus on national capitals or urban areas, with rural areas and populations frequently underserved, overlooked, and undervalued. Unfortunately, they remain almost forgotten and basically an afterthought, despite the fact that they are an integral part of our societies, due assistance and support, and possess great potential to significantly contribute to national economies. Through extending significant and multifaceted support and assistance to these areas and populations across Gash Barka, guided by its commitment to social justice, Eritrea is helping to ensure that “no one is left behind” and ultimately allowing more people to realize their true potential.

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