Policy Brief

Rethinking 'Co-curriculum': Alternative Mechanism to Combat Ethnic Intolerance within the Public Higher Education Sub-system

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Executive Summary

The items we read and watch in the media are lingering- as if to remind us that humans are still capable of savage behavior. Despite all the advances in science and technology, we seem powerless in halting the stereotyping, grievances and mass atrocities due to ethnic membership. The multi-ethnic East African state-Ethiopia also shares these characteristics. Empirical studies revealed that teasing, scapegoating, ostracism, harassment, repression, expulsion and violence among ethnic groups are widespread in Ethiopia. Public Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are among the affected sub-sectors.

Even though international norms urge university students to defend values like 'peace' and 'tolerance', students seem to struggle to live in peace due to ethnic intolerance (EI). In consequence, mistrust, hostility and direct violence among varied student group became very common and deadly over time. Though administrative and political measures are taken by the government and HEIs, violence reoccurred and it is hard to say a sustainable intervention is in place to transform the intolerant behaviour till date.

Ethnic intolerance is found to be among the deadliest causes of conflict. Sustainable peace on the other hand is hardly possible without educational intervention. Rigorous determinations have been evidenced to combat EI through co-curricular (CoC) activities like public lectures, excursion, festivities, art works, debates, sports games, print advertising campaign and others, in the context of Ukrainian[1], Russian[2], Kazakhstan[3], Malaysia[4], Dominican Republic[5], US[6], Pakistan[7], and UAE[8] universities where symptoms of EI were exhibited. This policy brief therefore aims to present a convincing argument to give CoC a central place in the Ethiopian higher education sub-system policy debate as an alternative means to tackle the protracted ethnic intolerance among regular under graduate program public university students.

Key Points

1. Public universities are expected to promote unity in diversity. Consequently, students from every corner of the country are enrolled at HEIs. However, their failure to tolerate their fellows with different ethnic affiliation creates hostility, violence and an unstable learning environment.

2. The contribution of CoC in fighting stereotypes and nurturing ethnic tolerance among HEI students is commended in different writings. Students and faculty members also favour this platform as a mechanism to decolonize intolerant attitudes and behaviours. However, CoC integration in Ethiopian public universities is not satisfactory.

3. There is a need for strong commitment by Ministry of Education (MoE) to assess the nature and magnitude of EI as well as the benefits and administration of existing CoC programs so as to identify special CoC programs that can combat EI among students.

Introduction

Ethnic intolerance implies a state of aversion towards others based on their ethnic affiliation. This led to genocide in Rwanda[9], hatred in Yugoslavia[10] and violence in Bosnia-Herzegovina[11]. Similar results are recorded in Ethiopia. Bekalu[12] argued, politicization of ethnic identity, competition over regional hegemony, and regional states 'sons of soil' orientation, resulted in conflicts, anomalie, death and displacement in different parts of Ethiopia. Semir[13] further revealed that the internal fracture of the ruling party and fragile state institutions, and efforts to increase security by certain ethnic groups jointly resulted in hostility, tension and violence among ethnic lines. The United Nations (UN)[14] was also concerned over hate speech and violent attacks on certain ethnic groups as it has the potential to escalate into national stability. These situations caused Yonas[15] to conclude that Ethiopia is prone to ethnic extremism with a potential to destabilize the nation.

Do these alarming manifestations of EI affect Ethiopian public HEIs? The answer is 'yes!' and EI towards out-groups become a new norm among students. The manifestations of such behaviour include using pejorative language and ridiculing attributes of a certain ethnic group verbally[16],[17,18] or through graffiti[19,20], refusal to engage with out-groups in class assignments, dormitory or lunch services (Abebaw, 2019; Genova, 2019; Melkamu & Ameyu, 2013) and violent attacks.[21] Consequently, cross-group cohesiveness and engagement on campus wide activities are negatively affected, injuries and killings are exhibited, properties are damaged and cancellation of classes become frequent. Hence, it is time to dismantle the way of thinking that one's own ethnic group is superior

to others and support students to learn to live in a respectful manner as stated under the HEI proclamations[22],[23],[24].

Most undesirable behaviours are learnable and can be unlearned. One way to achieve this can be through re-thinking overlooked platforms to integrate lessons for ethnic tolerance. Overlooked platforms that could be utilized in neutralizing ethnic intolerance include workshops, study visits, special lectures, cultural festivities, community services, and cultural fora in HEIs is CoC (Al Majali & Alkhaaldi, 2020; Czepil et al., 2019; Lewis, 2016; Lopez, 2004; Tamam & Krauaa, 2017; Vorobyova & Poleshchuk, 2015). The UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) also identifies CoC as a viable tool to respond to multiculturalism challenges in educational establishments.

In the Ethiopian public HEI sub-sector though, no evidence-based policy advice has been provided to strengthen CoC programs so as to use them as alternative mechanism to tackle EI. Consequently, the question raised in this policy brief is 'how do Ethiopian public HEIs use CoC to curb ethnic intolerance among students?' In so doing, a new direction can be forwarded to MoE and HEIs on how to put forth CoC programs as alternative interventions to combat it.

Methodology

Data was collected from Addis Ababa University (AAU), Addis Ababa Science and Technology University (AASTU) and Adama Science and Technology University (ASTU) between May and July 2021. Participants were graduate and under-graduate students who are not members of CoC clubs (nine and three respectively from each university), active CoC members (nine and three respectively from each university), senior instructors (six and two respectively from each university) and employees of student dean offices (three and one respectively from each university). In addition, policy documents were reviewed.

Ethnic Intolerance in Ethiopian Public Higher Education Institutions

The Essence of Ethnicity

Ethnicity is thoroughly discoursed in the texts of Max Weber[25] as a conviction in common ancestry; by Barth[26] as a result of ascription of specific behaviour; by Horowitz[27] as affected by intermarriage, conversion, failure to recall one's origin and merger of subgroups, affecting individual ethnic group membership and by Waters[28] as optional affiliation.

The Ethiopian constitution prefers to use nations, nationalities and people [NNPs] as groups that form the country[29]. Accordingly, NNPs are "people living in the same geographical area, and having the same language and a common psychological makeup of identity"[30]. Hence, Ethiopia is a state constructed by NNPs with primordial qualities. However, empirical studies shown that social and historical processes[31], and mixed ethnicity leave room for individuals to affiliate themselves to a certain ethnic group for material gain or psychological utility[32],[33].

Interviewed students described ethnicity as distinctive culture, language, and dressing style of a certain community group. This notion fits the Ethiopian constitutional definition and some students express their concern that primordial understanding of ethnicity negatively affected students' relationship and they desire to be taught in a way they can fit to the global world rather than to think in an ethnocentric manner. In supporting this, a student from ASTU said "when simple disagreements remain unresolved and get physical, rumours started that a fellow from X ethnic group is assaulted by a student from Y ethnic group which leads to ethnic-based group violence". Hence, the issue of ethnicity is a hidden fire that can be lit at any time among students.

Universities are centres where different perspectives are debated and dominant views are challenged. Accordingly, 'mixed ethnicity', 'optional ethnic affiliation', and 'socially constructed ethnic identity' should be critically debated (Waters, 1990). In HEIs, this can be achieved alternatively through conferences, trainings, special lectures, provision of printed materials and inter-cultural dialogue

sessions (Kaukab & Saeed, 2014; Lewis, 2016; Majali & Alkhaaldi, 2020; Savchits et al., 2017; Stellenbosch University, 2018). However, interview results showed that discussions platforms to interrogate the local thesis and ethnicity scholarship are hardly available.

EI: Essence, Consequences and Causes

Interviewed students define EI as a means to perceive 'out-groups' with an ethnic-lens. Such expressions seem to agree with Czepil et al. (2019), Majali & Alkhaaldi (2020) and Kaukab & Saeed (2014) definition that EI is a failure to respect out-groups'opinion, and little readiness for constructive conflict resolution in Ukrainian, UAE and Pakistan universities. Consequently, distrust, resentment, enmity, poor inter-group relationship, violence, and the tarnishing of the said university's image are observed.

A student from AASTU said "students are the roots of universities. Whenever students develop hostility, universities are sure to fail. EI is a poison that devour the roots of our universities". This is also shared by students in AAU and ASTU. These opinions seem to align with scholars' stance that growing intolerance makes students' intelligence questionable[34] and negatively affected the image of universities as some parents refuse to send their children to public universities in regions (Abebaw, 2019). All these unfortunate circumstances therefore oblige Abebaw (2019) to conclude that students in public universities are "vulnerable to ethnic extremism" (para. 2).

As for causes, students and instructors pin-point uncivilized advice from seniors to fresh students not to socialize with out-groups and desist from spending leisure time in 'Khat house' and the bar which according to them make students narrow-minded due to their socialization with strangers with political agenda. This claim is strengthened by Yonas's (2019) finding that the youth in general and in universities in particular are manipulated and paid by external actors to disseminate false information. The role of external forces in inducing violence was also implied in ethnic related incidents in Debre Markos and Woldia[35] and Bulle Hora (Centre for Advancement of Rights and Democracy [CARD], 2020) universities.

There is a famous saying that 'an idle mind is the devil's workshop'. If HEIs create a platform for students to learn openness to new and diverse ideas, interrogate conventional wisdom, invent new ways of doing things, collaborate with fellows and contribute to the community after class, they can produce engaged and well-rounded citizens[36]. Failure of public universities to create/strengthen/promote such strategized CoC platforms however contributes to students' immersion in dangerous agendas beside education.

Measures

Instructors stress the need to focus on the creation of platforms (other than the formal curriculum) to teach about multiculturalism, varied ideologies of identity, humanity, and the dangers of EI to help students develop a critical mind-set. Students' response also complement this. A student from AAU mentioned that "I have friends here and in other universities. Most of them spend their time after class in baiting rooms, Kchat houses or the bar where they are exposed to biased, and harmful information. This is due to absence of smart non-academic platform and/failure to link available CoC platforms to decolonize the ethno-centric attitude".

A student from AASTU further stated that "the management and MoE do not understand the level of seriousness. This is not a healthy learning environment. We do not need the police to watch over our every move. We need activities that help us to socialize, learn from each other and contribute to the community positively". Another student from ASTU cautioned "universities should not mistakenly believe absence of violence as peace. The hostility is there and no mechanism is in place to build tolerance". Hence, administrative and political measures adopted by HEIs to manage conflicts in general and ethnic related violence in particular[37,38,39,40,41] are not as effective as intended.

Policy Gaps

Ethnicity has become a contentious issue in Ethiopia since 1991 and an eminent danger after 2018. This issue has been affecting the fulfilment of HEIs objectives for long. However, it was not mentioned under the three proclamations (Federal democratic republic of Ethiopia (FDRE), 2003, 2009, 2019), the Education and Training Policy[42], Ethiopian Education Development Roadmap[43] and Higher Education 10 Years Development plan[44] as a challenge. Particularly, the 2019 proclamation was issued in the middle of inter-ethnic fissures in the country and put peace a priority objective and developing multiculturalism as its guiding value. However, it shall not consider EI as a threat to peaceful co-existence of HEIs.

Co-Curriculum in Ethiopian Public Higher Education Institutions

The Essence

Interview results showed that all students (not CoC club members) and instructors (four out of six) have an idea of what 'co-curriculum' means but have little knowhow on how it is managed within the university they are currently engaged. However, employees interviewed from the student dean's office within three universities claim awareness creation activities are made by the office for academicians knowledgeable about and involved in CoC platforms.

Co-curricular programs require well-structured plan and involvement of faculty members to help students learn, interpret and reflect what they learn and shift their beliefs and actions towards desirable behaviour[45]. Such dedication of the management and academic members for instance created a positive inter group contact among diversified students groups in Malaysian universities (Tamam & Krauss, 2017). However, such cooperative spirit is undermined by low awareness of instructors and students in Ethiopian public HEIs.

The Practice

The term 'co-curricular' is common in explaining diversity related educational initiatives and inter-cultural learning[46]. Its suitability for education on tolerance is also highlighted in studies made at Bahir Dar[47], Dilla and Hawassa[48], Addis Ababa[49] and Debre Berhan (Zekarias, 2020) universities. The sustained dialogue (SD) project, which was commended by Peace and Development Centre [PDC] along with Life and Peace Institute [LPI] to enhance the role of universities in championing tolerance and dialogue was also introduced in AAU, Haramaya, Jimma, Ambo, Bahir Dar and Gondar through supporting CoC clubs[50]. Additionally, coffee ceremonies, panel discussions, sport games, literary works, seed planting exercises and walking for peace in campuses were used. However, once the project was handed over to AAU, it was not effective. Students from AAU noted that the SD culture is loosely implemented among peace club members and majority of students have no idea what it is.

Even though no CoC activity is found in the three universities that specifically work to deescalate EI, peace club in AAU, peace forum in ASTU and art clubs in AASTU address issues related to rational thinking, diversity and stand for social justice. However, there is misconception on how clubs operate. For instance, an instructor from AAU said "I have no idea how peace clubs or other clubs run. If they are discussing critical issues we were supposed to be invited and provide intellectual suggestions". A club member in AASTU said "we usually join to get scholarships and other benefits. We have no superordinate goal and the desire to know the other". Non-club members in ASTU mentioned that the peace club is feared by many students because they have strong affiliation with university management.

Representatives of student dean offices pointed out the fact that "Institutionalization of CoC is in its toddler stage. CoC hold enormous untapped potential for teaching about tolerance. This requires linking CoC learning objectives to the university mission and stable financing. Students are either unaware or disinterested because we cannot respond to their critical problem- which is -dismantling the ethnocentric attitude". These recommendations are in line with what was stated by Ward (2017). She argued that articulation of learning outcome that reflect the university identity is necessary for sustainable CoC intervention. However such systematic approach is not extensively practiced in public HEIs.

Policy Gaps

The 2009 and 2019 proclamations explicitly stated that students can learn in and outside classrooms. Moreover, they acknowledge the importance of student unions in providing outlets for students' non-academic engagement and the role of training sessions, conferences and workshops to impart specific knowledge or skills related on broader social issues (FDRE, 2019; 2009). Such platforms on the other hand are part of CoC and help to create awareness and foster dialogue on tolerance, peace and multiculturalism (Ward, 2017; Vorobyova & Poleshchuk, 2016). Hence, the proclamations implicitly acknowledge CoC. The 2018-30 roadmap on the other hand explicitly recommend CoC outlets for stimulating 'unity in diversity' in HEIs.

Conclusion

This policy brief started by questioning 'how do Ethiopian public HEIs use CoC to fight ethnic intolerance among students?' Ethnic related intolerance threatened to deteriorate the security in Ethiopia since 1991, it remains a source of mistrust and violence in public HEIs. Some students even consider public HEIs as unhealthy learning environment' due to this. However, it has never been explicitly discussed as a challenge to the 'unity in diversity' notion in educational policy documents in general and higher education legislative documents in particular.

On the other hand, CoC outlets like student union, trainings, workshops and community service are acknowledged within the three HEI proclamations and the education sector roadmap. However, their role is not explicitly mentioned. Interview results revealed that CoC platforms are preferable in decolonizing the ethno-centric mind-set of students and help students remain vigilant on campus so that they do not meet strangers with hidden political agenda. However, it was found that CoC programs that discuss ethnic scholarship are rare, most students and academic staff have low awareness on how CoC are administered, and since learning outcomes of each CoC are not systematically aligned with the university mission, financial support is minimal. Furthermore, there are no special clubs that address EI, and peace clubs are even perceived with suspicion. Hence, it is hard to say CoC is integrated strategically in public HEIs in a way that helps address the critical problem of ethnic intolerance.

Recommendations

This policy brief lays out the subsequent policy recommendations.

¡   The Federal Ministry of Education along with its local and international stakeholders needs to undertake an in-depth assessment of the status of EI within public HEIs. The study should pin point the causes, magnitude and its consequences. The findings need to be incorporated into revised or newly issued policy documents in the future.

¡   The Federal Ministry of Education needs to undertake a national study on the status of CoC programs within public HEIs. Particularly, the potential contribution of each CoC activity for EI needs to be thoroughly examined. The findings need to be incorporated into revised or newly issued policy documents in the future.

¡   In order to ensure proper execution, the Federal Ministry of Education needs to prepare a national CoC policy that clearly aligns specific types of CoC activities that can combat EI issues. Moreover, a CoC wing needs to be established within the ministry to execute the policy effectively within each public HEIs.

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