



the Practitioner's page

Gabreab Barnabas of Ethiopia Encouraging country-wide development

Dr Gabreab Barnabas, Minister of State, Ministry of Federal Affairs of Ethiopia, was interviewed in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, on February 28, 2003, by Forum consultant Dr. J. Peter Meekison (Former Deputy Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs of Alberta and University Professor Emeritus of Political Science, University of Alberta) and Forum staff member Paul Morton.

Forum:

How long have you been in this office? What are the main responsibilities?

Barnabas:

I am a medical person by profession and I have been involved in politics for the last 30 years. In this government I worked as a member of parliament during the transition period, 1991 to 1995. When I was still a parliamentarian, I went to study in London. I did a PhD in social policy, health education policy. When I came back in 1997, I worked as a researcher at the party headquarters in the People's Revolutionary Democratic Front. Then I was given this assignment. I just moved from party headquarters to a newly established ministry, the Ministry of Federal Affairs.

Forum:

And you're its first minister?

Barnabas:

And I am the State Minister of the new ministry because the Minister for Federal Affairs is another person. I'm in charge of the states, with emphasis on the four marginalized states: Kambela, to the southwest, Benishangul-Gumuz in the northwest, Afar in the northeast and Somali in the southeast. They make up about 40 to 50 per cent of the territory, they may have more than eight, nine million people. They are economically and, even in terms of good governance, doing less than the other states, because of lack of human resources.

Forum:

What are the main responsibilities of the office and the ministry?

Barnabas:

The ministry looks after all the regions and makes the federation work. Not at the legal, institutional level, because there is this House of Federation as far as constitutional problems are concerned, but with administrative and political and economic development issues. We give particular emphasis to those states that are disadvantaged to enable them to catch up with the other states.

Secondly, it does also look into the pastoral development issue. Of the four disadvantaged states, two of them are pastoral.

The third responsibility of my ministry is urban development. The capital is overseen by this ministry. It's a federal capital but we oversee it even though it has its own autonomous institutions.

Forum:

So what do you see as the main challenge that the ministry faces at the moment?

Barnabas:

The main challenge is rural development. Ethiopia's system of farming has failed us. We have an agricultural system which was very good and which has stayed and fed the people for millennia. It has worked because the population was smaller than now, and the land was probably more habitable...

We are not only behind the world: we are behind Africa. And that's why we are very impatient. We resorted to war to overthrow the establishment because it was stagnant. We had to move and save our country...

And what are we doing to change that? In the last ten years we have increased the educational enrolment of this country by 40 per cent. It's now 60 per cent. Elementary school enrolment will soon be 10,000,000, which means young farmers will have literacy and numeracy so we can teach them about modern farming – low-technology...

Food security is part of rural development, as is capacity building. Ethiopia can accommodate approximately 100 to 200 million people, at least. We are now 67 million.

So it's not that we are overcrowded, but we are not producing enough. We have lots of rivers, lots of rain. If we had money to harvest the river water properly and use it when we are short of rain, we could make do. But it's not easy.

If we had skilled people we could tap the natural resource base of the country and feed ourselves and even export.

We have the tenth largest livestock sector on earth and the highest in Africa. But we don't look after their health, vaccinate them, de-worm them, or feed them properly so they are good for nothing.

Forum:

How does your office relate to the role of the House of Federation?

Barnabas:

The House of Federation is mainly dealing with constitutional issues, and revenue sharing. The formula for revenue sharing is decided by them. The number one criterion is population

size, and the second is revenue generation. If you raise a lot of revenue you get more. If you don't, you get less.

Forum:

So how does that help to build up those who are not able to meet their needs?

Barnabas:

Because the third criterion is marginalization. The less developed the region is, the more it gets.

Like for instance, the states that I'm helping are Afar, which has a million population, and Somali, which has about four million. According to the formula of the House of Federation, Somali receives 500 million Ethiopian birr, and Afar gets 300 million birr.

Forum:

You described the House of Federation more accurately as a "House of Nationalities" – could you elaborate on that point?

Barnabas:

Our federation is based on national entities. The Oromos, an entity because they speak their own language, they say "we are one" even though half are Christians and half Muslims. There's a huge divide in terms of religion but the overreaching criterion that has gone to unite the Oromos is their sense of belonging to one ethnicity or nationality.

So the House of Federation was composed of this because the ideology that prevailed before glossed over this identity. It didn't recognize these identities and then it created civil war. Our history is "checkered" in that there were civil wars... Many of them were ethnically caused... So the whole federation was deliberately made to emulate the diverse identities of the country. Every nationality was given one seat in that house. That's why I call it the "House of Nationalities"...

So it's only palatability that made it the House of Federation and we are a federation as a political order but it's a federation of nationalities.

Forum:

As one of the central players in the intergovernmental relations, with whom do you interact at the regional or local level?

Barnabas:

We deal with all of them. We deal with the state councils and we help them revise their constitutions. They have made revisions to their respective constitutions recently.

Forum:

And what changes do you make?

Barnabas:

We made provisions to include elders in the local government structure. Because they are still powerful, local leaders. They are not chiefs, but they could be clan leaders in the pastoral areas. We tried to strip off some religious elements that were inserted in the constitutions. Because the federal constitution is secular, religion had to go out.

Thirdly, there were provisions for states like Gambela and Benishangul-Gumuz states, now that they are multi-ethnic again. And you should have provisions for ethnic identity within one state. Like having their own councils where they could use their own language and discuss and decide on their own autonomous areas...

We included fiscal decentralizing, devolving resources and powers to local governments using formulas similar to the

ones formulated for the House of Federation. Those formulas are based on population, level of development, revenue generation and other criteria.

And then the separation of powers was not complete in some states. In the federal constitution, the separation of powers is complete. In those states that was not made clear in the previous constitutions. The president of the state was at the same time the man who convened the council. He was the head of the council so it created a problem of checks and balance. Now [the powers] have been separated.

Forum:

Within the regional government, is there somebody who would be your counterpart? Whom would you contact?

Barnabas:

The President of the state.

Forum:

And if the head of the government wanted to contact someone in the central government he would contact you?

Barnabas:

He contacts me first because I am responsible for regional issues. But he also has access to the Minister and the Prime Minister, who are executive. We are in the Executive Branch, not in the Parliament. This branch deals with most of the issues, but there will be issues where they will, if they want to, go directly to the Minister...

Forum:

Within the range of constitutions internationally, Ethiopia's is quite unique (e.g. the right to secede, the predominant role of nationalities). Where do you see the strengths or weaknesses over the past nine years?

Barnabas:

The federal constitution is quite remarkable. I don't see a lot of weaknesses. Maybe there needs to be some fine-tuning... Like in conflict resolution – where to take people who committed crimes in inter-state, inter-ethnic issues, because both groups, or both states get biased to favour their own criminals.

We are now trying to have federal, neutral courts to look into crimes committed by ethnic groups.

But many countries that are economically more developed than we are have not managed to put several diverse nationalities together. We have. Because our instrument is effective, it's an open-door system. Secession is a very charged term. We are not afraid of it. We deliberately put it there because we wanted to get this meaning of 'open door' policy. Nobody will force you to stay in Ethiopia. You have to love this country to stay in Ethiopia. If it's aerated, oxygenated, everybody loves to go into a house. If it's a suffocating one, everybody wants to go out... We are poor, we are undeveloped and yet we can live in peace together.

We have to work off biases and create a value of unity, equality, brotherhood. And we have to not only say it, we have to practice it.

[Among our] weaknesses only our scarcity of resources has been betraying us. Even if we have some resources, sometimes we use available government structures, and corruption occurs... We have to fight against corruption.

So the weaknesses are mainly not at the level of the law but at the level of implementing bodies, it is weaknesses in individuals, rather than in the provisions themselves.

That's how I see it. ☺