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**Decentralizing Education:
The BESO/Tigray Case Study**

A Summary

November 1996

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Abstract

The Tigray Decentralization Study was carried out in Tigray Region, in northern Ethiopia, from July to October 1995, as one of the bridging activities leading to the start-up of USAID's Basic Education System Overhaul (BESO) Project. The study's primary objective was to model a new, decentralized process for addressing the problems of Tigray's education system—a system being rebuilt after two decades of war. The Study was carried out in a context in which the central government had promulgated a policy of decentralization in education and other sectors, whereby many of the functions previously carried out by the central government were turned over to the regions. It soon became clear that within this general policy, many of the operational details of decentralization remained to be defined.¹ Given these conditions, the Tigray Decentralization Study sought to contribute to the process of defining what decentralization would mean in Tigray.

The research methodology included a series of five participatory workshops—involving educators from all levels of Tigray's education system—at which data collected by the research team at school and system levels were presented to promote policy discussion and action and to identify further information needs for research. This process surfaced two different interpretations of decentralization in Tigray—one centered on the responsibilities and functions of the regional office, and the other more concerned with schools, local administrative offices, and communities. From the regionalist perspective, the primary task was for the regional office to obtain the resources and capacities to manage the system. From the localist perspective, decentralization had done little to improve the lot of schools, or their relationships with the education administrative system. The primary task was to develop new relationships between school and the administrative organization.

These perspectives framed very different approaches to system reform. Though the study did not bring about fundamental changes in the system's decision making, it did model a decentralized process for incorporating field data and participatory dia-

¹ This process continues to the present.

logue into the policy formation process. It provided comparative data about the Region's schools and gave front-line educators a first opportunity to discuss the system's organization and its future.

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Glossary and Acronyms

ABEL	Advancing Basic Education and Literacy Project
BESO	Basic Education System Overhaul Project
Das	An open-air classroom, classes held outside for lack of a school building
Derg	"Group of equals," the military group that overthrew Emperor Haile Selassie and ruled Ethiopia from 1974 to 1991
Gem-Gum	A process used by the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) that encouraged the people to participate in community decision making and to evaluate the performance of their leaders.
Off-road school	School more than 3 kilometers from a main, all-weather road
On-road school	School less than 3 kilometers from a main, all-weather road
Region	The primary administrative unit under the Ethiopian national government (such as Tigray)
SARA	Support for Analysis and Research in Africa Project
Study Team	Eight-person team hired to conduct the Decentralization Study
TPLF	Tigrayan People's Liberation Front
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
Woreda	Administrative unit under the Zones and above the schools; underwent reorganization in Tigray during and after the study
Zone	Administrative unit under the Region; Tigray has four main Zones (Central, Eastern, Southern, and Western) and a sub-zone that consists of the regional capital of Mekelle

Introduction

It is interesting, really, how pervasive and persistent beliefs are in decentralization as a policy tool, given how little is known about how to bring decentralization about and what its effects are. In the area of formal education, for example, decentralization is claimed to lead to improvements at school (and many other) levels of education systems, to greater administrative efficiency, increased mobilization of resources, heightened accountability, increased community involvement, and so forth. Yet there is little empirical evidence to support these claims. There are, of course, reasons for this lack of evidence: Often, the time between design and implementation of decentralization initiatives is too great to permit credible causal attribution. Only infrequently are original plans implemented as designed. Suitable baseline data are rarely gathered to measure impact. Intervening or alternative explanatory factors are generally too numerous to link effect unambiguously with cause. Yet given our preoccupation with basing public policy on empirical evidence, it is interesting that we accept the claims of decentralization on so shaky an empirical foundation.

Perhaps most clearly explaining the widespread popularity of the term decentralization is the fact that it does not refer to any particular arrangement of functions, responsibilities, and decision making. Instead, any of a number of arrangements may be considered decentralized. In this way decentralization is rhetorically and politically useful, permitting superficial agreement without any necessary specification of operational details, which, almost by definition, will be controversial. For whether explicitly acknowledged or not, decentralization always includes a political component—some groups win, by gaining influence, resources, jobs; others lose.

This study represents our attempt to develop and model a participatory learning “research process” through which school systems, in this case in Tigray, Ethiopia, might address self-identified problems through organizational “solutions.”³

³ This approach and study design were developed over a period of months through discussions among Joseph DeStefano and James Williams of USAID's Africa Bureau; Marc Sommers, Study Team Leader; and Elizabeth Leu of the ABEL Project. Special appreciation is due to Joseph DeStefano, who played a particularly critical role in the discussions of design leading up to the study and in the formative first week. Thanks are also due to Ron Bonner of USAID/Ethiopia; Amare Asgedom, University of Addis Ababa; and Elizabeth Leu and John Hatch of the ABEL Project, AED.

Several hypotheses were designed into the research: First, we assumed that school systems and the process of reform are sufficiently complex, dynamic, and lengthy that it is impossible at the outset—or from the center alone—to gather an adequacy of information to prepare a definitive implementation plan. At the least, information is needed to make mid-course corrections, or to adapt to particular conditions in “the field.” More likely, organizations operating in environments of uncertainty, diversity, and change need to develop a process of learning to make successful adaptations. Thus our process needed to develop and model a way in which the school system might “learn to learn.”

A second hypothesis was that the process needs to be participatory; decisions about changes to the system should be made by those with stakes in the system and by those with responsibility for implementation. This is based on at least three assumptions:

- ♦ that the more participatory a decision-making process, the easier implementation will be;
- ♦ that complex, multi-level changes such as improving instructional quality in a system of schools require the knowledge and engagement (as opposed to simple compliance or cooperation) of all actors, especially those at the multiple local sites where change must take place;
- ♦ that participation increases the capacity and the ability of the system to “learn.”

Of course, participation may also get in the way of change. The organizational arrangements of an education system are inextricably linked with the interests of participants, and attempts to change may meet fierce resistance. But the solution is surely not to deny the political aspects of educational change, but to develop as transparent and democratic a process as possible for generating and evaluating alternatives. It would seem self-evident that decisions about systemic changes ought to be made by those in the system rather than by external technical experts. It also seems obvious that a study of decentralization should itself be decentralizing (or at least not centralizing) in its effects.

A third hypothesis was that decentralization is more usefully viewed in terms of the tradeoffs of alternative possible arrangements rather than as the search for a single, technically best solution. Yet, even as a given system problem has multiple structural remedies, all solutions are not equal. There are technical and political tradeoffs to each potential arrangement. Such an approach weakens the role of technical expertise as providers of answers while heightening their role as facilitators of process. At the same time, one of the clearest methodological “findings” of this study is that the research leader needs to introduce—at strategically important moments and in ways appropriate to different audiences technical insight into the tradeoffs of alternative structural proposals.

A final hypothesis is that, in order to achieve a particular purpose in a(n education) system, decentralization must be linked with a clear articulation of, and consensus around, that purpose. There needs, in other words, to be a shared answer to the question: Decentralization for what? In the Tigray case, the researchers explicitly tried to treat decentralization as a means to solving the problems of schools. Thus the decision to focus much of the inquiry around textbook distribution was taken not so much to address the problems of maldistribution and shortage of textbooks per se but to model a method for dealing with self-identified problems in the system. Perhaps the greatest failure of the study was its inability, perhaps unavoidable, to build consensus around this purpose of decentralization.

Based on these principles, this study was undertaken from July to October 1995 as part of the bridging activities preceding USAID’s Basic Education System Overhaul (BESO) Project in Ethiopia. The BESO Project design includes two studies of decentralization, one in each of the two regions in which BESO will focus its operations. The Tigray Study was the first. Like most decentralization studies, this research analyzed the distribution of authorities and responsibilities in Tigray’s regional education system. Unlike many studies, it also attempted to initiate a process of change which would both lead into BESO’s formal activities and provide a process for ongoing system reform in Tigray and beyond.

The kind of change envisioned by the study might evolve over four stages:

Problem Identification—perception and articulation of the need for change, and for research to support the direction of that change. In Tigray, a conscious attempt was made to articulate a *rationale* for decentralization and for changes in the education system.

Data Collection and Analysis—use of the information about the “problem” and, more importantly, what the system is doing and how it deals with problems. An important factor in the success of future stages is the analysis, and the framing of the analysis.

Process for Reflection and Generation of Solutions—use of the information gathered to develop and discuss technically-sound proposals for change. One of the primary objectives of this Study was to develop and model a process for guided, participatory reflection on education problems in Tigray. Ideally, such discussions are facilitated to progress toward technically better solutions to the system’s problems rather than simply to further the interests of participating, powerful groups.

Changes to System—implementation of the solutions. Ideally, the dialogue process initiated in the previous stage would be continued to guide implementation and ongoing problem-based research.

This research, it seems, was successful in helping to articulate a problem, collect and analyze data, and model a process for reflective discussions about solutions. However, there was little follow up following the final workshop, and it is unclear whether the process will be continued or institutionalized in its current, or a modified, form.

One limitation of the research was that it was unable to shift the system’s analytic attention from the problems it was discussing, e.g., textbook distribution and who was “responsible” for that aspect of the system, to the *ways the system deals with problems*. Getting systems to think and work outside their “boxes,” it must be admitted, takes time in any organization.

It is clear that this research aroused a certain resistance in the latter half of the study. The reasons for this resistance depend on one’s perspective. One viewpoint suggests that resistance developed as a “natural” response to the real threat this approach posed to the status quo, as compared to a more conventional study, which only a select group of policy makers see. Another perspective sees the study as having contributed little to solving the problems of education in Tigray. From this viewpoint, “everyone knows” the problems identified by the researchers; what is needed from the researchers are solutions (and resources), not facilitation of dialogue among many who do not see “the bigger picture.” A final perspective builds on the first one, seeing resistance as an expected part of the very difficult task of engaging a real representation of stakeholders in the dialogue process and convincingly relating systemic problems with systemic structures.

This case study is distilled from a longer report prepared by Marc Sommers, lead researcher and Study Team Leader of the Tigray Decentralization Study.³ In one respect, this or any paper summary fails to do justice to the research itself, whose results, like those of all action research, reside in the minds of participants as much as in the text written. However, we thought it useful to prepare a summary document in order to:

- ♦ Present an approach to decentralization research that both embodies principles widely held by educators and can be adapted for use elsewhere.
- ♦ Raise questions about the role of research in relation to decentralization and the ways in which such research is carried out.
- ♦ Suggest ways in which the research process might be made more accessible to the “subjects” of research and the stakeholders of the system being changed.

—James H. Williams, USAID/Bureau for Africa

³ *Decentralizing Education: The BESO/Tigray Case Study* is available from the SARA Project, Academy for Educational Development, 1255 23rd Street NW, Washington, DC 20037.

Tigray Rebuilding

Like the rest of Ethiopia, Tigray is rebuilding its education system. Two decades of civil war destroyed homes, villages, and farming systems throughout much of the country. Many farmers abandoned their fields as the war worsened. Widespread erosion and other damage to the land, exacerbated by drought, resulted in at least five major famines in Tigray over the past thirty-five years, the worst in 1984 when as many as one million Tigrayans died.

Using stones as chairs and their knees as desks, many Tigrayan students now attend school outdoors, near classrooms destroyed during the fighting. Nearly 50 percent of the Region's school-age children have never enrolled in school. Of those who now attend school, some miss much of the year because their parents cannot pay registration fees, and many cannot purchase paper and other basic supplies. Many spend the entire day at school with little food or water. They may walk five or more miles a day along mountainous terrain to get to and from their classes.

Tigrayan teachers lack textbooks, chalkboards, and other basic tools. They teach an average of fifty children per class. Few have received in-service training. They must prepare detailed lessons plans, which are subject to frequent inspection by their supervisors, but rarely have the time or materials to actually teach what they have written in their plans. Many actual school buildings, as opposed to the *Das* or open-air classrooms, are without basic amenities such as water and latrines. Many do not have windows or doors, or sufficient desks for the number of students.

The recent history of Tigray, and of Ethiopia as well, is linked with the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF). The TPLF was formed in 1975 to fight the Derg, the military regime, headed by Major Mengistu Haile Mariam, that overthrew Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974. Both the TPLF and the Derg occupied different parts of Tigray at different times. In 1989, the TPLF took control of Tigray Region, and in 1991, overthrew the Derg in the national capital of Addis Ababa.

In the areas it occupied, the TPLF initiated land reform, peasant participation, women's rights, and *Gem-Gum*, a process by which the people could directly participate in community decision making and could openly criticize their leaders. Both the

TPLF and the Derg developed highly politicized curricula for the schools under their control. (The research team observed several schools in which TPLF materials were still in use.) For several years no formal school system at all operated in the Derg-controlled areas.

Despite this troubled recent history, a spirit of optimism now prevails. Tigrayans, after more than a century of political marginalization and fierce economic hardships, have overthrown the central regime. That they succeeded with limited outside assistance has fueled many Tigrayans' confidence in their abilities to generate their own solutions to local problems. Indeed, although only six percent of Ethiopia's total population of approximately 53 million, Tigrayans now play a very important role in the national government. The TPLF leader Meles Zenawi became leader of the Transitional Government of Ethiopia in 1991 and was elected Prime Minister in 1995.

Many of the conditions affecting Tigray typify other regions in the country. Ninety percent of Ethiopians farm, and displaced families are returning to their homes and land to try to rebuild their livelihoods. About 46.5 percent of the Ethiopian population is under age 15. Only about 20 percent of the nation's primary school-aged children are enrolled in schools, a sharp contrast to the average of 70 percent in sub-Saharan Africa. Nationwide, literacy is quite low. Although the Derg instituted a much-publicized adult literacy campaign, far fewer adults, it seems in retrospect, have retained functional literacy than the 63 percent the regime claimed.

In this context the U.S. Agency for International Development introduced the Basic Education System Overhaul (BESO) Project. BESO includes both policy and institutional reforms to help the primary system improve quality and equity in an environment of expanding access. The five key program areas include decentralized system administration, rational and adequate sub-sector financing, pre-service teacher training, school-based quality and equity improvements, and an improved system for the delivery of inputs and services. The program involves a systems approach, working, simultaneously, top down and bottom up. Expected outcomes include established and strengthened regional and sub-regional systems for financial management and program administration; quality and equity improvements in the primary teaching force;

quality and equity improvements at the school level; and increased effectiveness of the learning inputs available to primary students and their teachers.

A National Policy of Regional Power in a Tradition of Central Authority

For more than a century, Ethiopia's national leaders have used centralized authority to try to deal with the country's disparate regions and ethnic groups. One of the ironies of Ethiopia's long and arduous civil war is that the TPLF, which had originally sought to free Tigray from Ethiopia, now dominates the national government. As national leaders, however, former TPLF members have departed from past policy and emphasized regional autonomy and "decentralization." The national government has articulated a policy of devolving power to Ethiopia's regions, in part in recognition of the role that regionally and ethnically based movements played in fighting the Derg. Led by Meles Zenawi and other Tigrinya-speaking leaders, the government drew Ethiopia's new regional boundaries according to local language distribution. Across sectors, the government has ceded significant amounts of power and responsibility to these new regions. Applying this regional orientation to education, the Transitional Government of Ethiopia announced an Education Sector Strategy in 1994 that suggested a dramatic break from a legacy of centralized education:

The administration of elementary and secondary education and training shall be decentralized in line with the ongoing regionalization process. Schools will be strongly linked with the community which will take responsibility in its well-being and upkeep. They will be made responsive to the local needs and requirements and shall act as centers for all educational activities of the community. The management of each school will be democratized and run with the participation of the community, the teachers, the students, and the relevant government institutions. In as much as possible educational institutions...will be encouraged to run on an autonomous basis.

That said, however, details for how a decentralized education system should actually operate remained unspecified. On the one hand, the policy explicitly encourages local-level autonomy and school democratization, concepts that coincide with *Gem-Gum*

and other TPLF practices during the civil war. On the other hand, the Strategy states that decentralization is supposed to take place "within the ongoing regionalization process," a process which has transferred power to the regions but which still maintains a strong center, albeit at the regional rather than the national level. The system represented a kind of hierarchy of centers.

Indeed, a political culture that has developed for so long is difficult to change. Although regionally rather than nationally based, power in Ethiopia tends to appear in a centralized command structure. Most salaried government officials learned about bureaucratic function and routine as members of highly centralized systems, whether under the Derg or in an opposition movement such as the TPLF. Thus, Ethiopia's decentralization is being enacted within a context and history of centralization.

In Tigray, therefore, the Tigray Education Bureau (or the Regional Bureau) has become the primary decision-making center for the Region's education system, taking

Box 1. Educational Structure in Tigray

- ♦ Tigray Education Bureau (the Regional Bureau)
- ♦ Zonal Education Offices (Eastern, Western, Central, and Southern zones and Mekelle sub-zone)
- ♦ Woreda Education Offices (Approximately 35)
- ♦ Schools

the place of the national Ministry of Education. Under the Regional Bureau, Zonal Education Offices operate in the four geographic zones (Eastern, Southern, Central, and Western) and in a sub-zone in the regional capital of Mekelle. Zonal Education Officers, in turn, are responsible for education in Woredas (recently reduced in number from 81 to 35 and undergoing reorganization). Under the Woredas are Tigray's primary schools.

The Regional Bureau has moved quickly to rebuild school structures and develop a new Tigrinya-language curriculum. An interim curriculum was extracted for grades one through four from elements of the Derg and TPLF materials, while a new curriculum was being developed. This new curriculum emphasizes interactive teaching methods over the more familiar "chalk and talk" format, short training courses to teach practical skills to students who leave school after grades four and eight, and in-service teacher training. The Bureau also plans to build nearly one hundred schools per year over the next five years and staff them with newly trained teachers and school directors.

The Tigray Decentralization Study

The Tigray Decentralization Study was designed to model a process for establishing a decentralized management system to support the Region's educational objectives. Through what the Research Team named a "research-and-discussion approach," the Study aimed to identify major problems that affect the learning process and explore how decentralizing the regional education system could best address those problems. Study designers chose this "action research" approach over a more typical design that would have confined itself to collecting-analyzing data and making recommendations

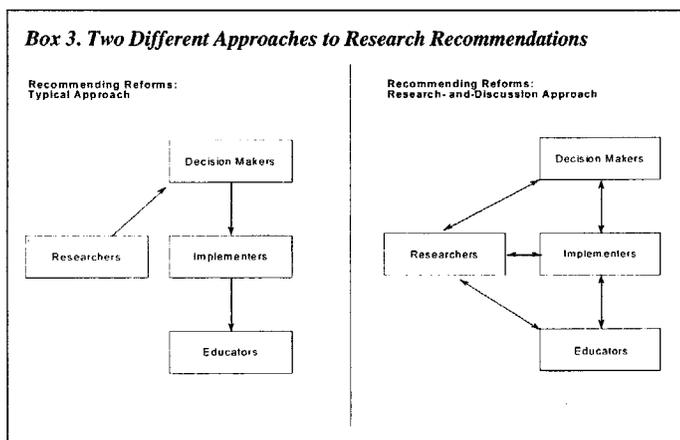
Box 2. Tigray Decentralization Study in Brief

- ♦ July to October 1995 in Tigray Region, Ethiopia
- ♦ A bridging activity to the larger Basic Education System Overhaul (BESO) Project
- ♦ Research-and-discussion approach designed to model a participatory, information-informed process of change
- ♦ Two interrelated research components
 - school- and administrative-office based data collection throughout the Region
 - series of five participatory workshops involving people at all levels in the Tigrayan educational system

to a few Tigrayan decision makers and to BESO staff. Instead, the research-and-discussion approach attempted to involve people at all levels in Tigray's educational system not only in gathering and providing data, but also in analyzing those data and deciding their meaning and use for improving the system. These general objectives were to be accomplished within a short time frame (see Box 2).

Philosophy Behind the Research-and-Discussion Approach

Two factors entered into the decision to design the research in this way. First, the BESO Project was to assist an education system almost totally destroyed by war and economic hardship. The Tigray Study needed to suggest strategies to an education system that was simultaneously decentralizing and reconstructing. In addition, the Study was intended to complement previous, more conventional approaches to decentralization research. Rather than make incremental improvements to a system largely in shambles, Study designers, and a number of Tigrayans, felt that decentralization provided the opportunity to restructure the system in a fundamentally different way, a way that would permit greater participation and "organizational learning." Box 3 suggests, by way of example, implications of the recommendation-making process for conventional and research-and-discussion approaches to research. The typical ap-



proach is orderly but centralizing. Research-and-discussion is decentralizing in effect, and likely to be messier.

Ten Guiding Principles

In retrospect, the study is defined by a series of principles, some of which crystallized early in the process, others of which evolved over the course of the research.

1. Decentralization has many definitions.

Different members of the education system came to the table with different, potentially irreconcilable views about what constitutes a decentralized system. Rather than posit a precise definition, the Study explicitly recognized decentralization as a general concept that can lead to a variety of approaches. In this way, it was hoped, participants could turn their energies to dealing with the problems of the system rather than getting hung up in debates on definitional issues.

2. Research-and-discussion is an experiment in inquiry-based change.

The Study envisioned an approach to educational reform whereby systemic problems were identified from the perspective of schools; data were gathered by the research team about those problems; discussions involving actors from throughout the system were held to propose and discuss solutions to those problems; and new information needs were identified for the next round of data collection and analysis. As with any experiment, a major benefit was testing the hypotheses that informed the design. Also like an experiment, it was hoped that the results would contribute to a larger body of knowledge and practice.

3. Decentralization should be guided by some larger external purpose.

In order to minimize politics and bureaucratic turf wars, decentralization needs a clear, widely accepted purpose around which it can prioritize its activities, articulate the need and direction for change, and mobilize the needed energies of system actors. In the absence of such a unifying purpose, decentralization is likely to degenerate into a power struggle, with power rather than educational or other goals the chief

determinant of policy. In the Tigray Study, attempts were made to portray decentralization as a means of solving the problems of schools.

4. The decentralization process itself should be decentralized, and broadly participatory.

Study designers felt that a participatory approach was essential to modeling the kind of change that might take place in Tigray. A more conventional study might have been perceived as advocating but not practicing decentralization. In fact, decentralization studies often have a centralizing effect (as illustrated in Box 3), when external experts conduct research and communicate their findings only to those at the center. Thus from the outset, the Study involved participants from every level of the system and geographic area in the workshops. Over time, the research team took a more active advocacy role by working to increase the weight of comments and perspectives of those traditionally at the "bottom" of the structure: Woreda education officials, school directors and teachers, and, where possible, parents, students, and other community members. Zonal and Regional Bureau officials, it appeared, were little accustomed to hearing from those at lower levels of the system.

5. The education system should try to see itself from the perspective of schools.

Although this sounds like a truism, in fact, education systems and researchers often fail to see (or even look at) regional management issues through the lens of schools and district offices. A previous study of decentralization of education in Ethiopia, for example, did not "have time" to include schools in the analysis. The Tigray Study, by way of contrast, intentionally positioned the region's primary schools and students at the center of all thinking and discussion. In field research, in discussions with system officials, and in a series of workshops, the Study Team consistently framed issues in terms of how they might affect classroom learning. In order to stress the idea that the primary purpose of the education system was to support schools, charts were drawn up with "schools" at the top of the page and "Regional Education Bureau"—as the foundation supporting the rest—at the bottom.

6. Communication with the leaders, i.e., the center, is crucial.

While the research must keep the focus on schools, researchers must stay in close contact with the leadership—to keep in touch and maintain cordial relations with the official decision making process, to gain information from the regional perspective, and to maintain access to the rest of the system. In Tigray, for example, communication with regional leaders contributed to high levels of participation in the workshops. Regional officials needed to be assured that the research team was not out to threaten or reduce their role as decision makers and system leaders.

At the same time, researchers must not be seen as colluding with those at the "top." In Tigray, the Study Team asked local education officials for their views on education problems and solutions, as well as on how the research process itself could help them. This addressed the concern of many that Tigray had undergone too many external research studies with few benefits.

7. Information must be made accessible to everyone, quickly.

A very high priority was placed on ensuring that everyone had access to information generated by the research, so that all could participate in policy discussions. All questionnaires and results were translated into Tigrinya; all workshop sessions were conducted in Tigrinya, or interpretation provided. Researchers used calculators instead of computers, preparing simple comparative tables in preference to sophisticated statistical analysis. Simple questionnaires gave the interview process transparency and permitted very rapid analysis of results. Among the most consistently positive comments about the study was the speed with which data and analysis were made available: Officials did not have to wait for a final report before learning what the Study Team had found. In addition, the final report was the first external technical paper in several years to be translated into Tigrinya. As a result of these various steps, the stage was set for use of information about the system in workshop discussions about solutions to the system's problems.

8. (In terms of changes to the system), researchers should play a facilitating, not recommending, role.

In an effort to foster a problem solving approach to the problems of the system as well as ownership of proposed solutions, researchers in the Tigray Study limited their role to facilitating the research-and-discussion process and advocating for the needs of schools. Researchers resisted making recommendations until the final report, allowing system participants, especially during the workshops, to develop their own ideas for change. Thus researchers maintained control of the research-and-discussion process but not the information or recommendations.

9. Facilitated dialogue is critical to the research-and-discussion approach.

From the outset, the Study designers felt that information alone would not be sufficient to meet the challenges of Tigray's education system. As a result, a series of five workshops were set up to serve at least three purposes. Workshops provided: 1) forums for discussing problems in the system, information associated with those problems, and possible solutions; 2) ongoing assessments of new information and research needs; and 3) models of a process for addressing systemic issues in a "decentralized" manner. Because of the importance of facilitation, the need to maintain communication with both leaders and school staff, the importance of timely technical information, and the value of facilitating but not making recommendations, the interpersonal and technical expertise of the research team leader was found to be critical. It also became clear that researchers have a critical role to play in providing technical information on the trade-offs associated with different proposals for change. Finally, the importance of presenting information in the local language cannot be over emphasized.

10. Change must be framed in terms that show practical benefits to those in power, i.e., the center.

One of the greatest problems in decentralization is that delegating authority — to those socialized in a centralized system — may appear to mean a loss of power or prestige. In order to counteract this idea, the Study Team pointed out that officials at the center of a centralized system are usually overwhelmed with work. Decentralization, the Study Team attempted to point out, would free up these officials, allowing them

<i>Box 4. Ten Guiding Principles in Theory and Practice</i>	
Guiding Principle	Principle in Practice
Decentralization has many definitions.	During field research, respondents were asked how they defined the term; differences were used in the workshops to keep debate open without dwelling on precise definitions.
Research-and-discussion is an experiment in inquiry-based action.	Data collection and workshops became an iterative process; each step contributed to subsequent steps.
Decentralization should be guided by some larger external purpose.	Decentralization was linked to solving the system's problems and helping schools improve.
The decentralization process itself should be decentralized, and broadly participatory.	Researchers set the broad agenda for the workshops and tried to involve people from every area and level. Information and data collected were given freely and openly to all.
The education system should try to see itself from the perspective of schools.	Researchers reminded officials of the central importance of schools; organizational charts and summaries were drawn with schools "on top."
Communication with the leaders, i.e., the center, is crucial.	Researchers communicated regularly—with regional leaders to update them on the research process, and with local officials to learn about problems, solutions, and new areas for research.
Information must be made accessible to everyone, quickly.	Questionnaires, research summaries, and presentations were simple and direct. Data were presented in simple comparative analyses. Data were analyzed and shared at workshops, rather than only in a final report. All materials were prepared in Tigrinya.

Box 4. Ten Guiding Principles in Theory and Practice (continued)

Guiding Principle	Principle in Practice
In terms of changes to the system, researchers should play a facilitating not recommending role.	Researchers facilitated discussions to keep them open to all. Researchers advocated for parents, teachers, and others at the community level. Although asked to, the researchers did not make recommendations during the workshops.
Facilitated dialogue is critical to the research-and-discussion approach.	Workshops were designed to focus on problem solving and involve stakeholders at all levels.
Decentralization has practical benefits to the center.	Researchers emphasized that decentralization would free leaders to handle the most important concerns.

time to focus on more important concerns while leaving more routine decisions to lower-level personnel.

Study Design

With only fifteen weeks to develop and implement the Study, time had to be used efficiently. Tasks were planned roughly as follows:

1. **Pre-design strategizing:** Research leader met with educators at USAID and ABEL to plan the approach and clarify the rationale.
2. **Design and regional contacts:** Research leader refined the study design and met with officials at the Tigray Education Bureau to discuss the research objectives and methods.
3. **Staffing and training:** Eight-person Study Team was hired (see Box 5), set up operations in Mekelle, and participated in a three-day training session.

4. First data collection: The team collected data in the Western Zone, translated and analyzed data, used findings to refine second round of data collection.

5. First workshop: Held in Western Zone, with participants asked to use the data to analyze a specific learning problem: textbook distribution.

6. Further data collection, analysis, and second and third workshops: The team conducted research and held discussions with officials in the Eastern and then the Southern zones; the second and third workshops also focused on textbook distribution.

7. Further data collection and fourth workshop: Held in the Central Zone, the fourth workshop introduced the question of decentralization as it is manifested in decision making within the education system.

Box 5. The Study Team

- Study Team leader/decentralization specialist (from Boston University, USA)
- Project researcher (from Addis Ababa University)
- Project expert (part-time, from the Regional Bureau)
- Two field interviewers (from Mekelle Business College)
- Two enumerators (from Mekelle Business College)
- Typist
- Translator

8. Finalization of study results and fifth workshop: Two currents of thought concerning decentralization again surfaced as participants were asked to use the data to construct a “basic vision” of the future of the Tigrayan educational system.

9. Final reporting and study close-out

Sharing Research Objectives

At the beginning of the research, the Study Team shared research objectives and proposed methodology with local education officials (see Box 6). In both written summaries and discussions with leaders, the team framed the Study in a context that addressed the system’s priorities. For example, in learning that the Regional Bureau categorizes educational problems and priorities in the three broad areas of access, quality, and equity, the Study leader prepared and distributed a summary to Regional officials that discussed the research using these same three concepts. In addition, local educators, particularly at the Regional level, had to feel comfortable with, or at least accept, the idea that the team would be visiting schools and would be hosting workshops at which open discussion across levels, including with Woreda and school officials, would take place.

Data Collection

Although a series of studies had been conducted about education in post-war Tigray, little was known about educational differences within the Region. Studies often assumed that conditions prevailing in one part of the Region applied equally well to other parts. This study challenged that assumption. The Study was planned to collect data through field research in each of the Region’s four zones and in the regional capital of Mekelle, and to feed the information into five decentralization workshops. In each zone, field research took place over one, very busy week. During that week, members of the team would meet with Zonal Education Officers and then select two Woredas to study, and two schools within each Woreda. In each zone, the researchers interviewed two Woreda officials, four school directors, sixteen teachers, and forty-eight parents, and also filled out school observation surveys that described the physical condition of the four schools they visited. The Woredas and schools were chosen based on two criteria: geographic diversity within each zone and, shortly after the

Box 6. Summary of Research Objectives Prepared for Tigrayan Officials

1. Guiding methodological theme: How can the education system emphasize its support of schools (instead of administering the schools)?

The Decentralization Study Team needs to answer two questions:

1. What the schools need

• Access

Enrollment: who enrolls in school and who doesn’t, the relationship between the school and the community

Retention: who repeats a grade, who drops out, who stays on course, and why

• Quality

Teachers: how much of the curriculum do they actually teach, what needs and concerns do they have

Materials: what materials are available in the schools, how are they used, how do they affect learning

Curriculum relevance: how do administrators at various levels support teachers in implementing the curriculum

• Equity

Gender: what kind of differences exist between girl and boy students

Geography: what kind of differences exist between rural and urban students

Economics: what kind of differences exist between very poor and relatively less poor students

2. Existing administrative capacity

What skills, resources, methods are present at each level of the educational system: Regional, Zonal, Woreda, and School

Box 6. Summary of Research Objectives Prepared for Tigrayan Officials

II. Linking decentralization and educational objectives

1. Articulate the purpose of decentralization

How does decentralization help Tigrayans achieve their educational objectives? For example, how do decentralization reforms help achieve: a) increased enrollment [an access issue]; b) improved quality; and c) more relevant education [an equity issue]?

Help attain a consensus on how a decentralized management structure can contribute to addressing the most important concerns of basic education.

2. Identify existing problems

Gather and analyze data on the current status, needs, problems, and priorities of all major participant groups in the Tigray basic education system (Regional Government officials, Regional Education Bureau, Zonal Education Offices, Woreda Education Office, Schools, Communities).

3. Identify solutions to existing problems

How can we solve the major problems?

Use workshops to facilitate a) discussion of findings, b) identification of the most pressing concerns, and c) exploration of solutions. The workshops would include representatives of the major participant groups.

4. Outline structures and responsibilities

How can solutions guide the management system?

Help define decentralized structures and job responsibilities in terms of a) how the proposed solutions can be achieved, and b) how they support educational objectives.

field research began, on diversity between schools located on or near a main road and those far from a road. Where possible, the team observed classes. Although the last week of field research was the only one in which school was in session (most of the research coincided with the semester break), the team did observe teaching in 27 classrooms.

The researchers developed a series of questionnaires that gathered mostly quantitative baseline data about the educational environments in schools and about the concerns, relevant capacities, and activities of parents, teachers, school directors, and Woreda education officers. The team's two field interviewers, both experienced teachers, used the questionnaires to conduct the interviews in Tigrinya; the responses were later translated into English.

By way of example, the teachers' questionnaires asked about teachers' training background, living and working conditions, and about such topics as inspections and teaching aids. Parents were interviewed to determine who in their family attended school and why or why not children were sent to school. Woreda education officers were asked what they thought others in the education system—particularly Zonal Education Officers and school directors—expected them to accomplish in their jobs.

While the field interviewers gathered information, others on the Study Team conducted more qualitative, open-ended interviews with education officials, particularly those in the Zonal Offices. These interviews focused on system decision making and interactions. Example questions might include:

- How do system officials learn about educational problems, and how are the problems prioritized?
- How are education decisions made, and how are they carried out?
- What do officials at each level know about what officials at other levels do?
- How does the person being interviewed communicate with other levels?
- What is the most important issue or concern facing the educational system?

To focus on questions about system processes as they related to a specific problem, such as textbook distribution, a researcher might ask an official:

- How is the problem currently being addressed?

- How do other officials at other system levels support the solving of the problem?
- How could the problem be better addressed?

After these various data were collected, the research team prepared simple, comparative analyses for presentation and discussion at the workshop soon to follow.

Design of the Workshops

Before the first workshop, the Study Team leader and Project Researcher devised a format for the workshops. Each session began with a review of the purpose of the research, with a reminder to participants of their critical role in research process. Presentations by members of the Study Team then followed, pertaining to baseline data analysis of issues of educational access, quality, and equity. A substantial discussion period (1.5 to 2 hours) followed. After lunch, the researchers introduced a specific topic, or problem, for discussion. As detailed later, the first three workshops centered on the topic of textbook distribution; the final two on the concept of a “basic vision” of the future of the Tigrayan education system.

Two ground rules guided workshop discussions. First, the Project Researcher—who spoke Tigrinya and was an experienced workshop leader—chaired the meetings, rather than the Study Team leader. This symbolically turned the workshops over to participants rather than to a foreign researcher, and this became critical to facilitating frank and open workshop discussions. Equally important, conducting the workshops in Tigrinya facilitated the participation of everyone. The second ground rule was that problems were to be discussed in impersonal terms, without criticizing the performance of any individuals in the system. The objective was to spend workshop time on solutions to systemic problems as opposed to personalities and blame.

<i>Box 7. Comparison of Conventional Decentralization Studies with Research-and-Discussion Approach</i>	
<i>Conventional Decentralization Research</i>	<i>Research-and-Discussion Approach</i>
Instead of designing definitive research questionnaires, carrying out fieldwork up front, then analyzing field data, and later providing a series of solutions for decentralizing an education system the Tigray Study, in each of the four main Zones of Tigray, gathered and analyzed data, then presented it at workshops, then moved on to a new Zone. Modifications were made in data collection as questions were refined.
Instead of specifying the roles and responsibilities for an educational system the Tigray Study used findings on critical educational problems and how they are currently being addressed to facilitate workshop discussions on how members of the educational system believe their system, and its attendant roles and responsibilities, could be reformed.
Instead of focusing on how the education system should operate the Tigray Study attempted to promote the belief that good local information facilitates good local decision making.
Instead of attempting to develop global solutions the Tigray Study focused on the current situation of schools, asking local educators to suggest reforms to improve the system's support of their schools.
Instead of writing a final report for a select audience of educationalists or system leadership alone great effort was taken to make the research data, analysis, and reports accessible to all members of the education system — by maintaining a simple, direct approach to the study of problems and solutions, distributing Tigrinya-language copies of data, analysis and reports across the Region, and conducting workshop discussions in Tigrinya.

With the time between data collection and the workshops short (on two occasions, overnight), each member of the team analyzed a specific piece of the whole. One interviewer and one enumerator analyzed quality-based data, while the other pair analyzed equity- and access-based data. The Project Expert prepared reports on general impressions of the system, and on the state of the Region's pedagogical centers. The Project Researcher concentrated on gathering information about how actors at different levels of the education system perceived the system's problems and priorities. He also reviewed the activities of Woreda education officers and prepared an overview of the quantitative analysis. These rapid analyses were distilled into one-page summaries that the team could refer to and hand out during the workshops.

Because of the team's limited computer expertise, the questionnaires had been designed so that data could be tabulated using calculators. This constraint, which required designing questions that could be answered with relatively simple calculations, actually proved to be an advantage. These simple analytical strategies facilitated production of useful, highly accessible, and reliable data quickly. Box 7 summarizes differences between conventional studies of decentralization and the research-and-discussion approach.

Findings from the Field

Five categories of analysis resulted from the data collection described in the previous section: 1) baseline data describing the current situation of primary education in Tigray Region; 2) comparison of key findings between Zones and by equity categories (male-female, on-road/off-road); 3) description and comparisons of the perspectives and key concerns that parents and education officials held about their education system; 4) comparisons between how the system worked in principle and in reality; and 5) in-depth descriptions and analyses of specific topics. As the team traveled around the Region, several consistent themes began to emerge. Among them:

- **Two perspectives on decentralization:** Although Tigrayans collectively were found to share a strong desire to increase access to schools and enhance educational quality, the system had yet to arrive at a consensus over how to share responsibility and authority between schools and the three higher lev-

els of the newly regionalized education system. From the outset, two conflicting currents of decentralization articulated in Ethiopia's Education Sector Strategy (see Section I) surfaced. Indeed, the Strategy summoned different conceptions of what a decentralized education system should look like and how it should be implemented. Some education officials, primarily, but not exclusively those working at the Regional level, believed that decentralization had already devolved from the center to the regions. According to this "regionalist" perspective, the primary locus for change and reform was the Regional education office. Another current of thought maintained that decentralization should go further, to give more authority and autonomy to the local levels. This "localist" perspective, perhaps not surprisingly, was held mostly (although not entirely) by those at the school and Woreda levels.

- **Decentralization as an ideal vs the bureaucratic reality:** Rhetoric to the contrary, the Study found that centralization constituted the predominant model for everyday system activity. In operational terms, the Regional Education Bureau in Tigray had effectively assumed the role formerly held by the national Ministry of Education. Regional Bureau officials believed that decentralization had already occurred and that any further reforms should take place within the current structure.
- **Communication flows down, not up:** Communication in the education system tended to flow primarily downward and generally only between adjacent levels of the system. As a result, higher levels of the system had little awareness of the actual conditions facing schools or the variations between them. There was no mechanism for higher levels of the system to obtain regular information about the status of schools, the distribution of educational inputs, the effects of central policies, or how central policies are understood.
- **Boxes cause barriers to discussion:** The "boxes" of the four system levels—Region, Zone, Woreda, School—created barriers that many viewed as unsurmountable. Many Regional officials, for example, professed discom-

fort with the idea of dealing directly with Woreda officials, rather than through their Zonal counterparts. Interaction between system levels was rare. This rigid structure constituted an enormous barrier to decentralization beyond its existing regionalized form.

- ♦ **Uneven distribution of educational inputs:** Perhaps because of lack of information from schools to levels of the system where supplies were distributed, the Study found large variations in the ratios of textbooks to pupils, teachers to pupils, and other inputs. On average, two Tigrayan students shared one textbook. However, this average hid very uneven distribution across zones and grade levels. At the worst, no upper-level (grades four through six) textbooks at all were available in any of the schools that the Study Team visited in the Eastern Zone. In general, educational materials were most prevalent in the Western and Central Zones. As with textbook distribution, teacher-to-student ratios varied widely in Tigray. Teachers taught an average of 68 students per class in the Eastern Zone and 50 students per class in the other zones in the Region. At the worst, the team found one class of one hundred students in the Eastern Zone; at the best, classes held 27 or 28 students.
- ♦ **An overload of details:** With decision-making authority over even relatively small concerns centered in the hands of the few, Regional and Zonal officials were simply overloaded with work. Meanwhile, school and Woreda officers often waited for months for responses to even routine requests. Lower-level officials appeared to consider it inappropriate to inquire about the status of their requests and probably would not consider pushing their superiors for a favorable response.
- ♦ **Different priorities:** Regional education officials cited access to the education system as their highest priority, which they frequently defined as speeding up construction of school buildings. Most teachers, on the other hand, cited a shortage of books and teaching materials as their most pressing educational problem. Most parents did not feel they were qualified to talk about the system's priorities.

- ♦ **Access over equity and quality:** Education leaders, particularly at the Regional level, articulated their ideas about improvements in terms of access much more than they did in terms related to equity and quality.
- ♦ **On-road vs. off-road equity:** At the outset, the researchers assumed that the traditional "rural-urban" distinction would be an important one in Tigray. However, discussions with education officials made clear, and the data seemed to confirm, that the key difference in the relative resources of a school rested in its proximity (three kilometers or less) to an all-weather main road. The relatively accessible schools had better teacher ratios and more educational materials; teachers also exhibited higher morale.
- ♦ **Male-Female Enrollment:** The team found that school enrollment in Tigray is 45 percent female and 55 percent male, with a lower ratio of girls in the higher grade levels (the grade one average is 50-50; grade six average is 42 percent girls and 58 percent boys). However, this average, like those above, hid important differences across Zones. In some areas, such as in Mekelle and in the Central Zone, more girls than boys were enrolled. Although the numbers are inconclusive, possible reasons may be the value that parents in different parts of the Region place on education as a benefit to their sons' future.
- ♦ **Role of the Woredas:** The data found that Woreda Education Officers had only the most basic training for their jobs, and there was little consistency in their day-to-day activity. In some areas, Woreda Education Officers spent most of their time conducting inspections; elsewhere, they were involved in adult education. Moreover, no one seemed to have a clear picture of what Woreda Education Officers *should* do. This finding fed into the final workshop because a reorganization of the Woreda Offices, including duties required of the Education Officers, was under way at the Regional level as the Tigray Study took place.

Box 8. Taking Advantage of Individual Expertise

The expertise and interests of individual Team members resulted in some unanticipated research directions, which contributed to the picture of basic education in Tigray.

The Project Researcher, an expert in media education, undertook a special project on the status of radio education in Tigray. He found that significant resources were dedicated to developing radio education materials at the central level but that the system broke down in the distribution of radios and in providing training and incentives for teachers with access to radios but did not use them for the programs.

Similarly, the Project Expert, seconded to the study from the Regional Education Bureau, had a particular interest in the Region's pedagogical centers, central locations that should serve as a resource of teaching materials. These centers could have been vital links in a system where availability of materials was an issue. In fact, she found most were in such a state of disrepair or neglect that they could barely function. By documenting their condition, she could share this information at the workshops with officials who could rectify the situation. In addition, it turned out that hearing the report from someone "from the Bureau" increased the credibility of her comments.

- **Schools largely untouched by decentralization:** Although schools were certainly affected by the shift to the vernacular as the language of instruction, by the large scale school construction efforts coordinated by the Region, and by the resurgence of regional pride, the basic relationship between school and administrative authorities had not (yet) changed. Most schools said that they had little more contact with the Region than with the national Ministry. The world of most schools was bounded by local community and Woreda, and these relationships were little changed by decentralization.

Workshops: The Education System Thinks Aloud

Field research findings were intended to inform workshop discussions about how the system should best address its pressing education problems. These discussions, and the documents that the workshop participants produced, were designed to assist the Tigrayans themselves in establishing a decentralized management system to support their educational objectives. As noted, five workshops were convened, beginning with a workshop in the Western Zone shortly after completion of field research in that area, and ending with a final, three-day session in Mekelle one week before the Study came to an official close.

Gauging from comments received about the workshops, the opportunity for people from "lower" levels of the system to attend substantive discussions was unprecedented. Although few participants from school and Woreda levels participated actively, discussions about fundamental policy concerns had, in effect, become "decentralized." The perspectives, concerns, and prerogatives of the top regional policy makers came into clear view. Fundamental philosophical differences between colleagues in these upper levels revealed how decentralization issues could inspire animated debate. All work-

Box 9. A Workshop Schedule

1. Review of the purpose of the research and the role of the participants in guiding the research
2. Presentation of data, with one-page summary handouts
3. Discussion and questions
4. Break for lunch
5. Introduction of a specific topic (in the first three workshops, textbook distribution; in the fourth and fifth, a Basic Vision for the system)
6. Discussion on the topic

shop participants witnessed how their system grappled with the problem of decentralization and were invited to enter into the debate. Suddenly, the education system was thinking aloud.

The workshops also confronted the two most prominent complaints heard about the research effort. Responding to the opinions of some that the research was taking place "four years too late," the debate showed that the issues of decentralization and educational reform were far less settled than had been thought. Second, in response to the complaint that "everyone knows the problems, now we need solutions," the Study Team organized the workshops as opportunities for the entire system to participate in suggesting solutions to education problems.

The Drama Unfolds

The research team started with the Region's main priority—access to schooling—and took one step forward, choosing textbook distribution as the first problem to address in the workshops. Textbook distribution was framed in terms of the Regional Bureau's concern about access: in this case, of students having access to books. The purpose was to ask: Once students get to school, what do they do?

In addition to addressing the problem of access, however, the existing system of textbook distribution shed light on system inefficiency, low educational quality, and equity (in terms of unequal distribution to the schools). Just as importantly, many educators at the lower levels, especially teachers, had identified textbook availability as their most critical concern.

The **first workshop** took place in the Western Zone capital of Shire Indaselassie with Zonal, Woreda, and school participants. (Regional officials were not able to attend because of the bureau's annual *gem-gum* meeting.) After presenting what was found in the Zone, the Study Team focused on textbooks. The team had learned that under existing procedures, textbooks travel by truck from the Regional Bureau to the Zonal Office, often passing through Woredas and by schools for whom the books are intended. Then, the books often sat in the Zonal Office for months. In terms of building materials, the researchers found, the system did a better job of distribution. Although Zonal Officers were still involved, the materials traveled from the capital to

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storage warehouses closer to the Woredas, where they could be more easily obtained by people in the field. Using simple but direct discussion questions, such as "Why is it easier to get a cement bag to a school than a book?" the research team tried to get participants to examine why solutions for delivering building materials to schools had succeeded while textbook delivery remained a low priority. Most of the newly built schools the team visited contained very few textbooks.

After debate about possible solutions, this first workshop ended with a consensus document that suggested alternative systems. It stated:

1. Direct transport of books from Region to Woreda, or even from the Region directly to the school, is both possible and efficient.
2. Implementing direct transport of books from the Region to the Woreda or school would require a reform of the existing structure, and the creation of conditions that would be favorable for reform.

This first workshop showed that complaints about the existing system were widespread. It also demonstrated that Bureau officials were highly respected, and that participants wanted to be constructive rather than overly critical.

Even so, when learning about the document, some officials expressed concerns that carried through to subsequent workshops. The concerns centered on accountability: that is, the Zonal Offices needed to receive the books so that they could be accountable for the books in their Zone. If the books did not go to the Zonal Offices, according to this line of reasoning, few books would ever reach the schools.

The issue of accountability surfaced again at the **second workshop**, which was held at the Regional Bureau office in Mekelle. Representatives from every Zone, as well as many Bureau officials, attended. Those defending the existing system stated that reform would cause problems with accountability and transport. A counterproposal, a slight variation on the existing system, was offered. (Basically, it kept the distribution system intact, but allowed for Zonal officials to use their trucks to pick up books, rather than use a Regional truck.) Although the majority of the participants seemed to prefer the first proposal, the minority position held firm and a consensus could not form. After some debate, it was suggested that proponents of each proposal write up

their arguments, which would be typed and distributed to participants at the next workshop for further debate. The most vocal advocates of each proposal agreed to put their ideas and rationale on paper.

Thus, textbook distribution took on a larger philosophical meaning in Tigray's ongoing decentralization debate. Those advocating that textbooks could go directly to the Woreda or schools tended to support a more localist concept of decentralization. Conversely, those who felt that the accountability issue dictated maintenance of the existing system were more inclined toward the regionally centered concept of decentralization.

The two textbook-distribution documents were discussed at the **third workshop**, also held in Mekelle, with the proponents presenting their proposals and answering questions. An interesting, and perhaps not surprising, event occurred. By the end of the day, the more status quo proposal had garnered the majority of the votes. Some of the lower-level workshop participants, despite their frustrations with the existing system, changed their votes. So, what had earlier been the majority position in favor of reform fell to defeat: twenty-one people voted in favor of the keeping the existing system essentially intact and six voted in favor of reform.

Nonetheless, many Woreda and school officials privately related that the participation of so many lower-level education officials in a discussion of system operations was unprecedented. True, the existing system had not been changed substantively, but the views of the reformers had been heard and discussed. This fact alone allowed the third workshop to end on an upbeat note. The existence of open debate had moved the educational reform process forward.

At the **fourth workshop**, held in Axum, participants expected to ponder another specific topic. Instead, the Study Team leader posed a more general and more provocative question: How did decision making take place in the educational system? This topic was introduced as a way to lead to formulation of a *Basic Vision* for the system, the topic for the final workshop. The regionalist perspective dominated the discussion, although the strongest advocates of the localist perspective did speak out. The workshop ended with proponents of the two points of view agreeing to prepare Basic

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Vision documents of what a decentralized education system for Tigray should look like.

Without going into great detail, the two visions contained significant differences. The localist perspective, for example, proposed an increase in decision-making authority by the Woredas and schools and suggested new job descriptions for officials at each level. In the regionalist *Basic Vision*, the Regional Bureau would retain its authority (although the vision statement also suggested that Zonal Officers "influence and convince" those under them about new policies and decisions). Even though this did not reflect much in the way of power sharing, it did constitute a step ahead in decentralization: previously, Bureau and Zonal officers were not even required to inform Woredas and schools about new policies.

The **fifth workshop** lasted three days and had double the normal number of participants (about 70, rather than 35). The first day opened with speeches from leaders in the system. The Study Team again reviewed the research objectives and summarized its final data. A presentation on three decentralization models was made, with consideration of the pros and cons of each model discussed (for more information, see the Analytic Afterword of this paper).

The second day focused on the schools and Woredas. Besides trying to reassert the position of these levels in consideration of the overall system, the Study Team introduced the topic because Woreda reforms were underway apart from the decentralization debate. Finally, the third day began with the presentation of the two *Basic Vision* documents, both vigorously defended by their authors. Although some attempts were made to unite the two visions in a consensus document, this proved impossible. Instead, the final workshop produced a more benign resolution that called for increased outside support (including for the research-and-discussion study itself), in-service training for teachers and administrators, and increased participation by all in the system. Despite the inability to articulate a common vision, by the end of the day, the participants had taken over the proceedings and were determining what would emerge as the "product" of the workshop. This development was one of the main reasons that the Final Workshop was considered a success—by the end of the research process, the system was not only "thinking aloud," but doing so on its own.

The system's reform process had been strengthened in two ways: Real information was being gathered and discussed in relation to policy issues and structures. Perhaps more importantly, people who had never been involved in discussions of educational policy were talking to each other and to the leadership.

The workshops produced two kinds of important data for the overall research endeavor. First, the debates revealed divisions between various groups and individuals about how education reform should proceed in both specific and general terms. The workshops also resulted in a series of documents, either written by individual participants or drawn up as workshop consensus documents. Together, the debate and the documents provide a concrete basis for continuing the process of decentralization of Tigray's education system.

Looking Back at Tigray: Accomplishments and Disappointments

In looking back at the fifteen-week cycle of field work and workshops, the Study Team leader developed several conclusions about the research-and-discussion approach used in Tigray:

The Study gathered information and modeled a process for dialogue. As a study, the research did what most studies do—identify problems, then collect, analyze and present data about those problems. The fact those data were used to frame widely participatory, public discussions about education was an important, and uncommon, advance. In terms of the stages discussed in the introduction, the Study progressed through stages 1 and 2 and “piloted” the third stage of reflective participatory generation of solutions. The research-and-discussion process set the Region's views up for debate. It enhanced awareness and expectations of officials throughout the system of what decentralization could become. Leaders maintained their authority, but with the awareness that others may examine their actions carefully in the future.

It is difficult to effect change after you leave. The process of change must be followed through by local officials and follow-on project personnel. If they don't buy in, results won't happen. Although the Tigray Decentralization Study was planned as a bridging

activity to the broader BESO project, logistical difficulties prevented most BESO project staff from attending the workshops. Thus while project staff can use the data and documents produced at the workshops, the gap between bridging activity and formal project is one of the limitations in pushing decentralization ahead with BESO. Similarly, of course, Tigrayan officials can choose how they will use the information.

The Team wanted to prepare more detailed profiles of education in each Zone, but ran out of time. In addition, the field research took place while school was out of session. This made teachers harder to find, and fewer classrooms that could be observed. On the other hand, had it not been the school break, the Team's excellent staff would have been at their own educational institutions and unavailable for research.

Education leaders still dominate the system. Leaders of an educational system can maintain control of the decentralization process if they can control the debate over how decentralization is defined and thus what the nature of specific reforms should be and who should participate in the debate. Although the Study Team attempted to prevent any group from dominating workshop discussions, some were heard more frequently and more loudly than others. The team's response was to accept this reality and to help articulate the concerns of the lower-level officials, without putting any one individual on the spot. Despite the attempt to leave definitions of decentralization aside, the regionally centered and locally centered views of decentralization were reflected in how officials at all levels thought, behaved, and responded to expected and unexpected situations.

The study generated a great deal of useful information—both about problems in the system and the way the system deals with problems. The study identified a number of ways in which the system could make improvements, on a conceptual as well as practical scale. On the practical side, for example, the research identified lack of training on the part of Woreda officials as an important constraint to the Region's decentralization plans. At the classroom level, teachers' ambivalence toward use of textbooks suggested several ways in which existing resources might be better utilized through strategic training efforts. More difficult is getting the system to look back on its accustomed structural ways of addressing educational problems.

Analytic Afterword

Because of the widespread acceptance of decentralization as a concept, coupled with the almost invariability of controversy surrounding any concrete details of a decentralization plan, those who would change education systems often cloak their agendas under the mystique of decentralization. In such cases, looking at espoused policy sheds little light on real intents; instead, the real meaning of decentralization can only be found in the details of what is implemented. There is considerable room, under the very broad term of educational decentralization, to make specific arrangements to achieve a variety of very different purposes. Such purposes might include improvements in the quality of instruction or they might, as is often the case, leave the school untouched.

In this case, Ethiopia had declared a policy of decentralization.⁴ Yet enough of the details remained unspecified that, from the perspective of schools at least, much of the essential nature of the decentralization had yet to be decided. It is true, of course, that the language of instruction was now set at the Region rather than at the national level, and this would have a major impact on schools. Yet the essential roles and relationships between schools and the administrative structure had yet to be defined. Was the system to organize itself to support the work of schools, or to administer them? Were schools the focal point for change, or was it the central office of the “decentralized” region?

In Tigray there were at least two clear meanings of decentralization in use. The first, which we have named the regionalist perspective, saw the regional office as the center of decentralization. In contrast, the localist perspective, though less clearly articulated, saw schools and Woredas as the primary locus of decentralized activity. Not surprisingly, the localists drew their support from local educators—some though not all teachers, school directors, and Woreda officials. The localist perspective was given legitimacy by the TPLF tradition of grassroots “consultation,” by pride in the Tigrayan

⁴ It is interesting that the national policy of decentralization did not enter into the discussions of educational decentralization in Tigray. In some sense, it seems, decentralization was taken so completely for granted that the Region was free to implement the policy as it saw fit.

victory over the Derg armies, and, not least, by the values of the external research team. The regionalists, also not surprisingly, drew their support from Regional government officials. Their legitimacy derived from their positions as leaders and by virtue of their education and experience. As of the end of the study, it was unclear which viewpoint would most inform the implemented detail of Tigray's educational decentralization.

A third type of decentralization, not evident in Tigray, relies heavily on external technical expertise to gather and analyze data and interpret the implications of data for system structure. The following typology attempts to make sense of these three perspectives.

According to this schema, when the regional office used the word decentralization, they appeared to mean regionalization, something like what is called “reproducing the center” here. By moving the center closer to the field or client, the center may become more responsive to the needs of its particular clients. If a number of such centers are created, as with Ethiopia's regions, the overall system is likely to achieve substantial variation across units. However, to the extent that the center is simply reproduced at a lower level, schools are unlikely to see much difference. Indeed, schools reported little difference in previous and decentralized systems. The center makes decisions, which the bottom implements. A key theme is enforcing the rules. Indeed in Tigray, fear of accountability played a major role in system paralysis. Error is seen as problematic, for which someone must be held accountable. This approach to decentralization is quite centralized—it relies on directives, it has relatively little interest in information and even less in participation. Because of this, perhaps its greatest limitation, it fails to benefit from local information or from the insights or creativity of local implementors. Thus it is difficult to use this approach to address problems that require professionalism on the part of local implementors. A centralist approach is relatively effective in building structures, but much less so in enabling teachers to improve the quality of instruction under widely varying local circumstances. Because the new center is responsible for so much of the system's coordination, it is prone to overload, as was observed in Tigray. Such a model would seem to be the default approach to decentralization in a context in which centralized command structures have dominated for decades, and in which alternative models of or-

ganization have been lacking. In such a context, turning over substantial authority to schools would surely appear to lead to the chaos that officials reported fearing.

The approach we are calling "expert design" differs substantially from the previous model in its rationality. Essentially technical, this approach to decentralization typically breaks an education system into its constituent functions and assigns functions to the most appropriate levels of the system, according to capacity. The logic of this approach to decentralization is that a function should be located as close as possible to the level of the system that both has good information about that function and is ca-

<i>Approaches to Decentralization</i>			
Approach to Decentralization/ Dimension	Reproducing the Center	Expert Design	Dialogue Learning
The Idea	Center is moved downward	Technical experts plan an ideal system	Ongoing process set up to encourage system learning, participation
Goal	Center closer to the "field" or "the action"	Ideal match of functions, capacities & information for more efficient, rational system	Negotiated, ongoing reform process
Division of Labor	Top makes decisions (authority); Bottom implements (responsibility)	Different functions fit different levels according to capacity	School is responsible for teaching; Rest of system is responsible for supporting school
Management Approach	Enforcement	Either enforcement or instructional support	Instructional support
Design & Implementation	Separate, sequential processes	Separate, sequential processes	Interlinked, iterative, ongoing
What is designed at outset?	Directive	Plan for final structure	Process

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<i>Approaches to Decentralization (continued)</i>			
Approach to Decentralization/ Dimension	Reproducing the Center	Expert Design	Dialogue Learning
Interest in participation	Low	Low	High
Interest in information	Relatively low	High	High
Approach to research	Centrally driven; How to carry out central decision	Extracting; Experts "mine" from "field," then interpret	Pedagogical, Participatory
Division of Labor: Research	Bottom provides data; Top interprets	Bottom provides data; Top interprets	All levels involved in providing & interpreting data
Attitude toward error	Defensive	Heroic attempt to know/anticipate all needed information	Potentially open as source of learning
Who are researchers?	Central decision makers, if any	Technical experts	(potentially) Everyone in the system
View of technical information	It is useful and possible to design, if not implement, "best" system	It is useful and possible to design, if not implement, "best" system	Sheds light on trade-offs that must be negotiated.
Problems	Too simplistic; Transfer of liabilities rarely effective; Limited capacity or incentives at lower levels; Little likely effect on school practice	Too central and front-loaded; Lack of will to give up power	Little knowledge about how to do it; Little incentive for center/top to undertake in absence of crisis

<i>Approaches to Decentralization (continued)</i>			
Approach to Decentralization/ Dimension	Reproducing the Center	Expert Design	Dialogue Learning
What problem sparked new approach?	Concerns about problems of over-centralization; Donor pressure; "Democratic wish;" Desire for power	Overly optimistic and vague promises of "decentralization"	Failure of centrally-initiated efforts to reach "beneficiaries" in periphery
Principal challenges	Selling to non-center; Implementation; Weak capacity of non-center	Getting enough information to develop good design; Implementation!	Keeping the process going; Maintaining good information and good participation; Providing useful technical input at appropriate places; Energy intensive; Gaining participation from under-represented viewpoints; Leveling information playing field
Nickname	Dictating system	Planned system	Learning system

pable of making technically good decisions. A teacher, for example, may have the best information about the students in her class, while a school director may have the best information about the needs of the community. However, if the teacher is not able to make best use of the information she has, decisions should, from this viewpoint, be made at a higher level of the system—school director, Woreda, though probably not region.

This approach typically relies heavily on technical, usually external, experts, who develop a blueprint for an ideal system structure. This structure is designed then imple-

mented in as close a form as is feasible. Expert design relies heavily on information, but the nature of information needed is generally defined by the experts. Informants are often viewed as sources of data, but not sources of solutions; thus data are extracted from the "field"; recommendations are made by the experts and typically shared primarily with the leadership. Expert design requires good information up front, but it is not very open to local information not in experts' conceptual frameworks. It often fails to include a political understanding, and thus implementation can be difficult. The approach is still top-down. It suffers from difficulty in convincing the center to let go of power and lack of demand on the part of the non-center, as "local" participation has been passive, at best. As such, this approach does little to build the capacity of local decision makers. For obvious reasons, expert design is the preferred approach of the consulting and donor/lender community; it does provide a rational basis for planning decentralization. Less obvious is the appeal to local policy elites, who can often decide whether or not to undertake the suggested changes.

This study has proposed a "dialogue-learning" approach to decentralization, in which the first task is to establish an iterative process of identifying problems, dialoguing and hypothesizing about remedial structural "solutions," implementing and monitoring the effects of these solutions on desired outcomes, then redefining problems, and so forth. Such an approach, we argue, should potentially be most effective at utilizing both central and local sources of information and making maximum use of participation from all levels and capacities of the system. A primary task is that of seeking information and negotiating trade-offs of alternative solutions. A dialogue-learning approach is potentially the most promising in terms of professionalizing local actors and developing system capacity. Because of the energy required to foster participation, this approach is likely to have less energy available to focus on technical rigor. Making information available to participants with different degrees of educational and technical sophistication is a challenge. External researchers are likely to meet resistance from local leaders if the viewpoints of typically under-represented groups are highlighted in a serious way. This approach is unlikely to be the first choice of local leaders, for it requires that they cede some authority in the interests of wider participation. The approach is likely to be a favorite of donors/lenders because of its appeal to participation, a term as subject to mystification as decentralization. Though conceived to counteract perceived problems in existing studies of decentralization, it is

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far from fully developed. From the Tigray experience, we have learned several lessons. Next time, we would:

- ♦ Be less likely to underestimate resistance from the newly decentralized "center," and would seek from the outset to devise a better strategy for winning over the existing leadership;
- ♦ Seek better ways of bringing technical information about trade-offs into the dialogue process;
- ♦ Develop ways to discuss the structural implications of the findings and structural remedies;
- ♦ Develop better methods of sampling;
- ♦ Feed back insights into the data collection instruments;
- ♦ Communicate more clearly the rationale for focusing on textbooks as a problem to solve;
- ♦ Fight the rationalist fallacy that if someone sees the light, he or she will follow it; and
- ♦ Work harder to ensure systematic follow-up.

This paper describes our attempt to develop an approach to incorporate a series of ideas, hypotheses really, about the ways in which educational change can and ought to take place. Some might object to this approach as too ideological. In this section, however, we have attempted to show that the competing schemes are equally ideological, worse perhaps, in that their ideology is hidden. As suggested earlier, the study did not achieve its ultimate objective. It was, however, the first study available in Tigrinya since the end of the war which everyone in the system could read. That surely is worth a great deal.

—James H. Williams