



**Interview with Mr. Meseret Tadesse Beshah, Executive
Director, Forum on Sustainable Child Empowerment (FSCE)
– Ethiopia¹**

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¹ Please find a brief biography at the end

This interview was conducted by The African Child Information Hub of The African Child Policy Forum (ACPF).

Thank you Mr. Meseret for accepting to be interviewed for The African Child E-Newsletter of The African Child Information Hub

It is my pleasure to be a guest for the African Child Information Hub and I am grateful for being invited to share our experiences.

If I may start, could you please tell us about yourself?

I am Meseret Tadesse. I was born and brought up in a small district town which is not very far from Addis Ababa² in what is locally known as the North Shoa area. This is where I went to primary and high school as well. My father was a civil servant and Head of a finance office. My mother was a house wife. I did my schooling in this district town until I joined Addis Ababa University in the early 1980s. In Addis Ababa University I studied Applied Sociology after which I joined a government organization which at that time was called the Rehabilitation Agency for the Disabled that was under the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. I started as a Social Worker in an orphanage where orphaned children received institutional services. They primarily came from drought-prone areas.

Where were these drought-prone areas?

The drought-prone areas at that time were in the *Wollo* area in Northern Ethiopia. Those children were brought to the orphanage where I was working. Some of them were children of military soldiers who were fighting at the front and they were being served in this institution. That was how I entered into the labour force,

² Addis Ababa is the capital city of Ethiopia.

working as a Social Worker. I was then promoted to manage a hostel for young men. The hostel provided services for urban destitute young boys who were brought in by the government's Social Welfare Department. I was then promoted to the head office where I served as the Main Section Head for the Department of Social Welfare Services of the Rehabilitation Agency under the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. I was later assigned to be a Team Leader of a community based rehabilitation programme unit. I then left this government organization to join Save the Children Sweden's refugee programme in *Gambella* located in the Western part of Ethiopia. I started working there with children of refugees from Southern Sudan. The programme targeted the educational part of the comprehensive service for refugees. After that, I returned to Addis Ababa to work for another organization called Francis Missionary Sisters that had a community based development programme in the Northern part of Addis Ababa. It provided services to children and young mothers. This later on gave me the interest to work with an organization that worked with young people. I joined the oldest NGO in Ethiopia known as the Young Men's Christian Association or YMCA. I know that it is even older than the Red Cross. It was very much interesting to serve there as its National General Secretary. After serving there for 5 years, I was attracted to join the Forum on Street Children Ethiopia so now I am here!

What are the major contributions of FSCE and what are its major achievements?

The forum has contributed in introducing and widely disseminating the UNCRC in Ethiopia. The forum has also achieved the institutionalization of child protection work in this country. Basically our work is with the government, more specifically the police force. FSCE has introduced model projects like child-friendly courts as well as the introduction of the preventive and integrated community based approach like community based correction systems. So we can say that these are the major achievements of FSCE.

What challenges do you face?

FSCE used to work in areas such as rehabilitation of street children and also preventing some children from joining street life. Focusing only on those areas didn't have that much of an impact on the protection of the many other children who were at risk. Those were merely issue-based strategies like working only on the specific issue of child trafficking, child labour or sexually abused or exploited children. This approach had not produced much because these problems still exist even today after 20 years of working in this area. Problems faced by children have not been impressively reduced so these are the challenges, especially the use of an issue-based approach to addressing problems.

How serious are the problems of child abuse, neglect and exploitation in Ethiopia? Is there any comprehensive study that you or others have done on these issues?

I can say that child abuse, neglect and exploitation are significant especially when you consider the child protection indicators developed by UNICEF. They show that child abuse, neglect and exploitation is widely present in Ethiopia. We have tried to look into issues in specific areas. For instance, we had a multi-stakeholder child protection programme here in Addis Ababa where we looked into the extent to which abuse, neglect and exploitation of children is an issue. For example, in *Woreda*³ [District] 8 of Arada Sub-City in Addis Ababa we undertook a comprehensive pilot study to see if there really are indicators that exist in the area. The results showed that child abuse, neglect and exploitation is prevalent in all 13 indicators used like violence against children, which is widely practiced in that community. It was found that 55.4 per cent of the community members violate the rights of children in their upbringing. About 30 per cent of children were living without parental care, including street children who do not

³ "*Woreda*" is an Amharic word meaning district.

receive affection, emotional support or even basic services. Child labour was also widely observed, about 26.3 per cent. Using all the indicators and despite the differences in degrees and magnitude, we can say that it is evident that child abuse, neglect and exploitation does exist.

When was this study carried out?

It was done this year. The first draft report was completed in February 2011 and we will present it this Friday at a network meeting at UNICEF to share our findings with others.

What do you think are the solutions to sustainably resolve these problems?

Our [FSCE] approach is to understand the context rather than working on issues. We look at what context and in what type of situation are children abused, exploited or harmed. It is a multi-stakeholder approach, a new system that we have put in place for community based child protection programmes. It is a new strategy against the issue-based approach. We previously worked with the police. When an individual child is abused or exploited the case would be handled by our social worker working alongside the police and the case would be referred to a court. We were following a case by case approach. Instead of following this old approach, we started to look into what are the contexts and situations under which abuse and exploitation of children occur. Through this assessment, we found that some of the abuses were occurring in the family context where family members or parents are unwilling or unable to protect their children. Children could therefore be living in an abusive or exploitative situation. This problem was also observed in the neighborhood or the community. There are cases of abuse and harm being inflicted on children while they are going and coming from school or while spending time in their community.

We then said that if this is the context in which abuse and exploitation occurs then why don't we change this abusive and exploitative environment into a protective environment. Why can't every family be a protector of children instead of being an abuser or exploiter? Why can't every family member, brother, father, mother, neighbor or community member all be protectors? With this aim, we have embarked on new work. In some areas we have started what we call a community conversation on child protection issues for communities to identify the major reasons for abuse, neglect and exploitation. Is it because of culture, religion or the law being loosely practiced? Then the community discusses it among themselves and tries to come up with a solution on how to protect their children. This is the new methodology that we are now trying to apply in our work. In this multi-stakeholder approach we have 3 major actors. The first actor is the government led by the Women, Children and Youth Offices and includes the police, justice offices, education, labour and social affairs and other concerned offices at the community or *Woreda* level. Another actor is community representatives that are locally known as *Idir*⁴. The third actor is the children themselves. The children organize themselves in their child protection clubs in their schools and come up with their own plans on how to make their environment conducive for children. Of course civil society, youth groups and women's groups are also involved and they work together. This approach is what we believe can be used to bring about a sustainable way of protecting children.

Do you think children in conflict with the law in Ethiopia are getting support from the government or civil society organizations?

We cannot conclude that all children are getting this support. To some extent, there has been work done by the government or by some NGOs in assisting these children. But to us, on the issue of children in the justice system, whether they are in conflict with the law or whether they are the victim of an abuse or

⁴ "*Idir*" is an Amharic word that refers to a community based organization that offers mutual socio-economic support to its members.

exploitation, this should also be part of a comprehensive community-based child protection programme. They can be assisted if their plight is comprehensively considered with other child-related issues. One indicator in our multi-stakeholder approach is that of children in conflict with the law so they are being served in a community based correction system. We are working with the government and other stakeholders on a diversion programme for minor offenses and for children to be rehabilitated through the community based correction system.

Does this rehabilitation take place in the community?

Yes. We have elders who mediate and who provide counseling for these children. We also have our own professional councilors who intervene through the community based correction system.

As you are well aware, the theme for the 2011 Day of the African Child is “*All Together for Urgent Action in favour of – Street Children*”. Please share with us any good practices that you know of in addressing the plight of children living and/or working in the street.

The plight of street children would be best addressed if we could enhance this community based approach where the community and families take on the responsibility for these children and respond to the issue of children without parental care, including street children. The theme of *All Together for Urgent Action in favour of Street Children* matches with our thinking of an inclusive all together approach with all stakeholders including the government, the community and NGOs. All stakeholders should come in and take stakes in supporting street children. Otherwise if we just follow the case by case approach...the issue of one child living or working on the street...then trying to rehabilitate and reintegrate that child...you will find that there are many thousands of children flocking to the street and are at risk of joining the street life. We have to consider this issue through a holistic approach. The families, the parents and the people in the

community who have resources should also be responsible for this and all of us should join hands to assist in the preventive aspect as well.

Can this approach be applied in other countries in Africa?

In Africa, the best thing is that the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child itself highly recognizes the importance of African cultural, family and community issues to the wellbeing of children. This is the right way of understanding the African situation. Unless we work on the context, the culture and the way communities practice the upbringing of their children, we cannot find solutions from abroad. There are many community and grassroots level solutions. We [Africans] are highly family centered and we are very much associated to our communities so the community based approach is appropriate for the African situation.

From your experience, what would you say are principal elements that any child-focused organization must base its advocacy and actions on for the protection of vulnerable children?

From our lens or way of looking at the issue of child protection, what FSCE encourages is that we should all look into the context and situation under which children experience harm, abuse and exploitation. The diagnosis part should come first by looking into the context and situation. For example, the context under which a child can be abused and exploited in the *Arada* sub-city of Addis Ababa might not be the same as another area of the city like *Sendafa* or *Bole* because these environments are different by themselves. The way families are organized, the way they interact and their lifestyles as well differ from one area to another. So we have to look into the context in which children are being brought up. Rural and urban differences should also be considered.

We have to answer the question of how can we set up corrective mechanisms so that children will not be abused or exploited. Solutions should not be something prefabricated somewhere else but should come from within the community, with that neighborhood context as well. Communities should come up with solutions that are suitable for them. It should be something that matches their capacities in the upbringing of their children. If we all work towards this end we can have greater success. For example, in the child protection indicators that I mentioned earlier, there are two elements that have shown impressive results in Ethiopia. The work that has been done in the areas of early marriage and female genital mutilation has resulted in a significant reduction in the number of affected children. This was made possible because a lot of work went into awareness raising and changing the mindset of communities. So the community responded and stopped the cutting of the genitals of females and the early marriage of their children. This came about by changing the mindset in communities that were practicing these abuses. For many cases of violence, abuse and exploitation of children that occur in our communities and in our society, I think changing their outlook or perspective should be something that we should work on and that is where we there are impressive results can be achieved. At FSCE, our pilot project that uses this approach is already showing impressive results.

Do you have any other comments, suggestions which you would care to add?

In dealing with any issues, I think it is good for us to take our local experiences into consideration. It is not enough to provide laws or to issue some enactment in relation to child protection work; that by itself is not enough. What we need is implementation on one hand and at the same time we have to get action from the community which is something that we should all work hard on. Child protection should not only be done for the sake of law enforcement but for the wellbeing of the society and for development purposes. Any issue of child protection is directly or indirectly associated with the UN Millennium Development Goals. Take

for example the issue of child labour. A child working in labour is a child that is out of school. If the child is out of school it means that you will not attain the universal primary school completion in this country [Ethiopia]. This deters the development goal of the country or in any nation for that matter. Issues like early marriage and female genital mutilation have to do with gender issues. When the girl child is married, she is going to be out of school and that brings disparity between girls and boys in educational attainment. So whatever we are doing in our child protection endeavors has to do with the overall achievement of the UN MDGs. This is why we have to work hard for the protection of children in collaboration with the government and communities through helping to build capacity of all actors including children themselves to make them resilient to abusive and exploitative situations. So this is all that I wanted to add.

Thank you very much Mr. Meseret for this interview!

It was my pleasure as I have said and thank you for giving me this opportunity.

Biography of Mr. Meseret Tadesse Beshah

Executive Director, Forum on Sustainable Child Empowerment-Ethiopia (FSCE) (2008 – Present)

National General Secretary, Young Men's Christian Association of Ethiopia (YMCA) (2003-2007)

Project Manager, Franciscan Missionaries (1997-2003)

Project Manager, Save the Children Sweden – Ethiopia (1996-1997)

Social Worker, Save the Children Sweden – Ethiopia (1995-1996)

Social Worker, Team Leader, Rehabilitation Center Manager and Main Section Head, Rehabilitation Agency, Ethiopian Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (1983-1996)

He has a Masters of Arts in Regional and Local Development Studies