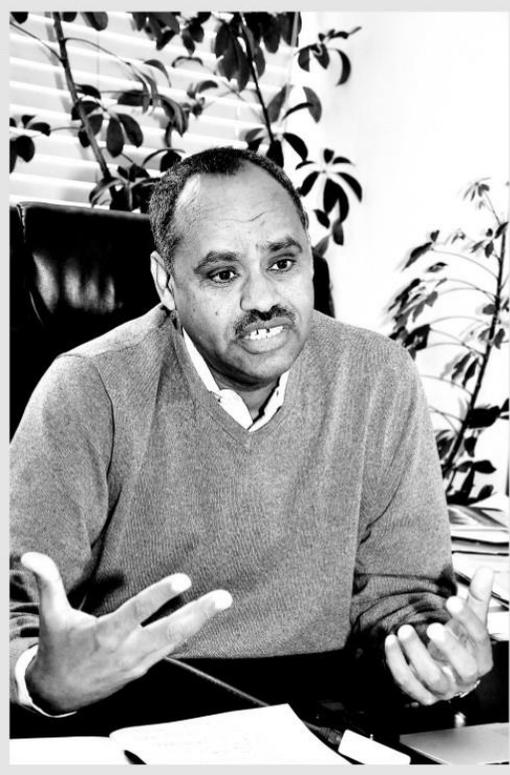


“Public media in Ethiopia is trailing with lack of adequate leadership” - Negash Teklu



Negash Teklu, 55, was born in the town of Adwa. The young Negash went with his elder brother to many areas of the South to attend his elementary education. After returning to his home land years later, he completed high school education. As a first ranking student Negash joined the General Wingate School. But, as his awareness grew with his age, he became attracted with the revolution that erupted in 1966 E. C. Things were not comfortable for Negash here in Addis. He went back home and joined the then TPLF underground activists. As the military became closer to unveil their underground activities, he joined the guerrilla fighters just at the age of 19. After victory he founded Walta Information Center and headed it for about 15 years. He is now head of PHE consortium. The Ethiopian Herald had an interview with him on issues related to his life, the media and others. Excerpts;

Herald: Let's begin with introducing yourself to our esteemed readers.

Negash: I was born in the town of Adwa in 1951 E.C. attended my elementary education at Adwa Queen Sheba school. Then after, I went with my elder brother, who was a teacher, to Jinka. Then we went to Konso as my brother was transferred to

each there. I attended up to grade 5 in these towns. Later, my brother was returned back to Tigray and

I finalized my junior education at Wukro. As I was ranked first among my classmates, I got the chance to join the General Wingate school here in Addis. After attending grade 9 and 10 at this school, the 1966 revolution approached.

I was keen to take part in the revolution, and as I was not comfortable of the environment here, I went back to Adwa to finalize my high school education there and as a member of Tigrean Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) underground movement. When our underground activities were getting closer to be under control of the military regime, I fully joined the guerrilla fighters of TPLF in 1969. I was severely wounded during the struggle and still the bullet exists in my body. I was taken abroad for medication and luckily recovered and began my contribution as an agent of foreign diplomacy from there. I have undertaken many public mobilization tasks in Sudan and Europe. Till 1985, I had been undertaking various propaganda and mobilization duties for both TPLF and later to EPRDF. Finally, I returned back to my country and established Walta Information Center, in collaboration with my colleagues. I was head of the center for about 15 consecutive years. Later, in 2000, I left Walta and founded PHE (Population, Health and Environment) Consortium, a local NGO working on population, health and environment in an integrated approach. I am the one who generated

the idea for its coming into being and still I am Chief Executive Officer of the consortium. I am married and have two children.

Herald: you were very young when you joined the TPLF fighters. What inspired you to take such a risky responsibility at such a young age?

Negash: as I told you, I have had the opportunity to tour to various parts of Ethiopia during my early ages and this has helped me to broaden my understanding of the country. I used to read various texts that helped to enhance my understanding on many issues. This was the defining characteristic of most members of the then generation. These and many other pushing factors made joining the struggle by the time a right decision in the minds of many of us. People in all standards of living felt the brutal regime's oppression equally.

Things went from bad to worse after the imperial regime was overthrown by the military. Those of us who have the chance to get education can easily understand the reality by then. The establishment of many political groups including TPLF, Meison, and EPRP, have contributed for our awareness and

participation in the political arena. Many of those who joined the struggle were in the same age with me and one can not easily resist the strong urge for freedom inside self-existing in that scenario.

Herald: you have been leading one of the private media outlets in the country for not less than 15

years. You also have exposure to know the public media closely. Some people criticize the public media as not representative of both the societal and governmental interests. What is your view on this? Negash: the journey of the media in Ethiopia, during the last couple of decades, was not as such in the right direction. Due to lack of clear direction and professional maturity, it has not played a huge role expected from it. I can not say that both the private and public media have attained the goals they were established for. They are in the same situation even at present. There is a wrong view in the public media that covering negative news and weakness of the government is not acceptable. They are focused only on reporting flowery and positive stories about the government. For this problem both the journalists and the media management staff are responsible. If the leadership is not capable of correcting this wrong view, all the existing public media houses could not play the needed role in the country's overall socioeconomic development. They should reflect both the negative and positive sides of the story by reporting challenges with their causes and achievements through direct participation of the beneficiaries themselves. It is only through this way that they can start to represent the interest of both the society and the government. The private media also is in similar

wrong direction. They are preoccupied with negative stories of the country as if they can not sell their newspapers without writing negative stories. They are focused on sensationalizing the issues they write on. This has made the private media play almost no constructive role in the country's development. Of course, some are trying to keep their balance and show both sides of the story. I suggest the government and other stakeholders should make effort to pave a better direction for both the private and public media to play their respective constructive role in the sustained development of the country. The media should adopt the culture of accountability and should rely more on justifications for their reporting. Constructive engagement with the media is necessary. I think the government should direct both the private and public media in the right direction via implementing various effective strategies. The media can work on constructive tasks on issues like corruption, maladministration, and issues related with the country's development in line with the concept of developmental journalism. We have tried to create this situation when I was at Walta. We tried to give due emphasis for the challenges of the society. We faced repeated challenges to air our works on radio and television due to decisions from these media houses not to air some of our works. The media in the country should grow together, as the domination of one of the media houses can not give the desired fruit from the sector. If we look at the issues raised by the German and American Amharic radio services and attracting more audience from the local media, some of them would have been covered by our domestic media. The main thing is the leadership in the media should create constructive engagement and tailor strategies that can address tangible societal woes. We should bear in mind that the society can effectively participate in the national effort for more development if it is only aware of the reality on the ground. For this to happen, timely, real, and deeply analyzed information should be supplied to the public. For instance, if you even compare Ethiopia Radio and Radio Fana, there is a clear difference in the tendency of the audience that many favor to listen to the later. The reason for this is very clear. Fana tries to address timely issues and show to some extent both sides of the story in a relatively balanced way. All media houses should know that the society is well aware of what they are doing and can evaluate their works before deciding to listen or read a certain media outlet. As a result, they have to strive to reflect the reality on the ground.

Herald: both the private and public media have come a long way to reach their overall present state. Was there any effort to re-direct them make them run on the right track?

Negash: the society at present prefers to watch foreign medias instead of watching our domestic public media. It takes the private media not as sources of reliable information. Most of the newspapers are today highly dependent on advertisements for their continuity. The society can not easily accept you when you deny development, about which it can prove with its own naked eye easily. Even though supplying only flowery reports are not needed, if the media has to play a constructive role, there is a tendency to stick to the wrong way. This is clearly indicative of weak leadership in the media which is not capable of taking measures that could correct direction of the media they are leading. As a result, these media are getting far away from the need of the society and the country's effort for development as well. Some effort are made to correct the situation via evaluation and giving corrective direction but the measures taken this way can not bring basic changes to the sector. The main remedy is to enable the media become capable of addressing the challenges, woes and concerns of the society at large. It must report objectively both the strengths and drawbacks of the government. They should not be led by directions tailored by subjective assessments. I do not think the government is happy with the public media reporting only flowery news. Even opposition parties do not need one sided media reports. They need to base on the society. So, we can change the media by properly filling the leadership gap.

Herald: Why did you decide to leave the media and establish PHE?

Negash: As I have told you, I have tried my best to contribute my share through Walta, for not less than 15 years. I believe I have contributed my share of which I am proud of. For instance, if you can remember, Walta was the pioneer to prepare forums of open discussion on various issues for the first time in the country. Political parties made open debates via our effort and preparation of the necessary situation for this. Issues related with HIV, corruption, and many others are widely and openly discussed thanks to the forum we prepared. You can get records of the proceedings at Walta's library. We also took the initiative in preparing the Q and A programme for students throughout the country aiming that enhancing their knowledge is key for the country's overall development. Walta also tried to reflect the reality that Ethiopia is a country of Nations and Nationalities via a programme named Hagere, on which we aired various documentary films showing the culture, life style and other values of the Nations and Nationalities of the country. We introduced, Ertale and Dalol, both are known tourist attraction sites in the Afar Region, for the first time when we started this program. In addition, we made relentless effort to leave historical records of the Ethio-Eritrean war by publishing two books that can show chronology of the war, feature articles that can show the course of the war, address questions from the society in such an adequate manner. I believe, within the policy framework, we have tried to shape our media to be an agent of constructive engagement and development. Then after, I shifted my attention to a new approach that is better close to the development endeavor. PHE has helped me to engage more on the development of social aspects of the society. We tailored the NGO from the perspective of sustainable and integrated development. Development endeavors both in our country and the other world are less effective just due to the fact that our approach is not in a way that can answer the society's question in such an integrated manner. The social, economic and even environmental aspects of societal interest should be addressed in coordinated way. You can not effectively remedy educational, health and agricultural challenges of the society in a disintegrated way. Integration of socioeconomic and environmental endeavors defines realistic sustainable development. The first conference aimed at practicing this ideal on the ground emphasized on even expanding it to an east African level project. What is peculiar to Ethiopia is it is burdened with huge population far exceeding the level of economic development. As a result, we need to shape the development dynamics in line with population growth management. Unless population growth is effectively addressed, it could have negative repercussions on the economy. Based on this we founded Population, Health and Environment (PHE) consortium. We started with 7 organizations as ad-hock members. Ministry of Environment, Addis Ababa University, Arba Minch University, Engender Health, Lem Ethiopia, Horn of Africa Regional Environmental Centre, and Consortium of Reproductive Health Associations were the founding members. Now, after 7 years we have about 55 members. They are joined under the umbrella of the ideal of integrated approach. Though it is a challenging approach, it is effective. We have transformed to such an integrated approach from the present system of disintegrated engagement. We have to show it practically on the ground, instead of speaking about its necessity theoretically. We now have pilot projects almost in all the regions. We add value to the integrated approach from lessons we draw from these pilot projects. For instance, the ministry of health may not 100 percent attain its goal of preventing maternal mortality, if it continues to solely act in various ways. It needs the support of other sectors. The government should incorporate this approach as one mechanism of engagement at woreda, zone and regional level. We appreciate the Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP), but it has limitation when seen from the integration point of view. Every sector is engaged solely on its own way. There should be a way to coordinate and integrate every sector on the ground for a better achievement. Herald: the NGOs are often criticized for not bringing tangible changes on the lives people in both rural and urban areas. Do you think the new approach could bring change from this point of view?

Negash: the NGOs in Ethiopia do not have their own chamber or forum like the business community. Since a year ago, we are trying to found our own forum. I am chairman of the forum. If we look at the structural make up of the

NGOs, most of them are sector based. Most of them hardly followed an integrated approach. They did not work in such a way that can attain the aim of integration both horizontally and vertically. Both the donors and the UN institutions do not follow such an approach. We have faced resistance at the beginning when we began effort in such a direction. We especially faced severe challenges from those who worked as consortium

as they had suspicion that we had a hidden aim to replace them. But when we reached at a consensus that our aim was to add value on them, they became our members. This was the challenge at the beginning. For instance, the Millennium development goals became less successful only because they were not comprehensive. They did not have a package to address social equity and environmental issues with in the educational and health packages. For instance, let's raise one issue we worked together with Jimma University. The government projected the Gibe I dam to serve for 50-70 years without any problem. But the research later made by Jimma University came up with a conclusion that as more silt is flowing to the dam, the projected period of service of this dam may be lowered to not more than 30 years. The sad thing is the university did not make this finding public and it stayed on the shelf. We later approached them and made prolonged discussions with stakeholders. A workshop and field visit was made on the issue. The naked fact was that deforestation was rife in the upper catchment area due to overpopulation. The population pressure has created huge farms and hence increased silt in the lower catchment area. If there were an integrated approach between all sectors, this would not have happened. Thanks to the recommendation from the workshop, six woredas in the upper catchment area are working on reforestation and other environmental protection schemes under the guidance of the Ministry of Energy. So, our aim is to expand this approach at a national level to create coordinated working system from the planning up to the outcome level. If our claim is based on evidence like the case of the dam stated above, the government is keen to work together. We are engaged in various schemes to save upper catchments above our big projects at a national level. The integration approach is key to foster our development. There may be challenges from both the private and public side, but if we are evidence based we can compel people to listen to our cause. With respect to the role of NGOs in bringing tangible change on the lives of people, development can only be ensured in such a sustainable way with the leadership of government. The NGOs are expected only to play a supplementary role by filling gaps. Meaningful development can be only attained through the ownership of the government. The main stake behind the diminished poverty level in the rural areas belongs to the government. Of course, the NGOs have their own contributions. But it should have been strengthened to bear more fruits.