

## A step in the right shoes...

The trouble with policy making is the fact that your intentions and actual starting points are never visible in the end product that you actually present to the world out there. Which is probably why policy advisors never admit what they do for a living when socialising, just as well because people never understand what it is that we do anyway. You start off trying to address an issue and by the time you have formulated your ideas in such a language that convinces your allies and doesn't give your opponents too many opportunities to pull the whole thing down and once you have consulted with all the stakeholders and completed the circle by hiding any bitter after taste (like resource implications etc)... you are then required to align your initiative with the rest of the gamut ensuring that it neither stands out nor appears too insignificant and out of sync... months or in most cases years later your finished product emerges looking nothing like you intentions or original thoughts and although you recognise each alteration, toning down, tweaking... fine tuning you have done along the way the totality of those activities only ever hits one when the policy begins to be implemented... and unfortunately, often, the more important a piece of policy or strategy is the more removed it is from the original goal.

And that is why I think conferences like these are important it is an opportunity for policy makers to come into contact with the issues on the ground and have an opportunity to consider the implications and impact of their intentions as shaped by countless shaping, reshaping, framing and reframing to fit various other contexts and there is no other way of doing this than asking you to briefly step into the shoes of an Eritrean... and if I may I would like you to step into these shoes... the shoes of a typical Eritrean young woman...born into a typical Eritrean family much like mine and grew up doing exactly the sort of things that thousands of other Eritrean children grow up doing... play on the streets... go to school, play some more... food is always on the scarce side, health and other provisions are not that well developed but Helen doesn't know any better and she gets on with her ordinary life... and becomes everything Eritrean girls her age and of her era become

She finds a set of beliefs that frames her outlook in life... we all do eventually don't we?... some will find it in their vocations, others in their ideologies and some of us find it in faith... religious faith as did Helen... still nothing extra ordinary in her path so far... Helen the ordinary girl from next door of a typical neighbourhood in Asmara... until a set of policies developed in government offices somewhere in Asmara comes into direct collusion with her ordinary life... her faith was banned all the activities related to it made illegal and most of her mentors jailed... she protests this abject denial of her way of life... and attempts to carry on living her ordinary life... to practice her faith... she now chose an extraordinary life on a collusion course with a set of policies enforced in abject breach of her rights as a human being... she is captured thrown into jail held in shipment containers for nearly three years of her life, was denied food, was separated from her family, was beaten and given up for dead... that ladies and gentlemen is the story ... the true story of my friend Helen Berhane...allow me to read you an excerpt from her forthcoming book to enable you take a few more steps in her slippers...

*A single candle flickers, its flame barely illuminating the darkness. They never burn for more than two hours after the container door is locked: there is not enough oxygen to keep the flame alive any longer. It will go out soon. The woman behind me shifts in her sleep and her knees dig painfully into my back. I try to wriggle over to give her more room, but I am already pressed up against another sleeping body. I pull my blanket up higher and curl up as much as I can. Despite the proximity of so many people, it is freezing cold. Condensation drips from the roof and slides down my cheek, and when it moistens my lips I taste rust. The air is thick with a dirty metallic tang, the ever-present stench of the bucket in the corner, and the smell of close-pressed, unwashed bodies.*

*I peer around, trying to work out where she is, the woman whose mind is gone. There, by the small window hacked roughly into the side of the container. I stiffen. Sometimes she blocks the opening by stuffing her blanket into it, cutting off our limited supply of fresh air. Other nights she shouts and wails, rocking the container so that none of us can sleep. She is worse now there are more of us; nineteen in a space that can only sleep eighteen. Tonight she is quiet, and it makes me uneasy. But I am so tired, and so I force my body to relax against the hard floor. Abruptly the candle snuffs out, I close my eyes...*

*The floor creaks. Someone must be getting up and stumbling across the sleepers to the toilet bucket. I try to shut the noise out. Suddenly, without warning, hands close on my neck like a vice. My eyes fly open, but it is too dark to see. Then there is a guttural snarl, and I know that it is her, the madwoman, her fingers tight on my throat. I push myself up but I have no breath to scream, and I am not strong enough to shake her off. So I do the only thing I can do: I bang my free hand on the wall of the container and kick out. All around us prisoners are waking up. One tries to pull her away from me, but now she has one hand on my throat and the other knotted in my hair, yanking it away from my scalp. I gulp down a breath and manage a scream. The other prisoners start to shout too, and bang the sides of the container. There are shouts now coming from outside, and the sound of hurrying feet, the noise of the bolts sliding back and the pop as air rushes into the container and then the doors are flung open.*

*My eyes burn as torchlight sears across my face, and then a guard is yanking her away from me and beating her about the head and body with his baton. I fall onto all fours, gasping in air. The guards pull her out of the container, and slam the door again. The women rush to crowd around the small window. 'They are beating her,' one of them hisses, low so as not to anger the guards. She risks another look. 'They have tied her outside,' she whispers, and the others start to lie down again, looking forward to a few hours of sleep before the guards come again to march us to the toilet field.*

*I lie down too, but my scalp feels as though it is on fire, and I know that I will not sleep tonight. Sometimes I cannot believe that this is my life: these four metal walls, all of us corralled like cattle, the pain, the hunger, the fear...*

This should be our starting point, if all our deliberations, strategies and policies are to amount to anything they should make a difference to Helen and many like her...this should also be the yard stick that we should measure the success of our policies and strategies. If we have veered too far from the objectives of ensuring respect of human rights for people like Helen, in the process of appeasing others and in an attempt to accommodate other policies that have also veered from their objectives owing to other pressures we will fail the weakest in our midst and the impact will be played in the lives of the thousands of young people who have chosen death in the Sahara or in the angry tides of the Mediterranean.

The Horn of Africa does need a comprehensive policy and strategy at every level, locally, regionally and internationally, we truly are at a cross roads and we each have the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of so many ordinary people. Obviously some of us have bigger influence than others but there is no such thing as insignificant influence.

There is a role for everyone who has something that Eritreans in Eritrea don't have a level of influence, enough to make some difference.

I am glad the Eritrean Diaspora is represented here and engaged in the process of changing Eritrea for the better, obviously we a bigger and more vibrant force than what we have here today, wherever we are we have a role to play in continually voicing the plight of our counterparts in Eritrea.

I am heartened that many from the international community, have also come here to consider the policies pertaining Eritrea, it is a step in the right direction of ensuring that your efforts will begin to make a difference to ordinary Eritreans out there.

It truly is an honour to be carrying the voices of millions of Eritreans who have little influence and no voice whatsoever.

And now before I let you step off Helen's pair of slippers, I would like to ask you to think over all your activities regarding Eritrea and consider the impact it would have had on her. We all have something that Helen in those four walls inside a shipment container never had the voice. A voice, to express the plight of others and the influence to do something positive about it. Thank you for listening.