

Commercial Graduates Association

What is Behind Its “Sustenance” Over Sixty-Five Years

By: Fantaye Awash and ZenebeworkBissrat

The Back Ground

The statement of “starting small and continuing to grow steadily is the true and sure way of development” serves many non-government organizations and development practitioners in orchestrating development endeavors. Does that hold true with the Commercial Graduates Association? If this theory holds true, has such development scheme proved sustainable? If sustainability is achieved, what are the reasons for such sustenance? In examining the questions stated above, the study tries to find out the driving force that enabled the Association to sustain through the 65-years.

The presenters of this article tried to assess the stages of development using two methods: i.e. secondary data on studies and assessments done before and primary data gathered by developing questionnaire for interviewing few members using a random sampling method. The following responses of the sample-graduate members are recorded under each topic discussed below:

1. The Birth and the Toddler Stage of the Commercial Graduates Association.

The 65-years old Commercial Graduates Association came into being out of clear vision of the first 15-graduates who in the first instance were aiming to establish periodic gatherings to keep the bondage of friendship they treasured as class and in-mates. Sooner they were met with wisdom based advice of their school director, Dr. William Nagib, to start an all encompassing set up instead. This way the group laid the foundation of a very important professional body-the Commercial School Graduates Association.

The study approached a number of the founding members and some novice members of the Association for information gathering of this study.

Right from initial stage, the founders were determined to use their association with the views: (1) to select and discuss business related topics that they can apply at work and improve their profession by creating various forums within their association; (2) to support the general working community in developing their skills; (3) to lay facilities to enable members use their spare time in healthy entertainment such as in-door and out-door activities.

As for funding, the graduates contributed funds from their personal savings to avail seed money for the start- up and management of the Association. Such voluntary contributions continued until the Association developed a directive which specified the amount of membership and registration fee for new entrants.

Once they laid down a system of monthly income generation, they rented a small villa near the Armenian Church to house the Association.

To satisfy the quench for skilled office workers, the government pressed Commercial School to take more and more candidates and increase its yearly graduates; so was the school also motivated by the positions its graduates assume and the reputation it was getting; also the Association had to cater more members yearly. This development further enhanced the existing relationship between the Association and the mother institution which looks upon the Association as an anchor between the school and its graduates.

The managing personnel realizing the need for adequate facilities to accommodate the ever increasing number of graduates launched a plan for establishing a central site with the necessary facilities was underway.

The members who approved the plan also ensured that all the necessary funding was to be raised by its members and friends of the Association instead of taking loan from banks or from any other source at the initial stage. Thus the annual contribution by each member was earmarked at Birr 40 (clearly spelt out in the first Association's By-Laws).

The management of the affairs of the association was laid upon a sound foundation by setting the proper objectives, incorporating the right administrative directives to help clarify the responsibilities of member, elected leaders and the relationship with other partners. Respondents noted that the development of the By-laws and the ensuing administrative manual was an essential instrument and guidance for the managing leadership of the association thereafter. The above documents were approved by the Ministry of Interior in Yekatit 1942 which was the permit-granting body at the time.

However, the By-Laws of the Association has undergone several amendments to enable the Association comply with members' requirements as well as enabling the leadership pursue timely growth and sustenance strategies. The Association has ever complied with government requirements for legal status: The initial By-laws was granted permanent status by the National Security office; however, the permit had to be renewed in 1968 by the then in charge organization, the Ministry of Defense. Again, in 1974 the permit renewal was granted by the National Security Office, which had taken over the affairs of the various organized bodies. The celebration of the Forty-second anniversary earmarked an innovative and timely change in the status of the Association which aimed at encompassing all Business Graduates from recognized higher education institutions be it in and/or outside the Country. This change was effected by renaming the Association from the "Commercial School Graduates Association" to "Commercial Graduates Association". The Executive Board, based on its Forty-years-experience: both the favorable and the unfavorable, the encouraging and the impeding factors coupled with the need to narrow the gaps, had reviewed the By-laws accordingly and had it approved by the General Assembly (See "The Forty-Second Special Issue" of the Commercial Graduates Association of Yekatit, 1984). The Executive Board of the Association has implemented the reviewed By-laws, a copy of which is submitted to the concerned authority, since Tikemt 12, 2002. The usual exercise of annual renewal of permit is still on air, according to the Authority, they say they are awaiting a new directive governing Civic and Professional associations.

The aims and struggle to grow as a professional association remained an intrinsic central issue of succeeding leaderships during the years—this unfailing urge for growth, the authors think, has been the secret behind the success of Commercial Graduates Association; though the pace at which young graduates join the association remained a concern.

2. The Association at Developing and Maturing Stage

As per prominent graduate-respondents, including a long standing member and member of the Executive Board several times, pointed out that acquiring a site to meet the increasing needs for space and facilities was given priority. This huge development project which called for raising funds to cover the cost of the land, the building, and the various establishments, facilities as well as proper furnishings and equipment for the Association.

It may be worth, at this stage, to state how all the funds were raised. As always, the Association relied on and invited its members for all kinds of ideas and funding that were needed. One of the important steps taken by the management and members was to initiate an evening class at the mother institution, the Commercial School. This decision enabled the Association to raise funds towards the projects solicited as well as to help the working community of the various organizations to improve their skills and to get additional training in other areas.

Other sources include: (a) generated funds from the membership fees contributed towards the project as one-time payment from individual earnings and/or from businesses owned and ran by members; (b) A donation of a portion of entrance fees from Loerate Tsegaye Gebre Medhin's play "Yeshoh Aklil" played by Commercial School students at the National theatre; (c) Audience granted the leadership by the Emperor who appreciated the idea and contributed funds as well. The then Director of the Commercial College and the pioneer Director, Dr. William Nagib also contributed funds.

3. Asked what Sustained CGA for Sixty-Five Years, the respondents statements included the following:

- a) Commercial Graduates Association was created out of an ingenious idea of the pioneering 15 graduates who were determined to preserve the classroom and inmate bondage they had developed while on training;
- b) Their idea was further enriched by the then Commercial School Director, Dr. William Nagibe, who advised the graduates to establish an all embracing association which will cater future graduates as well; accepting their Director's advise, they established CGA in 1942 E.C.
- c) Being unprecedented associations in the country, Commercial Graduates Association started on a strong foundation as a result of which it became productive from the beginning.

Its long term experiences and the untiring efforts of its members and leadership kept it going stronger ever since.

The presenters posing questions to examine each and every aspect of the inputs that kept it going, below is some of the expressed views of respondents:

i) Association Members: Members of the association have taken full responsibilities of managing, providing services and making the association a full-fledged organization that is of high standard. :

(i) Leadership of the Association:

The leadership election process is such that members with good reputation and with appropriate leadership qualities are elected democratically to serve the Association for a period of four years

(ii) Commitments of the Leadership and Members at Large:

It is satisfying to note that the members at large trust the leaders they nominate and elect members are unhesitant to provide needed intellectual and/or material support toward implementation of approved plans and projects. This is proven by the development activities carried out with zeal and commitment for several years witnessed by the growth achieved thus far.

(iii) The systematically and timely financial and activity reports which are being presented to members reflect soundness of the working systems set for the management and the devotion and honesty of the leadership of the Association which are appreciated by all members.

(iv) Continuous Development Efforts by the Leadership and Members:

The Association is continuously moving on the development cycle to respond to continuous needs realized by its members and by the business society in general. Very recently, further development projects are being considered one of which is already launched as an expansion of the current center providing a fitness center to its members and to the community. As usual, the funding for the construction of the gymnasium was fully covered by untiring members' contributions with the exception of very few organizations who are supportive of its efforts.

(v) Development being a continuous process; both members and the leadership support each other in the realization of targeted plans and projects. As per CGA's By-Laws (Article 3 – Sub article 13 – Responsibilities of Association Members --Yekatit 1989 E.C.--), members are expected to accept any assignment(s) called for by the leaders of the Association

From the foregoing points, it is safe to conclude that the long established honesty, loyalty and far sightedness of the leadership groups matched by the trust and adherence of members to support whatever is on the floor involving the growth and development of the Association has been a key factor for the continued sustenance of CGA.

4. Services to the Working Community

The mother institution, the Commercial School of Addis Ababa, came into being as of 1935 E.C, established as an adjunct of the Minilik Secondary School sharing the premises of the School. The very aim the School was established was to produce skilled manpower to fill the various posts in government offices at the time of nations building evacuation of the Italians at the end of Ethio-Italian war. At the time, the School trained graduates equipped with accounting, administration, secretarial services as well as in purchasing and inventory management.

The founding members of CGA, being aware of the lack of knowledge and skill on the part of individuals and organizations who were offering business services, the graduates took it upon themselves to share what they learnt from their mother institutions. Apart from offering on-the-spot training to business community, they were courageous to step in to fill the missing gap and started to initiate and run extension classes on the school premises to all working groups who were willing to improve their working skill needs. This venture was run by the Association from to When the school took over the extension classes.

CGA members also participated in giving skill trainings and in assisted the business community set up accounting systems for their ventures using the services of member volunteers to assist and participate in the training of people who are interested in business and management skills.

Also, from time to time, graduates were invited by the government to assist the Chamber of Commerce Training programs (to train business groups and office workers.) In addition, the Commercial School Graduates (association members) were involved in policy making efforts of the government; they also assisted in the development of the business tax regulation and participated in the group assigned to recommend as to how the Chamber of Commerce management should take off properly.

As regards sharing intellectual materials, CGA's publications used to contain business course materials and current issues in business so people could read and utilize some of the lessons in the topics presented. For example, some of important business topics included: Basic business topics; Accounting and Auditing Profession in Ethiopia, Enhancing the Value of the Accounting and Finance Functions in the Management of Ethiopia as well as topics including "Problems in the Development of Entrepreneurship" and "An Agency problem and its impact on financing of public Enterprises" in Ethiopia were discussed in detail to help those engaged in and interested in improving their businesses and also to opt for further readings in the areas indicated.

Special issues of the Association also contained topics like banking business, Insurance Industry, Globalization, Tourism Business, Business Taxes, etc.

5. Does the Political Will Contribute Towards the Sustenance of the Association?

The Association has passed through the following three governments. Respondents were asked to narrate their experiences of the political environments the association passed through; respondents' views were noted as follows:

-From 1942 to 1966 E.C the Association has existed and has been functional. This was the Emperor Haile Selassie's era at which time the Association was getting a very high support from the government. The political environment during the Emperor was so conducive; (a) he graciously contributed funds towards the construction of the current center by giving audience to the leadership of the Association. (b) he graciously opened the current center at inauguration in 1954.

-During the Dergue, Yekatit 1966-1985, although the country was in turmoil-there was no restrictive policy for Associations to operate. Although the political environment was not very conducive, but not very hostile either, for the association leadership to hold meetings, plan and develop the institute, as these were the major performance that can satisfy the members, the routine activities were also functional.

However, the Association lost a huge property due to its Cadres that have been misinterpreting the various policies promulgated at the time. Basing the land policy of Hamle 19, 1967, the Cadres insisted that the compound of the association should be minimized to the present level and insisted that road be constructed by dividing the plot of the Association into two (this means without the others who are using the road who should equally contribute land on which to build the road). At the time the Association lost about 4000 Sq. meters of land retaining only 4,814 Sq. meters of land for the present center.

The other incident, because of improper empowerment of cadres, a serious pressure to hand over the present center to the kebele administration was forced upon the then president of the Association who tried to protect the center by refusing she has no mandate on any association property by asking for a general meeting of members at large knowing such gatherings are prohibition by the government. Her refusal exposed her to face a day's detention at the kebele cell. The demand to take over did not stop here, but continued time and again. To avoid being labeled as anti-the day's political order, the leadership set up a temporary library composed of business books and ideological collections claiming that the Association is providing political awareness forum to its members. The succeeding president was also pressurized as well.

The few members, who continued their frequent visit even if for a short period, stood for the Association and participated full-heartedly in the struggle to save their Association's property through their personal contacts and untiring follow ups. The pressure from various corners did weaken the Kebele cadre's pressure on the leadership of the association.

-During the EPRDF, (1985-present) the government policy is not very clear. Non-government organizations were governed under the Ministry of Justice, Charities and Societies Agency for quite a long period of time. Later on, they were to be reorganized

under another agency named as Federal Democratic Agency of Charities and Societies Agency.

They are properly governing the Non-government organizations but as for the professional organizations, the situation is different and unclear. In two occasions have board members had discussion with officials but in vain. Two senior members have been delegated to attend the workshops organized by the Agency. However the policy governing the professional associations is still under review, as they say. Because of this, the yearly permit renewal requirement is not being met. All services and activities are still going on without any strife or without any disturbances.

6. Problems Encountered by the Association

The presenters were keen to know if there were any problems encountered by the Association. The response they received was the following:

- a. There were no very serious problems encountered but need for improvement noted. In earlier years the majority of graduates of the Commercial College were placed in government offices. In recent years, although placement is not being done by government, most of Commercial graduates are still being accepted by government and non-government organizations.
- b. Interviewed members expressed concerns as to lack interest by novice graduates, especially those graduates from the Commercial College, to come forth to join the Association. The Association is striving to register more of the new force to work with the senior members in the effort to lay out a succession plan and as well as carry out improvisation plan in rendering the services to the business community.

In this regard, the leadership group has been trying to work with the College in order to give proper image of what the Association services are and what the novice graduates can benefit from it. This effort is not a one-time affair but a continuous action on the part of the Association. Since 2014, more graduates from other universities and colleges are joining CGA as compared to Commercial College graduates. This situation should be taken up to retain the usual close relationship with the mother institution.

The foregoing findings ascertain that the Commercial Graduates Association has sustained itself for over 65 years, and it shall sustain further, due to the loyalty, hard work, sincerity and devotion of its members and the sound management system they created. They created the institution and they want it to continuously succeed in all aspects a professional association is expected to fulfill by renovating its major activities:

- As has been originally planned, the graduates are placed in all organizations operating in the country to render viable profession and voluntary services
- The public service that the Association has been giving needs to be revitalized in collaboration with all concerned organizations.
- There is also a very serious need to renew its close relationship with the Chamber of Commerce of Addis Ababa through whom CGA could approach those business community members who need help related to business management, etc.
- CGA has sustained for sixty-five years due to its members who are willing to engage in any aspect of support to the Association, to the community as well as to the general public and the various organizations in the country. This has to continue in an improved manner to give CGA more vitality of its professional status in the country.
 - Also renovation and revitalization of activities with improved facilities are called for:
 - ✓ The entertainment and sports facilities should continue but with some improvements.
 - ✓ Create and run a periodic discussion forum by inviting professionals of different areas of study
 - ✓ Start refresher course competency exams given by various national examination agencies, be it in skill and/or academics exams.
 - ✓ Negotiate with insurance companies for reduced premium offer to higher education students and/or graduates for education, medical, life, and fleet to benefit members.

Renovate and strengthen the business club created during EPRDF's establishment which offered a discussion forum of business professionals which was instrumental for the establishment of the two banks namely: the Abyssinia and the Unity Banks