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# MEDREK

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**The Newsletter of the Forum for Social Studies**

**A Centre for Research and Debate on Development and Public Policy**

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## Commentary

Readers will recall that the maiden issue of our newsletter, MEDREK focused on our inaugural workshop, the structure of governance of the Forum of Social Studies (FSS). It is with great pride that we announce the publication of MEDREK also in Amharic as of this second issue. We have no doubt that this will help us increase our outreach significantly. We want to take this opportunity to thank readers for their support, suggestions and appreciation of our effort to publish MEDREK.

In this issue, we have included two "think pieces" which elaborate further the nature of our organization and what we hope to achieve. In the first think piece,

Dessalegn Rahmato discusses think tanks and the place they are likely to have in the Ethiopian context. The significance of the reflection is related to the fact that FSS considers itself as the first independent think tank in Ethiopia.

Having traced the nature of think tanks in other parts of the world, Dessalegn highlights the role these institutions are likely to play in the specific context of Ethiopia's political culture and historical tradition. Among the various challenges, he puts emphasis on the crucial importance of independent opinion to policy makers, the creation of a tradition of dialogue among researchers, the public and decision makers, and the search for innovative ideas and approaches by policy researchers to tackle old problems in new ways.

Another objective of FSS is the intergenerational transfer of knowledge and experience. This task will require rediscovering and reevaluating our history. It is often assumed that it was the generation of the 1960s that was engaged in the struggle for social change. In the second think piece entitled the "The Social Reformers of Early Twentieth Century", Bahru Zewde puts an end to this shortsighted view

while providing us a glimpse of his forthcoming book on intellectual history. Tracing the origin of the country's first modern elite to the early twentieth century, which he perceives as a powerful force for change, Bahru indicates their moderate reforms and their trajectory before and after the Fascist occupation of Ethiopia.

In this issue, we also include a brief introduction of the type of issues that would be addressed by the second symposium of FSS which will be on *Public Access to Information*. Focused on what are believed to be issues of critical concern in the development of the country, the various symposia are the principal fora for the promotion of a culture of dialogue among researchers, the public and policy-makers.

Finally, the issue carries a synopsis of some of the activities of other organizations. We hope to make this a regular feature of MEDREK and we take this opportunity to invite organizations involved in research and advocacy to send us information about research in progress, upcoming workshops and conferences and new publications.

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## Structure of Governance

FSS is democratically governed, with decision-making shared by the General Assembly, the Board of Advisors, and the Management Committee. The General Assembly meets once a year to review and approve the broad policies of the organization. The Board, which meets more frequently, is responsible for drawing up the policies and strategies of FSS, monitoring the work of the executive, and reviewing and approving the finances. Of the nine members in the Board four are women. The Management Committee is the executive body of FSS. It is responsible for implementing the decisions of the Board and managing the activities of the organization.

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## THINK TANKS: A New Venture in Ethiopia?

Think tanks are also known as policy research institutes, and in this article I shall use both terms interchangeably.

### Think Tanks in the Developed World

Think tanks are proliferating in western democracies where they are playing an increasingly prominent role in policy planning and formulation, advocacy and public education. Their growing importance is attributed to the expansion of the democratic process and the robustness of civil society. Think tanks are also spreading quite rapidly in Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe, and are making an appearance in Africa as well.

What are think tanks and what do they do? There is such a wide diversity among institutions commonly called think tanks that there are considerable difficulties in trying to define their distinctive identity. Think tanks differ in size, structure, resources, commitment, objective, and "ideological" orientation. There are, in addition, differences in their method of operations and outlook arising from national differences, and differences in political culture and historical experience. In the west, where they originated, think tanks may be 'partisan' or "non-partisan" in orientation, single-issue or multi-purpose, advocacy or research oriented, and national or international in scope.

The term "think tank" acquired a rather negative connotation in the U.S. and Britain because of the rapid growth and active engagement of New Right think tanks in the 1970s and 80s. Interestingly enough, in this same period, there was in both countries a proliferation of environmental think tanks, which have been quite popular and have attracted considerable public support. Among the better known and well-established think tanks in the west are ones concerned with economic policy, international relations and foreign affairs, and environmental issues.

Broadly speaking, think tanks are institutions engaged in research and analysis of policy relevant issues. They serve as sources of new ideas, and often undertake advocacy activities. They are sometimes called idea brokers and advocates for change. They produce independent, objective and in-depth analysis of public issues to promote public awareness, to inform decision-makers, and to influence the policy process. Their weapon, as it were, is the force of intellectual argument, and their chief instrument for achieving their goals are publications, public debates, workshops and symposia, and the media. In the West, governments and the media listen eagerly to policy institutes, and quite often, cabinet ministers, legislators, and reporters freely borrow ideas, theories, and policy options from them.



The main end user of the product of policy institutes is government, however donor organizations, civic institutions, the public and the business community also benefit from their intellectual output. Think tanks therefore not only actively engage in dialogue with government but also maintain an open and healthy communication with decision-makers and state officials.

The institutional relationship between policy institutes and government varies according to the political culture of the countries concerned. In the Anglo-American tradition, think tanks are said to be best placed to "think independently" if they are autonomous from the state. In France, on the other hand, which has a different political culture, think tanks are closely associated with government. In Germany, some of the large and influential think tanks are a creation of the mainstream political parties. Nevertheless, even in the U.S. and Britain think tanks are willing to accept funding from government sources without the fear of compromising their independence.

There are however certain basic characteristics that are common to most policy institutes and that help to ensure the institutions' credibility. These are: a) *Research freedom*. Think tanks must be able to set their own research agenda, determine their own methodology and theoretical framework, and pursue the investigation of issues independently. b) *Organizational independence*. Think

tanks should have legal status as a non-government and non-profit institution, and must be established outside the organizational framework of the public sector. Unlike NGOs, think tanks do not build schools, clinics, roads, irrigation schemes, etc.; what they offer instead is an intellectual product. c) *Policy focus*. The main objective of think tanks is to engage in policy relevant research through which they try to inform decision-makers and intervene in the policy process. This is what sets them apart from university research institutions whose research output is largely geared to academic purposes and is frequently less amenable to public consumption. In many African countries, research undertaken by academic institutions is often not available outside academia due to poor dissemination. d) *Public purpose*. Research in policy institutes has a public purpose, i.e. it helps to promote public awareness, contributes to the enhancement of the public debate, and encourages public participation in the decision-making process. This is what differentiates think tanks from consultancy firms.

### *Think tanks in Africa*

Policy institutes in Africa operate in a difficult environment: the state overdominates in virtually all spheres of activity, civil society institutions are weak, and the democratic process is either in its infancy or is altogether absent. Most African governments are hostile to independent opinion, which they view as a form

of opposition or as an irrelevant exercise. Independent bodies such as trade unions, farmers' organizations, or teachers' associations are not welcome and sooner or later are liable to be brought under government control. The independent media, if at all it exists, lacks the experience, resources and trained staff to assist in the task of public education and to serve as a forum for public debate. Think tanks rely on the independent media to disseminate their findings and to inform the public.

Under these circumstances, policy researchers in Africa will not be able to think freely, exercise full control over their research agenda, nor pursue an independent line of investigation **unless they maintain their autonomy** from government, political parties, donors and pressure groups. Policy institutes here, more than anywhere else, should guard their autonomy jealously for there lies their credibility and influence. This does NOT mean researchers should try to keep the government at arm's length. On the contrary, there should be *dialogue* and close *cooperation* between one and the other, otherwise researchers will be unable to contribute to the policy process, and the government will lose the opportunity to benefit from independent and professional opinion.

Policy institutes in Africa should set themselves lofty goals even though these may not be fulfilled in the immedi-



ate future. They should provide independent opinion of the highest professional standard, which will help improve policy planning and formulation. They should, in other words, serve as *catalysts for change*. Moreover, they should work actively to promote public awareness of policy issues and to encourage public participation, and through such effort contribute to the *democratization of the policy making process*.

### Think Tanks in Ethiopia?

Readers may question whether think tanks as described in this article exist in Ethiopia or not. The point is indeed subject to debate, however even those who may argue that they do indeed exist will grant that they are negligible in number and influence. On the other hand, I believe the Forum for Social Studies does qualify as a think tank. FSS describes itself as the first *independent* think tank in the country. Its main objective is to undertake in-depth research on issues of development and social change in Ethiopia and to provide a public forum for the discussion of such issues. While its special focus of research is development problems, the goal of its undertakings is to inform policy planners and to contribute to the improvement of the policy process.

Over the last five to six years, a number of civic organizations have been established in the country, among which are NGOs, professional associations and public support institutions.

It is thus apparent that since the fall of the Derg civil society institutions are slowly emerging, though Ethiopia compares very poorly in this regard with many of the countries in the rest of Africa. According to CRDA sources, there were over 250 NGOs operating in the country in 1997, of which 152 were members of that umbrella organization. While the larger and more resource-endowed NGOs have their headquarters in Europe and North America, more than half the total number is of local origin. Many of the local NGOs, as well as some of the professional associations, are resource-poor and limited in their scope of activities. A few of the civic organizations that have emerged in this period have certain characteristics that resemble those of think tanks but some of them are not engaged in policy-relevant research, and others lack a programme of public education.

The objectives of think tanks in Ethiopia should be no different from those in the rest of Africa, although there will be differences in priorities and methods of operation due to differences in political culture and historical tradition. Policy researchers here have a number of very important but very difficult tasks awaiting them. First, they should make all efforts to convince the government that it should *seek* independent opinion. The tradition among successive governments in this country has been to marginalize independent opinion. Decision-makers always turn to government experts whenever there is

a need for information, analysis, and similar work having to do with the drafting, formulation or evaluation of policy initiatives. This is, if you will, an incestuous exercise: the government is merely talking and listening to itself, and as a consequence foregoes the benefits of the diversity of ideas and options that independent opinion would have offered. Secondly, think tanks should help create a tradition of dialogue among researchers, the public and decision-makers. Thirdly, policy researchers should pursue innovative ideas and approaches in all their undertakings. They should learn to tackle old problems in new ways, to rewrite the terms of the policy debate, and to provoke a healthy and wide-ranging debate.

I believe we need more think tanks with more diverse objectives in this country. The greater independent opinion intervenes in the policy process, the greater the chances for the democratization of decision-making.

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### FSS Publications

#### ⇒ MEDREK

In addition to the news of FSS activities and report of the activities of other research and advocacy organizations, MEDREK hopes to include think pieces, research in progress, new publications and book reviews. We also hope to publish:

- ⇒ Proceedings of Symposia
- ⇒ A Journal
- ⇒ A Discussion Paper Series
- ⇒ A Monograph Series
- ⇒ Books

### Attention Readers

Readers are invited to send us news of research in progress, workshops, upcoming conferences and new publications

## The Social Reformers of Early Twentieth Century Ethiopia

Few events in the recent history of the world have had as momentous a significance as the encounter of the West with Africa and Asia. Begun around 1500, the process has gone through various stages and could be said to have reached its climax in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The direct impact of the advent of the West on the social and economic lives of the African and Asian peoples has been a matter of considerable interest and wide investigation. No less remarkable has been the way the "East" strove to respond *intellectually* to the challenge of the West. Although the West set the tone and parameters of the dialogue, this response has generally been characterized more by creative adaptation than by blind imitation.

Ethiopia's modern encounter with the West, more specifically Europe, could be said to have started around 1500. After a short but eventful relationship with the Iberian powers, when an unsuccessful attempt by the Jesuits to covert the country to Catholicism led to a bloody civil war, there ensued a period of mutual isolation until Europe came in full force to the African continent at the dawn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. While Ethiopia managed to escape the colonial rule that attended almost inexorably the European presence, it was far from immune from the influence radiating from Europe. The independence guaranteed by the Ethiopian victory at the Battle

of Adwa in 1896 brought in its wake the onerous responsibility of adjusting to European norms and standards of administration and behavior.

The Ethiopian intellectual experience is a vivid illustration of an African reaction to the hegemony of the West. It drew deeply, initially at least, from traditional intellectual moorings yet was in many instances able to express itself in the language of the West. The fundamental tension between dependency and development, which has punctuated the intellectual and political history of the so-called Third World in the modern era, was evident in the Ethiopian experience as well.

The burden of defining intellectually Ethiopia's relationship with the West fell on the country's first modern elite. This process of definition began in the early twentieth century with the critical analysis of Ethiopian society and the recommendation of moderate reforms. It culminated in the radical rejection of tradition and the revolutionary transformation of Ethiopian society after 1974. Indeed, measured by the experience the country has been forced to go through since the late 1960s, it is difficult to imagine many other societies where the educated elite has exercised such a preponderant influence on social and political change.



Christian Ethiopia had developed a system of education which had a record of more than a millennium when the challenge of the West began to be felt. That system began with the mastery of the syllabic alphabet. It then passed on to the recital of the Acts of the Apostles, the Psalms of David and other religious books. At the higher level, it involved being proficient in the liturgy (*zema*), Ge'ez poetry (*qene*), and commentaries on the holy books (*tergwame*). Except perhaps in the realm of *qene*, the premium was on diligent acquisition of old norms rather than on creative innovation. Authority was revered and memorization was a requisite asset.

The advent of modern education in the nineteenth century exposed the glaring inadequacies of that system to meet the new challenge. The West could only be met on its own terms. Western education became an indispensable tool to understand and meet the new challenges. That education was acquired in various forms and through various routes. In the early days, young Ethiopians were patronized by missionaries and either educated in the country itself or sent abroad. Others found themselves in Europe under rather fortuitous circumstances, either being picked up and adopted by foreigners (as in the case of *Hakim* Warqenah, alias Dr. Charles Martin) or stowing away aboard European vessels calling on Red Sea ports (as in that of *Naggadras* Gabra-Heywat Baykadañ). A few others were sent by Ethiopian rul-

ers (Emperor Menilek, Ras Makonnen and his son Ras Tafari, the future Emperor Hayla-Sellase). It is not surprising that the two first modern schools bore the names of the first and the third. Outside, Europe was the main destination of most students, although a few were also sent to the United States.

However divergent their routes to Western education might have been, the group represented a powerful force for change once they returned to their country. Through the weekly *Berhanena Salam* and their numerous independent publications (one of them, *Blatten Geta* Heruy Walda-Sellase, had over twenty books to his credit), they depicted graphically their country's backwardness as compared to the industrialized world and made wide-ranging recommendations for social and political reform. They denounced the heinous practice of slavery and slave trade. They championed the cause of the peasant (the *gabbar* as they called him) arguing for an equitable system of taxation that would liberate him from the arbitrary exactions that had thitherto been his fate. They urged the adoption of centralized customs administration, not only in the interest of augmenting the revenue of the state but also to spare the merchant the inequities of the ubiquitous toll gates. They called for the modernization of the system of justice and military organization. Above all, they waged a tireless campaign for the expansion of education, so that others could also see the light.

How successful was this group of modern-educated Ethiopians? Although they did not clearly achieve all their objectives, they did not pass without leaving an impact. A number of their ideas, particularly those that tended to strengthen the hands of the central government, came to have practical implementation. They also came to be co-opted into the state apparatus, occupying positions ranging from chief customs officer (*naggadras*) to that of director and minister. One of them, the Russian-educated *Bajerond* Takla-Hawaryat, was entrusted with the drafting of the country's first constitution which was promulgated in 1931.

To a large extent, their relative success can be explained by the fact that they had an ally in the young Tafari Makonnen who needed their intellect and skill to combat the forces of tradition. This had its obverse side, however. Once his objective of seizure and consolidation of absolute power was accomplished, Hayla-Sellase, as Tafari came to be known after his coronation, did not have as much use for them as when he was battling the old establishment. It is in part a measure of this distancing of the intellectuals that three of the most prominent ones (*Naggadras* Afawarq Gabra-Iyyasus, *Bajerond* Takla-Hawaryat and *Hakim* Warqenah) were assigned to ambassadorial posts after 1932 (in Rome, Paris, and London, respectively).

The Italian invasion of 1935-36 put an end to this fasci-



nating period of Ethiopian intellectual history. Quite a few of the educated, particularly the younger ones, became victims of what has come to be known as the "Graziani Massacre", the reign of terror unleashed in Addis Ababa in February 1937 after the abortive attempt to assassinate the Italian viceroy. The more lucky ones escaped into exile but could not have the same social and political consequence after the restoration of independence in 1941. Indeed, after that year, the spirit of critical distance yet meaningful engagement of the early intellectuals was replaced by a culture of loyal civil service. Things began to change only after 1960. And when they did, the agenda of cautious reform had been irrevocably replaced by the strident call for revolution.

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### Forthcoming Activities of FSS

#### *Development and Public Access to Information in Ethiopia:*

FSS is pleased to announce that it is hosting a one-day symposium on *Development and Public Access to Information in Ethiopia*, which will be held on Thursday 25 March 1999 at Semein Hotel on Belay Zelleke Road. H.E. Ato Woldemichael Chemu, Minister of Information and Culture, and H.E. Ato Neway Gebreab, Chief Economic Advisor, Office of the Prime Minister, have both graciously consented to deliver

statements at the opening of the symposium. H.E. Ato Asrat Bulbula, Commissioner of the Ethiopian Science and Technology Commission will deliver the closing statement.

The purpose of the symposium is to hold a public debate on the problems of access to information and their consequences for the development process. It is hoped that the debate and the conclusions that will come out of it will sensitize the government on the importance of the issue and the need for sound policies and supportive programs. While in the long run it is the public at large that stands to gain, such measures will be of immediate benefit to investors, information technology service providers, the media, government experts, development practitioners, researchers, professionals and donors.

The symposium will be attended by invited guests from government departments, the business community, information technology service providers, the media, professional associations, women's groups, academic and research institutions, and the NGO and donor community.

#### Activities of other Organizations

In the first issue of Medrek, we had invited our readers to send us news of research in progress, workshops, upcoming conferences and new publications. Accordingly what follows are brief announcements of recent workshops that

were brought to our attention.

*National Workshop on Food Security Through Sustainable Land Use: Policy and Implementation Issues on Institutions, Land Tenure and Extension. January 14-15, 1999, Ethiopian Agricultural Research Organization Conference Hall, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.*

The workshop was organized by the NOVIB Partners Forum on Sustainable Land Use. Known by its abridged name, the Forum, the organization was established in 1995 with the overall aim of contributing to improved sustainable land use practices in Ethiopia and Eritrea. The Deputy Director of the Ethiopian Agricultural Research Organization (EARO) gave the opening statement on behalf of Dr Seifu Kidane, the Director of EARO. The statement emphasized the urgent need for appropriate policies and yield-enhancing research that would promote effective food security and urged participants to be concerned not only with producing perfect recommendations but much more so with the imperfection of their implementation. Professor Mesfin Wolde Mariam gave the keynote Address entitled "The Chronic Problem of Food Security: Can We Overcome It?"

Prior to providing an elaboration of the structural and institutional problems facing Ethiopian agriculture, Professor Mesfin pointed to the Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Commission and the international NGOs as "the twin pillars



of the problem of food security in Ethiopia. He noted that "the fact that they are averting famine by providing relief food assistance in time should not conceal the equally important fact that they are blunting the will of the regime to face the problem, and are depending the helplessness of the peasants."

The basis of Ethiopia's poverty and chronic food insecurity emanates from the 'non-use or misuse of the available human and material resources. He then concluded that the "problem of food shortage in Ethiopia cannot go away by talking or doing more of the same". It requires a radical departure from what successive regimes have been doing for the last thirty years. That requires the courage to depoliticize agriculture and to liberate the Ethiopian peasants from the bondage in which they find themselves."

The Workshop was organized around three sub-themes namely food security, land tenure and extension on which fifteen technical papers were presented. Under the sub-theme of food security, the workshop identified the major problems as the neglect of chronic food insecurity and the lack of participatory land use planning and resource misallocation. In discussing institutional issues, the lack of a land use policy and the fragmentation of responsibilities between the different units of government and hence duplication of efforts were perceived as some of the major constraints. Other constraints cited were policies

that require NGO accountability to numerous institutions, and those that bar NGOs from credit provision for rural development, and government interference in the activities of service cooperatives.

Numerous concerns were discussed under the land tenure sub-theme. These included property regimes, land ownership, access to land, land use security, gender and land rights and the impact of land distribution on production and the environment. The major constraints identified were land tenure insecurity, shortage of land for agricultural purposes, fragmentation and progressive diminution of the size of land. Tenure security and food security are highly correlated. Land redistribution erodes the confidence of farmers to invest on the land and to undertake conservation activities. Local communities are excluded from decision-making on land use and its distribution.

The major recommendations related to land tenure included the provision of permanent land tenure rights; land use policy, legislation and legal enforcement; the development and promotion of appropriate land administration mechanisms and procedures; the determination of maximum and minimum land holding size which is context specific, and abandoning the process of land redistribution except in some exceptional individual cases. Both the constraints identified and the recommendations were widely debated.

### *Political Participation of Women in Ethiopia*

The Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association organized a one-day Workshop on December 26, 1998 on the above topic to facilitate reflections on ways of increasing women's political participation in the coming elections of the year 2000. The Workshop was based on three commissioned studies. The first of this focused on "Women's Political Participation as a Legal Right and the Constraints in Its Implementation" In Ethiopia, there has never been a legal barrier to women's participation. However, the absence of democratic governance has meant the absence of the right to vote or be elected by both men and women. It was only the revised Constitution of 1955 that provided the right to vote. Women's right to full political participation has been reaffirmed by the new Constitution.

However, women's political participation is constrained by a multitude of factors. These include, the unequal gender division of labor, women's lack of adequate education and skills training, women's weak economic power and the widely held belief that public affairs are the concerns of men. Although women participate equally with men as voters, their effort can not be classified as a gender-aware female vote. Women voters are not sensitized about the manner in which they can influence government decisions by voting for women and men who will



remain accountable to them. A significant increase in women's political participation can only come about through sustained efforts by civic groups, political parties and the government. In this regard, the Beijing Platform of 1995 has clearly delineated measures that are likely to increase women's political participation.

The second paper addressed "The Parliamentary System in Ethiopia and Women's Participation". Having covered the history of the Parliament in Ethiopia and parliamentary elections from its origin in 1924 to the present, the paper focused on the constraints limiting women's participation and recommended solutions. Following the establishment of the Federal Republic of Ethiopia in 1995, there are relatively few women in the various Federal and regional parliaments. Likewise there are few women in decision-making positions. Factors that limit women's political participation include requiring candidates to get 1,000 signatures of endorsement and women's lack of education. The recommendations included making the electoral laws more gender sensitive and increasing women's education and political awareness.

The third paper focused on Women Political Participation in Other Countries highlighting the strategies used to gain political rights by women and examples of laws that facilitate women's increased political participation. Here institutional and cultural factors were identi-

fied as the principal impediments to women's political participation. Cultural constraints consist of societal views that undervalue women and discourage women's participation in the public arena. The institutional factors include legal requirements, electoral systems, the election process, the weakness of civil society especially women's organizations and gender bias in political parties.

The experience of other countries indicate that women had to put up long and diverse forms of struggle to ease the constraints that limit their participation in the economic, cultural and political arena. In response to women's advocacy efforts, some governments have taken concrete measures such as affirmative action with a view to increasing women's political participation. In India, for example, the government has reserved 1/3 of Parliamentary seats, legislative bodies and local government posts for women. Likewise in Uganda, the government has introduced a large number of policies that would increase women's representation in local and national government and in various decision-making posts. The determinant factor in advancing women's right is women's organization and the numerous types of innovative strategies that they have devised.

The three papers generated heated and wide-ranging debate. Why do educated Ethiopian women shy away from political participation? What kind of electoral laws and other types

of legislation facilitate an increase in women's political participation and representation?

### Building a Research Library

One of the mandates of FSS is to set up a research library and preserve government documents, NGO and donor publications, and fugitive literature. The library will be open to members, researchers from government departments, NGOs donor agencies and civic institutions.

We would like to inform our readers that FSS is now in the process of collecting books, documents and monographs. We take this opportunity to kindly request copies of your publications both past and recent and to be put on your mailing list.

We would also like to take this opportunity to thank all those institutions both here and abroad who have already



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