

The Multifaceted Southern Red Sea Region



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From the six regions in Eritrea the Southern Red Sea region is ranked third in area coverage. This strategically situated region is bordered with Djibouti in the south east, with Ethiopia in the south, the Red Sea in the east and its sister regions in the west.

It has four subzones and thirty zonal administrations. The region stretches over an area of 23,384 square km and has a population of over 80,000. Half of the population lives by herding livestock, 10-15% are engaged in trade and commerce and the rest are fishermen. The Southern Red Sea region has more than 500 km unpolluted coastal line on which the population heavily relies upon.

The region is home to mountains and vast plains of land. The plains cover 49% and mountains as well as hills cover around 44% of the landscape while 7% of the land is volcanic. The altitude of the eastern part of the region ranges from 0 to 500 meters above sea level while the western side ranges from 500 to 2000 meters. The eastern side is known for its hot and dry climate and the western side has a cooler climate. Annually, the region gets around 200mm of rain. However, as the rain water is mixed with the salty land it is not suitable for cultivation. Though the introduction of irrigation agriculture is becoming common in the region nowadays. Irrigation has killed the myth that the Danakil area is never meant for cultivating crops. The underground water used by the

increasing number of farmers is providing fruits, vegetables as well as crops to the region's market. Thus, the irrigation based agricultural activities are given more attention by the government and zonal administrations as the yield seems encouraging. To ensure the consistency of agriculture and productivity, reserving every drop of rain water every summer season is a task that cannot be overlooked. Preserving water would also attract wild animals to the area. According to a regional assessment in the past year, farmers harvested 2000 quintal of animal feeds, 2000 quintal of Sorghum and 2200 quintal of fruits and vegetables. In other agricultural endeavors, 1800 families were provided with 30,000 chicken broods to sustain their families and stabilize markets.

Tourism is another factor that makes the region attractive. It is the second best riches the Southern Red Sea is renowned for. There are 36 islands under the region's administration. Fishes, turtles, coral reefs, sea flowers, and numerous bird species are some of the tourism assets of the region. The strategic road along the coastal line connects the port cities of Massawa and Assab and enables passengers to enjoy the view of the Red Sea. On the way is Rahayta, a town that has been administered by Sultans since 800 years ago. The present Sultan is the 16th Sultan named Abdulkadir Dawood. The Rahayta Sultan is the chief from the four Sultans in the Afar tribe (two are found in Eritrea).



Another attractive landmark is the dormant volcano that constantly releases steam. According to geologists, the area is likely to turn to active volcanos. The colorful stones in the Denkalia area, the manuscripts of Maebele, ancient graves, and underground room people used to hide themselves and their livestock from the Tigray feudal lords are among the beauty of the region. Moreover, the 1861 built Sherif Ali Mosque in Edi made of coral is another tourist attraction. The 8th -10th century built

wells in Mieder tell a superb history. Mieder is a historic place where the second group of Prophet Mohammed's disciples entered Eritrea from Saudi Arabia.

The Southern Red Sea region is also endowed with its share of wild animals such as the Ostrich, gazelle, hyena, boar, monkey, fox and leopard among the rarely seen in the region.

Delivering social services was a challenged due to the scattered distribution of the people in the region. However, some initiatives to gather the scattered people into a common place has made it easier to provide social service by the administration of the region.



Without proper infrastructure such as roads, no development programs are possible to achieve. In the past it was difficult for pregnant women and patients of the region to travel over the desert to reach the port city of Assab. The 600 km newly constructed road resolved the transportation problems. It reduced the several days journey into hours to reach Assab. Because of the construction of this road, the Harat Transportation Company deployed buses and minibuses into the region so that people can easily perform their affairs. The buses travel on Asmara-Assab, and Assab-Tio routes, with two city buses in the port city of Assab. Moreover, some thirty taxis are already giving service to the public along with privately-owned buses.

The 71km asphalted road that stretches from Assab up to the Eritrea-Ethiopia border and the all whether Rahayta-Assab road are some of the major national development programs achieved. The government spent 207 million Nakfa to construct the three roads (Massawa-Assab, Assab-Rahayta, Assab-Ethiopian border) and make operational. Such infrastructures will help the population to easily exploit the natural resources the region has. All the towns are connected via these strategic roads. It has also been a while since the Eritrean Airline resumed flights connecting Asmara and Assab.

In terms of health, there are 19 health centers including one privately owned clinic, providing health services by 140 medical workers. Two of these health centers are communal hospitals and the one in Assab is a Referral Hospital. Now patients who were going to Massawa and Asmara to get better health service are getting health service in their own towns. Three ambulances are available to transport patients and pregnant women. Vaccination programs are progressing well and infection rate is at its minimal. Communicable diseases are no longer a threat in the region, according to Mr. Humed Ali, head of social services in the region.

Communication in the Southern Red Sea is also making progress. Most towns and villages have access to mobile service.

Electricity is getting improved gradually, which in the past was only limited to Assab and some towns. Four power generators have been installed and expected to be operational in near future.

In the last 26 years of independence, water reservoirs were constructed to provide potable water to the population. According to the statistics of the zonal administration, around 80% of the population is getting safe and pure water for drink.



To partake of the social services people are encouraged by the government to start living together instead of staying scattered. Particularly, towns located near the volcanic areas are highly recommended by the administration to relocate into safer places as soon as possible.

There were only 10 schools providing educational services before independence which have now grown into 76 (3 high schools, 13 junior and several elementary) teaching 9000 students. Most of these schools have solar powered energy for classrooms and libraries. According to the education branch head in the region, Mr. Idris Ali, 85% of the population who are keen to get knowledge are getting it. The government built boarding schools in Assab, Tio, and Afambo to provide children access to education. The quality of education is ensured by the 80 % former students and now teachers of the region teaching in their mother language and complying with the educational policy of "Education through mother language". Sixty eight percent of the population of Southern Red Sea has been freed from illiteracy, yet female participation is decreasing from time to time due to long distance to school and underage marriage. Zonal administration is constantly making efforts to get over these problems and regain the number of females who had gone to school. To increase the overall participation of students in the region, the National Youth organization of the region offers a FIEMA Award every year. The award is given to students who are able to keep their studies until 12th grade in Sawa and score good grades in the Matriculation. For those students who missed out education because of overage (9-14 years of age), a three year crash course is provided so as to keep them aligned with their peers.

The Mewl Program initiative, the saving and lending program which was launched in 2001, is one of the branches of the government which looks for improved living standards of the people. The organization built 16 village banks in the four sub-zones providing financial services by going to the doorsteps of the people. It regularly monitors the economic progress of individuals and groups it lends and makes sure the money is paid back on time. The 1687 clients include 72% women most of whom engage in fisheries. Assisted by the credit, people open groceries, wood and metal workshops, and weaving shops and the organization encourages people to engage in the emerging agricultural activities.

The modern ice factory in Assab is contributing immensely to the fishermen. A Salt factory is has created a lot of job opportunities. Moreover the port city of Assab has two international Hotels and abundant water supply that attracts investment, said the governor of the region, Mr. Ghirmay Tekleab. As it stands, the free trade zone area is ready for operation.