

Gherset Agro-Project: Making Significant Contributions to Food Security



By Habtom Tesfamichel

Agriculture is the main economic activity in Eritrea and it employs over 70% of the workforce. The majority of people in the country engage in crop production and livestock herding. Most farmers depend on rainfall.

This can pose a problem since rainfall is variable and unevenly distributed across time and place. One of Eritrea's national goals is to guarantee food security. Efforts to achieve this goal include the introduction of modern equipment and technology, various irrigation and terracing schemes, soil and water conservation, and reducing dependence on rainfall. Eritrea's national food security policy stresses the advancement of agricultural practices with modern technology to produce surplus. The policy encompasses all sectors and reflects the country's motto of self-reliance.

Eritrea's macro-policy framework is the platform for country's socio-economic growth and development. Agriculture, food security, and socio-economic growth are interrelated and reinforce each other in the process of overall development. The Government of the State of Eritrea (GSE) has committed itself to achieving food security in the near future. To address food insecurity, the GSE has implemented a number of agricultural, health, education, fisheries, and other projects and programs. The GSE's focus is on enhancing productive resources to increase production and achieve food self-sufficiency. This avoids dependency on food imports and domestic market distortions by subsidized food aid. Improving agricultural production in Eritrea will help in the achievement of various national developmental goals, including ensuring food security, reducing poverty, improving people's livelihoods, and raising standards of living.

In order to implement policies, Eritrea has been divided into three development regions: central highlands, eastern lowlands, and western lowlands. Various projects are underway in each of these regions. If there is one location that exemplifies agro-industry in Eritrea, it's the Gash Barka region. Due to its geographical size and agro-ecological advantages, the Gash Barka region in western Eritrea is the breadbasket of the nation. In order to avert drought and expand farming, the GSE has constructed strategic dams along major river basins and potential catchments such as Gerset, Bademit, Fanco Rawi, Fanco Tsmue, Kerkebet, and other small water reservoirs. These provide much-needed water for the region.

Irrigation-based agriculture has increased output and led to a surplus in cereals, vegetables, fruits, and livestock. In Gash Barka, over 160 dams, micro-dams, water catchments, and diversion schemes have been constructed. Additionally, over 100,000 hectares of land have been cultivated through irrigation, splash irrigation, and drip irrigation.

Agro-industries have been erected, including the Banatom Factory in Alebu, which processes locally produced tomatoes and bananas. Importantly, this adds value to the products. Aligider, Gheret, the two Fancos, Badimit, and Alemayet also are home to important agro-industry activities. Remarkably, these dams have a capacity of over 300 million cubic meters of water.

To promote sustainable development, the Eritrean Crops and Livestock Corporation has taken over several agro-industry projects. Mr. Haylzghi Habte, manager of agricultural projects in the Southwestern Gash Barka region, says that "the Eritrean Crops and Livestock Corporation works in regionally divided agricultural development zones. The Southwestern Agricultural Development zone is one of the regional agricultural development zones administered by the corporation. This zone incorporates the sub-zones of Goluj, Haikota, and Tesennei. In these farms, there are large and small agro-projects."

The largest farms are Gheret, Fanco Tsimue (Fesco), Adi Omer, and Aligider. Some of these were developed earlier and are continuing to operate, while others are currently in development. The projects that are in the preparation phase include Fanco Rawi, Wedi Leges, and Bademit.

For the Gheret project, more than 10,000 hectares of land has been cultivated. Produce includes lemons, mangos, dates, oranges, and various vegetables. The project also features a cattle, sheep, and goat farms. Apart from irrigation-based agriculture, the Gheret project also produces crops such as sesame, sorghum, maize, and millet. There have also been successful pilot projects to produce wheat and teff. According to Mr. Haylzghi, "although various kinds of crops can be produced in Gheret and the other farms, we are currently focusing on certain fruits and vegetables. We are driven by the needs of the nation. For now, we cannot

produce all kinds of products at one time.” Recently, the Gherset project has expanded to accommodate individual farmers.

Agricultural development cannot be achieved without appropriate attention given to markets. The Eritrean Crops and Livestock Corporation aims to stabilize the market price of different agricultural products. In the Gherset project, there are approximately 13,000 sheep, 800 cows, and 200 camels. The Corporation has had a significant impact on stabilizing market prices. Fresh products are available to most regions of the country throughout the year. The Corporation also supplies meat to different ministries on national holidays and various other special occasions.

One of the Corporation’s main aims is to ensure that local residents are the main beneficiaries of the projects. In the Adi Omer project, for example, the Corporation has provided milk and dairy products at reasonable prices to local residents. The Gherset project has also created employment opportunities for over 4,000 local residents. Notably, some of these residents returned to Eritrea after having lived or spent time in Sudan.

The Corporation works closely with various national institutions from across the country. The Gherset project, as well as other agriculture-related projects, are staffed with agricultural specialists from various national institutions.

In order to increase production, the Gherset farm is equipped with horticulture and animal science specialists. These specialists are graduates of Hamelmalo Agricultural College. Mr. Meron Russom, a veterinarian currently working on the Gherset farm, explained how the specialists are, “carefully observing the animals’ feeding and health conditions. If the animals are treated properly, they are highly productive.” He went on to add, “Here in the field, we have been able to apply what we learned. We have broadened our understanding and deepened our knowledge”.

Ms. Shewit Ghebruhwet, who graduated from Hamelmalo Agricultural College with a degree in horticulture, explained, “Previously, seedlings were imported from Sudan. Now, however, we have established our own nursery area. We also provide seedlings for the other farms. We have been quite successful. Moreover, it reduces the unnecessary effort and hard currency spending to import”.

Additionally, Mr. Haylzghi noted, “Our current level of production should not be overlooked. What is encouraging is that we are only scratching the surface of our potential. We are laying the foundation for an intensive farming system, but we are yet to reach the desired level of production.”

The Gash Barka region is blessed with rich, fertile lands that are suitable for agricultural activities. The region is Eritrea’s breadbasket and agro-

industry hub. The Gherset farm site relies on different types of irrigation, including canal, drip, and splash. It should also be noted that there is great potential to expand the Gherset project in the near future. In fact, the Corporation is currently working to increase the area of cultivable farmland to between 15,000 to 20,000 hectares.

Eritrea is working to achieve sustainable development and food security. A key part of the country's strategy is the development of agro-based industries. Additionally, the Eritrean Crops and Livestock Corporation has made significant contributions. Irrigation-based agricultural activities have helped increase production and contributed to the surplus in cereal crops, vegetables, fruits, and livestock. Dams, micro-dams, and water diversion schemes have also been very valuable. Moving forward, the integration of the private sector into activities can also prove beneficial.

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