



The State of Eritrea

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Eritrean Women in Agri-business Association: A Promising Women Entrepreneurship

The Ministry of Agriculture (MoA) of the State of Eritrea is working with the goal to ensure safe and nutritious food security. As a result, it has been seeking different ways to reach this goal. Providing technological support and creating an enabling environment for small and medium commercial farmers (SMCFs) is one of the focuses of the MoA. The overall goal of the Small and Medium Commercial Farmers Strategy (SMCFS) is “to support farmers who engage in highly-productive, profitable agriculture value chains linked to domestic and international markets by 2028. The SMCFs will supply domestic agro-industries with high-value agricultural products, contribute to higher farmers’ incomes, utilize natural resources in a sustainable manner, and generate growing high-quality employment.”

In this regard, women, who make up 50% of society, must be provided with a conducive environment and that is why the MoA encourages the active participation of women in agribusiness through promoting tailored capacity-building programmes and other supports. The Eritrean Women in Agri-business Association (EWAA) is one of the beneficiaries. The Public Relations Division of the MoA has conducted an interview with Ms. Senait Tesfaldet and Ms. Genet Bekuretsion, Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson of the association respectively, to brief our readers on the general establishment and activities of EWAA, and also with Ms. Selamawit Mekonen, Secretary of the association and chairperson of the COMESA Federation of Women in Business (COMFWB) Eritrea Chapter, to highlight on the current activities of the Federation.

- **Question (Q): Please introduce yourselves to our readers.**

Answer (A): My name is Senait Tesfalidet. I am the Chairperson of the Eritrean Women in Agri-business Association (EWAA).

A: And I am Genet Bekuretsion, Deputy Chairperson of (EWAA).

- **Q: Ms. Senait, let's start with a brief explanation of EWAA's objectives and activities.**

Ms. Senait: Just to start with its background, it began as part of the African Women's Agri-business Network in 2003 through the National Chamber of Commerce by Ms. Tsehaytu Daniel, who is tasked with the capacity development of women's businesses. At that time, its objective was focused on networking with women who are engaged in agricultural businesses in the Horn of Africa region and connecting them to a sustainable network of markets. Although there were no women who had achieved export capacity at that time, Ms. Tsehaytu dared to organize a total of 10 committed women, including myself, with a vision that we would steadily grow to that level. This organization continued until 2013 focusing mainly on the carrying out of training courses. Since it started engaging with the MoA, the number of its members grew bigger. Ultimately, it transformed into a recognized association under the umbrella of the MoA and officially embraced a new name: EWAA.



Ms. Senait Tesfaldet

- **Q: What was the initial number of EWAA's members and how inclusive and impactful was the latter organization?**

A: When it was organized in 2013, it had a total of 30 members. With the view of having a national scope, it, soon, started to carry out promotional activities in all regions of our country to increase its membership scope, which, in the beginning, stood beyond one hundred. However, many of the women who joined the association couldn't sustain their membership due to a lack of awareness. They had an expectation that associations support with supplies and facilities at a reasonable cost; whereas our association focuses on equipping women with continued training. To date, we can't dare to say that this association is strong, in terms of outreach, as it should be. However, we have managed to win the interest of around 35 new young women who became members recently and have already completed a training course.

- **Q: So, can we attribute the major challenge of the association to a lack of awareness?**

A: Yes. There has been an apparent lack of awareness regarding the merits of training. Generally, many people, including women, tend to focus on the financial, technical, and other aspects of investment rather than on the prime need of investing in their minds. We could sustain our agri-businesses, against all odds, flexibly, thanks to the continued training courses we have been taking. Yet, we could recently witness steadily growing awareness among members and the concerned women with regard to the importance of training. There are several members who continuously ask about training courses that are in the pipeline. This is my personal perspective regarding the underlying problem.

- **Q: How many training courses have been organized by EWAA since its official establishment in 2013?**

A: Well, they are not few; 50 to 60 training courses. The training courses we took previously were basic ones with a major focus on management, book-keeping, customer handling, coaching, and the like; and took the form of a regular class of a three-week period. Then, starting in 2013, more advanced training courses, which are anchored on practical needs assessment, were conducted. For instance, the trainers visited my nursery and horticultural business in advance and carried out a needs assessment for me. They also did

the same thing with the other association members who are engaged in different fields of agri-business. Then, they gave us tailored training based on the study's conclusions. The training lasted for around two months and had a direct impact on our businesses.

Furthermore, we have become beneficiaries of several short training courses in several fields such as management and entrepreneurship.

Equally, worth mentioning is the fact that the association, in collaboration with the MoA and other stakeholders, has ensured that members of this association get training through exposure visits and short courses in different countries like Japan, China, India, Kenya, Israel, and other countries.

- **Q: Okay, let me direct my question to Ms. Genet Bekuretsion, Deputy Chairperson of EWAA: How diverse are the agri-business engagements of this association's members?**



- Ms. Genet Bekuretsion

Ms. Genet: They are engaged in almost all aspects of agricultural production activities, namely; poultry, mushroom, livestock fattening, rabbit, horticulture, crops, food processing, and spices, among others. We are confident that there are many potentially capable women in all spheres of agricultural production.

- **Q: What advantages can interest women get from joining this association?**

A: The major advantage they get is enlightenment. If they exactly know what they can do, they can be competitive. So, we usually stress sustainable training. We are always engaged in training and refresher courses and because of this, we are witnessing the growing potential of producing export-standard processed and packaged products.

- **Q: Ms. Senait, let me come back to you, what are the criteria for membership in EWAA?**

A: According to the association's policy, female individuals who are 18 years and above, and who have two years of experience in agri-business can be members of EWAA.

- **Q: Okay, Ms. Senait, please brief us about EWAA's stakeholders and the joint activities thereof.**



We work closely with SMAP – Institute of Education, Training, and Consultancy. They give us many training opportunities. There are individual resource persons like Dr. Abel Tedla and Mr. Tekeste Asgedom who give us management-related training courses as well. The National Confederation of Eritrean Workers (NCEW) has also become an important stakeholder, assisting us in various areas. The MoA, above all, has enabled us to work efficiently under its umbrella. The Association of Eritreans in Agricultural Sciences (AEAS) is also one of our stakeholders which has been highly involved in organizing training courses for us. We share a lot of factors in common.

- **Q: How is EWAA related to the COMESA Federation of Women in Business (COMFWB)?**

A: We have started working together recently. So far, we have engaged in joint training sessions and monthly bazaar events. So, we have got opportunities to display our products to our people directly. In addition, EWAA took part in COMFWB's meeting in Uganda and a subsequent annual bazaar was hosted by Zambia. Cooperation of this type has opened a doorway to many opportunities for our association.

- **Q: What direct technical support does the MoA give to EWAA?**

A: The MoA is not merely a stakeholder. We are working under its umbrella. On top of this, it organizes free training courses through its experts whenever it is necessary and it is through this ministry that we secure supplies –For example, improved seeds, rabbits, and technical and material support for the mushroom production group among others. The MoA has a great role in making EWAA's endeavors impactful.

- **Q: Does your association carry out promotional activities targeting its potential audience or customers?**

A: Well, we can't dare to say that we have disseminated ads. It had once got media coverage through Dimtsi- Hafash radio program and Tigre newspaper, Eritriye Haddas. We can't even figure out the impact of this promotion. What we can say, for sure, is that there is steadily growing awareness about EWAA.

- **Q: What are the planned programs of EWAA for the future?**

A: We have a plan to lay a groundwork for members to put the knowledge they have acquired into practice and thereby ensure businesses' growth based on

various initial loan opportunities. We are working to this effect in collaboration with the NCEW.

We further focus on encouraging members to engage themselves in group-owned agri-businesses, which enable us to organize more in-depth and fine-tuned training courses. Currently, we are making more focus on in-depth courses and exploring loan opportunities in a bid to equip new members adequately in a short period of time.



- **Q: Any final words you would like to add?**

Ms. Senait: I thank you for making a special focus to cover EWAA's activities and I would like to encourage concerned women to pay attention to the merits of membership and thus avail themselves to be beneficiaries of the growing opportunities.

Ms. Genet: Let me just add one remark here: It has been clear to us that many of our members are struggling with securing packaging materials for their products. So, I'd like to remind the MoA and other stakeholders to ensure a means through which our association can get packaging materials for its members.

Thank you!

A Highlight on COMFWB, Eritrea Chapter

COMESA Federation of Women in Business (COMFWB) embraces women who are engaged in business activities and are members of associations.

Subordinating the chairperson of the federation's national chapter exists a hierarchy of different officers: Liaison Officer and then a team of an executive body that is composed of the chairpersons of the relevant national associations of women. In Eritrea, there are five national associations of this type, namely; the Eritrean Women in Agri-business Association (EWAA), the Association of Fish Processing and Fishnet Making, the Association of Ceramics and Handcrafting, the Association of Fashion Designers, as well as Association of Weaving Business.

These national associations carry out their respective activities independently and when they started engagement with COMFWB, their chairpersons became members of the national chapter's executive body immediately. Such an organizational system ensures a workflow that enables members of the national associations to have a connection with COMFWB's activities through their respective association chairpersons.

On the other side, there could be women members of national associations who do not wish to be members of COMFWB. So, the federation requires that women complete the membership form.



Ms. Selamawit Mekonen

Ms. Selamawit Mekonen is currently working as the Secretary of the Eritrean Women in Agri-business Association, as well as the Founder and Chairperson of COMFWB's Chapter in Eritrea. In explaining the course of the chapter's

establishment in Eritrea, Ms. Selamawit points out that the initiative thereof was inspired in 2019 in connection with her exposure to a conference which was hosted by the African Free Trade Continental Area in Addis Ababa, where she took part as a member of EWAA. She further explains that a then-new Eritrean CEO for COMESA, Ms. Ruth Negash, who was tasked with the founding of COMFWB chapters in various African countries, played a big role in encouraging her to work on the federation's establishment in Eritrea.

“Ms. Ruth held talks with all the participating women from 21 African countries, including me, and encouraged us to ensure that all pertinent women's associations get organized under the umbrella of the Ministry of Trade and Industries with the intent of opening an office thereof and guaranteeing organizational structure as well as a clear work plan. COMFWB was due to replace FEMCOM, which didn't bring about active participation from many African countries. In Eritrea the local activities were carried out through the support of the National Union of Eritrean Women,” Ms. Selamawit explains.



According to her, although she engaged herself actively in the pursuit of expediting the federation's establishment in Eritrea following her return from the conference, the subsequent global challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic had impeded and complicated the possible cooperation among the concerned parties such as the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Trade and Industry. The noble first step was federating the existing relevant associations of women,

including EWAA. Even during the pandemic, some informal mutual efforts were underway with a view of laying the groundwork for its establishment.

Ms. Selamawit gives further details as follows: “Meanwhile, Ms. Ruth encouraged me to keep track of all COMFWB meetings that were being conducted virtually so that Eritrea doesn’t fall behind the other African nations due to a possible vacuum which could result in the suspensions of the formal establishment and legalization of the chapter in Eritrea. Then, in July 2021, His Excellency Mr. Osman Saleh, Foreign Minister of Eritrea, focused on the importance of the matter, while Ms. Ruth emerged successful in federating all the 21 African countries, and a decision was taken by the government to establish it urgently.”



His Excellency Mr. Arefaine Berhe was tasked with the process of setting up COMFWB’s chapter in Eritrea under the umbrella of the Ministry of Agriculture (MoA) and the fact that there were already five identified relevant associations of women was a good stepping stone to this end. The new COMFWB chapter was welcomed by the MoA and a total of 30 representatives could immediately participate in the first training course on Financial Literacy and Product Internationalization that was organized for participants from the 21 member states. This was the time COMFWB was officially established in Eritrea and embraced its first continental activity. Therefore, we had to subsequently present financial, pictorial, and narrative reports vis-à-vis the training budget, Ms. Selamawit said.

Ms. Selamawit further sheds light on the fact that they were in a position to be represented by six members in COMFWB's regional trade fair in Zambia, right after one month, in September, thanks to the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Marine Resources co-funds for the five participants. They could display a gratifying number of products there. Such a debut of participation also gave rise to the quick acquisition of experience and thus moved the executive body of the national chapter to focus on two things: Proper harnessing of local resources and standardization targeting product demonstration on events of this type. As a result of this, it locally staged the first bazaar of women's products in December 2021, just after two months. The event was set in coincidence with New Year and its outcome was commendable.

Ms. Selamawit indicates that, at the beginning of this year, COMFWB's Chapter in Eritrea was well institutionalized and equipped, utilizing its budget under the regulatory role of the Ministry of Agriculture. "Then it was time to organize a second training course on Trade Readiness for Export, which is fine-tuned in the context of regional scope, and 54 women became beneficiaries of this training course. It is logical that success in regional trade exchange is an indispensable prerequisite for continental trade. So, the 21 African member states are divided into five regional categories: The Horn region, Eastern region, Indian Ocean region, Southern region and Northern region" She adds.



Ms. Selamawit further explains that: COMFWB was due to hold the Horn of Africa's regional summit this year and, to our surprise, Eritrea was approached to host it as the only candidate country based on the merit of its sustainable peace. Otherwise, the majority of the region's countries surpass Eritrea in terms of experience in the organization. "So, we managed to host an impressive three-

day summit, from 27th to 30th of July, witnessing participants from Sudan, the Chair of the region, Zambia board chair of COMFWB, Somalia, Djibouti, and Eritrea, besides the presence of the Chairperson of entire COMFWB”, she said.

“Therefore our outstanding state of peace was also promoted through the hosting of this summit and we could earn a gratifying country image, which is very crucial in building partner confidence in all trade transactions, especially given our region’s volatile political situation. We heard overwhelming personal testimonials from the participants concerning this and it motivated us a lot,” she said.

Moreover, the Eritrean Chapter participated in the Annual General Meeting of COMFWB. Concurrently, 11 members participated in the 3rd annual COMFWB Trade Fair Program convened in Kampala, Uganda from the 24th-26th August of 2022. The team displayed agri-business, fisheries, weaving, ceramics, and fashion-designed products. From a total of 19 participating countries, Eritrea was awarded: ‘The Best Presenter of the Year’ for its upper varieties of products, number of presenters, and greater exhibition area. Ms. Selemawit also commended the role of the Eritrean Embassy in Uganda and the Eritrean community for decorating the display areas and for rendering all-around assistance for the exhibition.

Meanwhile, the national chapter of COMFWB has been staging monthly product bazaars seeking continued improvements toward standardization. There, products like handicrafts, agricultural products, ceramic products, and others are regularly displayed and sold. This strategy entails dependence on technical and voluntary popular feedback that is received in written form during such events. Then, the members of the executive board engage themselves in immediate assessment meetings. So far, they have staged a total of eight bazaars, thus registering remarkable impetus in product improvement, packaging, and pricing, among others.