

Understanding Eritrea's Distinctive Development Vision



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Eritrea's development story is too often told through the narrow lens of global benchmarks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), or the African Union's Agenda 2063. While these frameworks provide valuable points of comparison, they risk overlooking or misrepresenting the country's own long-standing and distinctive approach to progress.

Far from being a late or reluctant adopter of global priorities, Eritrea has, since well before independence in 1991, embedded the core principles of sustainable development – social justice, equality, human dignity, environmental stewardship, and shared prosperity – into its national vision and policy architecture. Yet these commitments are frequently misunderstood.

Eritrea's insistence on self-reliance, for instance, is often mislabeled as "isolationism," or "autarky", while the deeply rooted social values of solidarity and collective responsibility are rarely acknowledged in mainstream development discourse. A closer look, however, reveals that Eritrea's path not only aligns with many global goals but also reflects a broader, indigenous vision of sustainable development – one that is at once pragmatic, principled, and deeply connected to the country's history and culture.

This vision has deep roots in Eritrea's modern history. Consider the decades-long armed liberation struggle: while its immediate objective was national independence, it was also waged in concomitant pursuit of social justice, gender

equality, poverty eradication, human rights, and shared prosperity – all of which today are recognized as cornerstones of the SDGs and Agenda 2063. These aspirations did not emerge in reaction to external agendas but were part of the nation's identity from the outset.

Eritrea's commitment to sustainable development has also been clearly articulated in official documents and declarations. A central example is the National Charter, adopted in February 1994 in the historic town of Nakfa, which continues to serve as a guiding vision for the country. It outlines Eritrea's aspirations to build a prosperous, unified, and just nation, where citizens can fulfil their potential in a peaceful, healthy, and sustainable environment. Strikingly, the objectives of the Charter align closely with the SDGs and Agenda 2063 and, in many respects, anticipated them by decades.



Importantly, these aspirations have not remained abstract. Eritrea has consistently sought to translate them into tangible outcomes, particularly through its commitment to social justice and equity. The country has worked to ensure that historically vulnerable and marginalized groups are given equal opportunities to thrive within a favourable and optimal developmental ecosystem of upward social mobility. This principle is reflected in the provision of free healthcare and education at all levels, alongside a range of social protection measures designed to safeguard the most disadvantaged and enhance a level playing field for all citizens.

Notably, Eritrea has pursued these policies despite its status as a developing country – a reality that makes such universal commitments both ambitious and exceptional. In doing so, Eritrea distinguishes itself not only from many other

developing nations, where similar services are often inaccessible, but even from some wealthier states that fall short of guaranteeing such rights to all their citizens. This reflects a deliberate choice to prioritize inclusivity, fairness, and human dignity as central pillars of national development, even in the face of scarce resources.



One of the most frequently misunderstood aspects of Eritrea's development model is its principle of self-reliance and approach to foreign assistance. While some critics label this stance "isolationist and "autarky", such characterizations miss the mark. Eritrea does not reject international partnerships; it insists that they be genuine, equitable, and complementary to national priorities. Assistance that is time-bound and sought as a bridging gap in times of diversity is countenanced when it addresses specific, locally identified needs and strengthens national institutions. But it is rejected when it comes with suffocating conditionalities or risks fostering structural dependency. In Eritrea's view, the fulcrum of development partnership must also be shifted to investment and trade, rather than on debilitating and perpetual hand-outs that are often factored in the dependent nation's budgetary calculus in each fiscal year for an indefinite period of time. Indeed, Eritrea's strategic location, considerable endowments and comparative advantages – blue economy, tourism, manufacturing – history, population size etc. dictate that its development strategy be anchored on pursuing vibrant policies of investment and trade within the framework of self-reliance in its broadest sense.

This approach has sometimes put Eritrea at odds with its development partners – the term "donors" is deemed as denigrating – accustomed as they are to wielding disproportionate control over funding flows and development strategies. Yet far from signaling withdrawal from the international community, Eritrea's policy

reflects a determination to safeguard sovereignty, preserve agency, and ensure that citizens themselves remain the primary authors of the nation's development.



Today, as the international community increasingly scales back development assistance and funding across the globe, Eritrea's approach appears not only principled but also prescient. Many developing countries that became heavily dependent on aid now face acute challenges as external support diminishes, often with devastating consequences for essential services and long-term development goals. By contrast, Eritrea's insistence on building capacity from within, minimizing reliance on external handout, and prioritizing self-reliance and vibrant investment and trade, has meant that it is comparatively less vulnerable to such global shifts. Rather than scrambling to fill sudden gaps, Eritrea has continued to pursue development on the basis of internal resources, resilient institutions, strong social solidarity, and vibrant and dynamic domestic and foreign investment – demonstrating the wisdom and durability of its chosen path.

Complementing this resilience is Eritrea's strong foundation of solidarity, generosity, mutual support, and community – pillars that are often overlooked in external analyses but remain central to the country's social fabric. These values are reinforced by both faith and tradition. Christianity emphasizes giving, while Islam enshrines Zakat (almsgiving) as one of its five pillars. Likewise, the country's diverse ethnolinguistic groups place high social value on collective responsibility. From an early age, Eritreans are taught that while communities are made up of individuals, the survival and flourishing of individuals depend on the strength of the collective. Reflecting this, across rural villages and urban neighborhoods, people routinely come together to till the fields, plant crops, build homes, and develop community projects. During the COVID-19 pandemic years

ago, this spirit of solidarity proved vital in mobilizing resources, sharing burdens, and mitigating hardships nationwide.

Underlying these traditions is also a profound sense of duty and obligation. In some ways, this can be described as an appropriate Social Contract in an-all Stakeholder society. Supporting the less fortunate is widely seen not just as kindness but as a moral responsibility. Nowhere is this clearer than in the enduring support extended to war veterans, the families of martyrs, and contributions from the Eritrean Diaspora. The immense sacrifices made for independence and sovereignty have instilled in society a collective duty to honor those who gave their lives or livelihoods, and to preserve their legacy through continuous acts of generosity and solidarity.

In sum, Eritrea's development story is one that has been too often misunderstood, reduced to external frameworks or mischaracterized through superficial labels. While the country's policies and practices overlap significantly with the SDGs and Agenda 2063, they also reflect a deeper, historically grounded vision rooted in independence, self-reliance, solidarity, and community responsibility. Far from being isolationist or reactive, Eritrea's approach demonstrates a commitment to sustainable development that is indigenous, resilient, and profoundly connected to the lived experiences of its people. Recognizing this reality is essential to appreciating the country's perhaps distinct development trajectory and its broader contribution to the global discourse on sustainable and inclusive progress.

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