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Eritrea: 20 years of Progress towards Food Security and Self-Reliance

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“A 'No' uttered from the deepest conviction is better than a 'Yes' merely uttered to please, or worse, to avoid trouble.”- Mohandas Mahatma Gandhi

Today, mass food production and food banking is essential to the economic and political sovereignty of a nation. Globally, Food Security is a fundamental objective of populations and governments. Food is vital to all sectors of the people that make up a nation, starting from the smallest child to the most productive adult; it is essential to the growth, prosperity and stability of a country. In Eritrea food security has taken greater precedence as development policy in order to eradicate poverty and to achieve sustainable economic development.

After Eritrea became independent, in 1991 de jure and 1993 de facto, it was faced with the lack of sustainable infrastructure in education, economic institutions, health, social services, transportation, communication and Agriculture. All these sectors are important to creating an economically viable and prosperous nation. Faced with the challenge of building a nation from scratch, the government of Eritrea set out its priorities with Food Security being among its top priorities in an effort to achieve national and domestic household food security in the country.

Despite its efforts, Eritrea's greatest challenge has been food insecurity due to the practice of subsistence agricultural farming and the irregular rain fall on which the farms and livestock depended upon. In addition to lacking the basic infrastructure the agricultural sector was mainly composed of subsistent farmers and pastoral nomadic population, which forced Eritrea to import its food from outside. It is indeed a great challenge to begin forming the foundations of the sector that is to become responsible for feeding the nation and securing food for every household. So, the foundation began with the proclamation, formed by “the government's commitment to long-term investments in human capital and down-to-earth assessment of available resources” to foster development. To do this, Eritrea took on a four part strategy of long and short term goals to ensuring food security in the future, while improving current conditions. The strategies included:

- Enhancing and expanding agricultural production through various means,
- Self-reliance and avoidance of the dependency on food-aid,
- Increasing national foreign exchange earnings capacity to import food to fill the supply gap and to maintain strategic reserves.
- Promotion of training with emphasis on food and nutrition, child care, Sanitation, domestic care, etc.

Looking at the strategies undertaken by the government of Eritrea, it is apparent that they are contributing to the improvement of conditions. For example in the Northern Red Sea Zone, all of the four point strategies have been implemented. The NRSZ was selected due to the high rate of malnutrition peaking at 23% and high rates of poverty among the population. According to the study conducted partnering with CARE, 30 projects were implemented in seven villages. The government projects focused on water supply, vegetable production, nutrition to improve the living conditions, malnutrition and economic of the inhabitants.

The government built water wells for villagers to reduce the shortage and the distance of water fetching. What used to take 2-3 hours of walking to get water now takes 30 minutes of walking. In addition the villagers were dependent on underground water dugouts to water their animals, the government to built water wells for the animals as well. The consistent water wells meant the villagers can settle in one area. In addition to the water supply, the government built irrigation systems and assisted inhabitants in better farming through diverse planting. Villagers were encouraged to plant different kinds of vegetables that have high nutritional value and that are diverse. In addition workshops were setup to education population on nutrition and the financial incentives of growing more diverse vegetables. Through this project vegetable consumption and income increased and in some cases, Self-employment and temporary hiring increased. In addition, permanent villagers were established. It is this kind of down to earth policies that have been improving the issue of household food insecurity.

In another part of the country, the Southern Red Sea Zone, the Government has heavily invested in the fishing industry by cultivating fishing traditional fishing community and building the infrastructure of the communities through building wind turbine to provide the electricity needed for the ice production and fish processing plant, providing fuel subsidies and engine improvements for local fishers in addition to building a market place and distribution centers for the industry. The purpose is not only to improve nutrition in the country but to also reduce the strain on the grain. In addition the distribution centers with quality standard have contributed in achieving in increasing the foreign exchange capacity through exporting fish products. In the Gash Barka region, greater infrastructural projects have been under taken to build the country's bread basket, from irrigation, water supply systems (damns and wells), transportation, large scale cultivation, biotechnology based seed and biodiversity planting and soil management, financial and technical supplementations...etc. the results, as seen in the 2009 bumper harvest, was an increase in yield and variety of produce in the market.

Although Eritrea has not achieved complete food security yet, it is evident that the self-reliant manner, down to earth method of assessments and the government's long-term commitment in achieving food security in Eritrea are playing a big role in improving the country's poverty conditions. Just look at the human indicators published in the world health organization, and the human development index improving from .444 to .474 in two years in addition look at the decrease in malnutrition, infant mortality rate, and increase in life expectancy. NGOs and Aid agencies should look at Eritrea's development policies if the true intention is to develop poverty, drought and war stricken countries.

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