

Twenty Years of Independence Series –No. 5

Eritrea: 20 Years of Success in Social Justice

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Development is one of the key goals of all countries. Development is defined in several different ways and it is measured by different standards. Yet, there has not been any established approach to the goals, definitions and measurements of development. Regardless of how it is defined, its goals are established and its end results are measured, people, positively or negatively, are at center of all development. Many of us agree that development should attempt to make the living standard of people better. It should aim to bring a better quality of life for the majority. Development without a better living standard of the people is deficient. Such development, as in the case of the construction of physical and social infrastructure, has to be people focused. As long as the construction of physical and social infrastructure focuses on the development of people it will directly and indirectly ensure and boost social justice because people are the core of all social justice endeavors. As development history shows, for a long time many people in the world have been marginalized from physical and social infrastructure. Social justice, as measured by the access to social and physical infrastructure, has been denied to many people or provided to them at nominal symbolic level. No question many developing countries had built considerable physical and social infrastructure in their major cities, serving a minority of elites, at the expense of the disadvantaged majority.

Eritrea is an exception in the reality of today's developing countries that got their liberation more than half a century years before Eritrea. Many have not been able to boost social justice by expanding access to national infrastructure to their disadvantaged majority. The people of Eritrea, like many of other colonized people, have been denied access to social and physical infrastructure during the colonial occupation of Eritrea. The deliberate denial of access to social and physical infrastructure that went for centuries had caused an unbalanced and unfair social justice in the country at the time of its independence. However, after the independence of Eritrea, on May 24, 1991, the Government and the people of Eritrea have successfully built, rehabilitated, and expanded diverse social and physical infrastructure not only in the major cities and for the already disproportionately advantaged people and for a mere political symbol, but to bring a better quality of life with a clear purpose of securing social justice in the whole country.

The Government's development policy is to improve the economy of the country that is widely distributed and shared among the various groups of Eritrea. The Government has attempted to expand the well-being of the people by narrowing down gender, region, and income related gaps. The Government, with its limited resource, has so far successfully built marvelous social and physical infrastructure throughout the country. The government and the people of Eritrea have been working relentlessly to bring a better living standard and quality of life through the provision of national social and physical infrastructure. National social and physical infrastructure has taken place in a wide geographical area, covering both rural and urban areas, as well as addressing primarily the major social as well as physical needs of the majority of the people: people who have been denied access, and even were not aware of the possibilities and benefits of social and physical facilities. In the 20 years of independence, the country has proudly able to expand access to major social and economic resources and opportunities. According to the policies and development

programs of the Government of Eritrea, social justice is well incorporated to address access to and fair distribution of the wealth of the country through the provision of economic, social, and physical facilities. Eritrea, using its own recourses and depending on its firm believe in the principle of self-reliance, has successfully built major social and physical infrastructure throughout the country. In the past 20 years the people of Eritrea has been able to get better social and physical infrastructure with a better access and fair distribution of the country's wealth. It is next to impossible to find a village in Eritrea that has never been affected by the construction and rehabilitation of national infrastructural work; villages and small towns where the infrastructural work took place are places that existed, but because of colonial neglect, many didn't even know they existed. As it is clearly and properly articulated in its development program, the Government of Eritrea aims at building human capacity and rehabilitating as well as reconstructing major physical, social, and economic infrastructure that covers roads, airports, harbors, water supply, health services and power supply. The aim is not for a mere presence of reckless physical assets built for a bragging right of the government, but to create access to and ensure fair distribution of wealth through the network of national infrastructure to benefit and better the lives of the majority.

Today, after 20 years, Eritrea has been able to boost social justice as measured by access, usage, and distribution of basic national social and physical infrastructure. The country has built tremendous infrastructure in all its regions reaching all social and economic groups. In order to examine this amazing achievement, in view of its contribution to social justice, someone does not need to go beyond finding an answer to the following three questions listed below. In order to answer these three questions, I have collected and presented statistical data from the papers presented at the national symposia of ministries and regional administrations in Eritrea on the occasion of the 20th independence of Eritrea.

1. What sort of national infrastructure has Eritrea built in the past 20 years?

In the past 20 years, Eritrea has built all sorts of national social and physical services that directly and indirectly impacted the life of millions of its people. These include: educational services, health services, food security, telephone services, port services, residential houses, a national network of roads: Massawa-Erafaile, Barentu-Tessenei-Talatasher, Massawa-Gilbub, Afabet-Kubkub-Nacfa, Massawa-Assab, Igla-Qohaito-Demhina-Foro, Himbrti-Mensura-Agordat, Massawa-Decemhare-Mendefera-Areza-Shambqo-Barentu, the Massawa-Afabet-Agordat, and the Serejeqa-Shebah are some of the major ones), dams and reservoirs (Tekor, Gerset, Fanco are among the big ones), a national power supply grid, communications and transportation.

2. How wide has the national infrastructure geographically expanded in the past 20 years?

The geographic distribution of the national infrastructure can be seen by taking some of the major accomplishments that took place in the six administrative regions of Eritrea.

- **Central Administrative Region:** Over the past 20 years, a total of 62 educational institutions ranging from kindergarten to secondary level have been constructed and over 95% of the inhabitants have access to potable water. The Eritrean Institute of Technology at Mai Nefhi, as well as the Orotta School of Medicine and the College of Health Sciences are located in this region.
- **Anseba Administrative Region:** The number of educational institutions ranging from kindergarten to secondary level has increased by 672%; the number of health institutions has increased by 414%; road networks have been constructed at an expenditure of over 265

million Nakfa running from Keren to Geleb, Keren to Halhal and Keren to Afabet; 65% of the population in the region has also got access to potable water supply; and 35% of the population in the region has become beneficiaries of power supply; and 75 big, medium and small micro-dams and water reservoirs and 5 water diversion schemes have been constructed. This region, in Keren, has the nation's pharmaceutical plant. The Hamelmalo College of Agriculture is also located in this region.

- **Gash Barka Administrative Region:** Over 150 water reservoirs and catchments and more than 118 ponds have been constructed in the region. In addition to the strategic large-scale dams of Gherset, Fanko Rawi, Fanko Tsimu'e, Aligidir and Omhajer. Further 6 dams have been constructed. The expansion of schools increased from 38 to 341, and that 90% of the administrative areas are now providing educational opportunity to nationals. In the case of water supply 74% of the region's population has now got access to potable water supply. The number of schools in the region has increased to 347 which have opened in 173 administrative areas. This is in addition to 13 nomadic schools opened in the 2010/11 academic year. Concerning health service a total of 49 health institutions ranging from health station to referral hospital have been built and out of 189 administrative areas in the region the 171 have access to educational institutions, which in turn raised student enrolment by 700%.
- **Northern Red Sea Administrative Region:** Schools that used to stand at 28 prior to independence has now increased to 381. There are 42 kindergartens, 120 elementary, 45 junior, 2 boarding schools and 11 secondary schools, as well as 146 stations for Adult Education Program. There is a plan underway to expand electricity service from 25% to 35%, and that the coverage of mobile phone service has reached 60%. Educational and health services have shown a fourteen-fold and ten-fold growth, respectively. The construction of the strategic Kohaito-Foro road constitutes a turning point in the urbanization of the 10 adjacent villages and 20 transportation lines have been set up along Massawa-Asmara, Massawa-Ti'o, Massawa-She'ib, Massawa-Ghindae, Massawa-Emberemi, Massawa-Hirgigo, Massawa-Gulbub and Massawa-Embereni-Wekiro. Afabet has got access to 24-hour power supply. In addition the region has a referral hospital in Ghindae. The College of Technology and Marine Sciences is located in this region.
- **Southern Red Sea Administrative Region:** Over 70% of the population in the region has become beneficiary of potable water supply. The construction of the Massawa-Assab road, Assab-Rahaita route, Garsa-Assab and the road running from Assab to the Ethiopian border, as well as over 1,000 feeder roads is also among the major accomplishments in the region. Over 73% of the inhabitants of the Southern region have got access to potable water supply. The region also has a referral hospital at Dhtum. The College of Arts and Social Sciences at Adi Qeyih and the College of Business and Economics at Halhale are located in this region.
- **Southern Administrative Region:** Over 1,603 educational infrastructure projects were implemented at the cost of 2.8 billion Nakfa. Health centres increased from 27 to 88 and 148 new schools were constructed. Villages connected through roads increased from 204 to 732 and 375 potable water projects were completed. Schools in the region have increased by 306% and the number of health centres has increased by 229%. There is also a referral hospital for the region in Mendefera.

3. Who has benefited from the national infrastructure in the past 20 years?

It is not difficult to see statistically that the major beneficiaries are children, women, and people in remote rural areas. In terms of age, 90% of children receive the necessary vaccination at present and maternal mortality rates have reduced from 1,000 per 100,000 during independence to 486 per 100,000 today. In education 19 stations providing educational opportunity to children who were deprived of such opportunity due to nomadic way of living and remoteness in the sub-zones of Geleb, Habero, Halhal, Hamelmalo, Asmat, Hagaz, Kerkebet and Elabered. The gap of health service provision has narrowed around the country and that Eritrea has been recognized internationally for successes achieved in meeting the Millennium Development Goals. In terms of gender, 19% of pregnant mothers used to make pre-natal medical check up only once in the early days of independence. At present 89% of them are getting the necessary pre-natal medical care. The number of pregnant mothers giving birth by health professionals has also increased from 6% to 34%. Over the past 20 years more than 27,000 youths have graduated from vocational and technical schools with certificate and diploma in which 40% of the graduates are female and female participation in vocational education has increased by 50%. In terms of rural-urban relations, 7% of rural areas and only 30% of urban centers had access to clean water in 1991, whereas at present 77% of the population of the rural areas and 95% of those in urban centers have access to clean water. Computer training was introduced in schools in remote areas at a cost of 76 million Nakfa and 400,000 students have become beneficiaries of the program. Computer training programs has been introduced in 65 Secondary and 50 junior schools found in remote parts of the country; even areas that do not have access to electricity are using computers that are solar-powered.

Social justice attempts to primarily help those who have no or inadequate access to social, physical and economic services. In the past 20 years, Eritrea has been able to rehabilitate, expand and build the national infrastructure that has provided millions of Eritreans with access to the wealth of the country. In this short period of time the country has been able to expand access to social and economic resources to the majority of its rural people and even within the rural people to those who have been disadvantaged from gender (women), age (children), and location (people living in remote rural areas). Therefore, by just looking at the types of national infrastructure that has been built in the past 20 years, the geographical coverage of the national infrastructure built in the past 20 years, and the people who have benefited from the national infrastructure in the past 20 years one can conclude that the national infrastructure that has been constructed and rehabilitated in past 20 years of independence has boosted social justice (as measured by access to national infrastructure) in Eritrea.

Thanks and victory to the Government of Eritrea for initiating the 'Wefri Warsi Yekalo' program, thanks to the people of Eritrea for their patience and longsuffering, and thanks to all members of the Defense Forces of Eritrea for their sacrifice, the impossible is becoming possible, and the vision is becoming a reality. Eritrea is becoming a beacon of hope were social justice is more than a lip service.