



SELF-RELIANCE AS A STRATEGY OF POVERTY REDUCTION

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Self-Reliance as a Strategy of Poverty Reduction

Eritrea is one of the poorest countries in the world. It recently emerged from a 30-year war for independence from Ethiopia, which forcibly annexed the former Italian colony in 1962. The war left Eritrea impoverished and environmentally devastated.

Although, most of the population lives a subsistence lifestyle, a fundamental principle of the national development program is progress through *self-reliance*.¹ This philosophy has been embedded in the Eritrean struggle for freedom. It worked for the country in pre-independence days. The Eritrean people appreciated what they did to themselves and treated “Aid” as something that will supplement their own work. Aid that has conditions attached to it and threatens to their country’s hard-won freedom and sovereignty is not welcomed. This policy has put the country at odds with the international donors.

It is obvious that poor soil, unreliable rainfall and the disruptive effects of the world's longest war added with current border conflict with Ethiopia has left the government dependent on outside relief to keep its population alive. However, the government and the people of Eritrea believe that food aid can only heal but not cure their problem. Most of all, they sense that their ability to do things for themselves can only stand them in good stead as people and as an independent nation in the competitive world. In 1991, at the time of independence, the new Eritrean President remarked:

We have been left with a very shattered economy; and that has compounded the dependence that we have. The time everyone in this country will feel relieved will be when we are not asking anyone to give us any help. We would like to reach a stage where we can talk as equals to anyone without asking for assistance.²

At the time of the struggle for independence, the EPLF³ (Eritrean People’s Liberation Front) built an excellent network of village clinics, hospitals, schools, adult literacy programs, and constructed an admirable road infrastructure in the remote areas depending on its own limited resources. It was able to produce dozens of drugs (more than most independent African countries) in order to deal with diseases like malaria and dysentery. It developed its own field microscope as part of its health program.

1. Reintegration and Local Settlement Section, *Handbook for Self-reliance* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2005), 1

2. Connell, “In Context”, *Beyond Famine*. Retrieved May 1, 2007, from <http://www.context.org/>.

3. EPLF is a freedom fighter organization that mobilized the whole Eritrean people against Ethiopia colonialism and brought independence in 1991 by defeating the greatest Ethiopian army merely depending on its own capital and human resources raising self-reliance as an ideology.

The EPLF (now the Eritrean Government) was successful in creating an extensive agricultural development system and road networks in some of the most difficult terrains in Africa. The EPLF produced basic goods from rubber sandals to sanitary napkins. It was also producing its own school textbooks in several languages. Substantial work has been achieved by the EPLF at fixing any kind of broken machinery from a Mercedes truck engine to a wrist watch. The EPLF did all this in rural workshops and clinics dug into hillsides or camouflaged from the air because of the constant threat of bombardment by Ethiopian MIG fighter planes.

Right after the war, the Eritrean Provisional Government commenced to renovate all of the country's economic sectors. With the goal of achieving agricultural self-sufficiency, the government moved to reinstate the economy, rebuild its ruined infrastructure and encouraged a return to small-scale farming and institute sweeping land reform that for the first time guaranteed women equal access to land. This marked its conviction to rely on its own effort rather than depend on foreign aid.

To underwrite this strategy, the Eritrean Macro Policy Paper⁴, covered a multi-sector re-establishment of essential agricultural and industrial activities, the repair and rehabilitation of infrastructure, the restoration of community assets such as schools, clinics, water systems, agricultural tools and livestock, buildings and others. This signified the determination of the government and the people of Eritrea to eliminate poverty and to turn to their own labor for achieving that goal than develop a dependency syndrome.

The new Land Reform Policy⁵ which placed land in the government control had removed the traditional land tenure system and encouraged for agricultural development and investment. The government also provided agricultural inputs to demobilized soldiers and returning refugees to promote cooperative projects. New initiatives have been taken to reinvigorate the fishing industry which had been collapsed during the war years.

Eritrea's aging infrastructure dated from the period of Italian rule and was almost in ruins: leaking water systems in the major towns, impassable roads, badly damaged port facilities of the country's main outlet to the Red Sea and obsolete light industry were set on priority for rehabilitation to avoid long-term chronic dependence.

Currently, an exemplary work is taking place by the army such as repairing the roads; building small dams and catchment's basins, terracing the badly eroded hillsides and planting tree seedlings. These activities are also enhanced by the villagers on food-for-work programs.

Even though this remains the reality, the outside world has a different perspective on the Eritrean self-reliance policy. *The Economist magazine website* posted an article that harshly criticized the Eritrean policy of self-Reliance, calling it "A myth".⁶ On a similar basis the *BBC Magazine* commented "Self-reliance could cost Eritrea dear".⁷

First and foremost, there is no school of thought in the field of social sciences in general nor in the field of economics in particular that presents "self reliance" as an outdated and defunct concept. "Self-reliance" policy did work in pre-independence days and there is no reason why it could not work in post-independence days of Eritrea.

4. The Government of The State of Eritrea, *Macro-Policy* (Asmara: 1994).

5. The Government of The State of Eritrea, *Land Reform Policy* (Asmara: 1996).

6. Economist.com., *A myth of self-reliance* April 27, 2006. Retrieved March 26,2007from <http://www.economist.com> .

7. Harris, BBC News. *Self-reliance could cost Eritrea dear* (BBC News:). Retrieved March 5, 2007, from <http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/>.

Mr. Yemane Gebreab, the Head of the Political Section of the PFDJ (People's Front for Democracy and Justice), affirmed this by stating "The basic lesson from our independence struggle is that we were able to win the war on a very self-reliant basis. This is very important lesson for the future as well.⁸ This statement confirms that the Eritreans have developed a culture of self-reliance in the time of struggle for independence and it is continuing to shape their vision, ideology and their interdependence with the international community.

The government and the people of Eritrea are aware that the only path to independence is to rely on internal resources. To achieve that goal the whole population is engaged in different tasks and dedicated to realize this challenging task.

The Eritrean President, His Excellency Isaias Afewerki, in his speech at the world summit for sustainable development in South Africa, put the core development strategy as striving for self reliance and avoiding chronic and debilitating dependency on external aid.¹⁰

The Eritrean meaning of "self-reliance" embraces the principle of "learning by doing". Similarly, in its Handbook for Self Reliance the UNHCR defined self-reliance as a "...developing and strengthening livelihoods of persons of concern and reducing their vulnerability and long-term reliance on humanitarian/external assistance."⁹ Hence, the people and government of Eritrea asked nothing but to develop and strengthen their own capacities and eliminate dependence and poverty together, not only reduce poverty as UNHCR document stated.

Eritreans fought for decades against the Ethiopian occupation. They lacked any superpower angel who would have been willing to bankroll their struggle. With little support, the Eritreans had to rely on their own resources (both human and material) to achieve freedom. The Eritrean government is proud of what it has achieved during a bitter 30-year war for independence and national self-reliance. What started as a deficit in the struggle time turned into strength, and it continues to shape Eritrea's culture and relations with the rest of the world, including prospective donors.

The Secretary General, of the UN for humanitarian assistance to Eritrea, once falsely accused the Eritrean government on piling thousands of tons of food stored while people are getting hungry.¹⁰ The government knows how to manage its resources and does not need a tutor for that. The Secretary General intentionally tried to disparage the government's self-reliance policy and portrayed it as incompetent in the international community. He indicted the government falsely at handling the problem of its own people by claiming that he witnessed food aid rotten in warehouses while people are starved to death.

There is one thing that the Secretary General needs to keep in mind, if keeping an NGO has a Zero-Sum effect (that is with no positive or negative values), then there is no point keeping them.

As a matter of fact, Eritrea welcomes the assistance of international NGOs as long as their presence in the country does not threaten or weaken Eritrea's capacity to develop itself. The government also insists on Eritrean ownership of all projects that the NGOs initiate and make the project sustainable and not subject to unpredictable shifts in the donor's priorities. This means that Eritrea, and not the NGO, takes the lead in identifying problems and designing solutions for itself. At one time the Eritrean President noted:

8. Connell, "In Context", *Beyond Famine*. Retrieved May 1,2007, from <http://www.context.org/>.

9. Reintegration and Local Settlement Section, *Handbook for Self-reliance* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2005), 1.

10. Ibrahim A. Ibrahim, Self-reliance, the only path to achieve full independence in Eritrea (Sudan Tribune). Retrieved June 3, 2007, from <http://www.sudantribune.com/>.

The emergence of Eritrea as a working state in so short a time is a remarkable testament to self-reliance. We learned the hard way that our sense of purpose, our own unity, our own organized capabilities were only things that we could count on to succeed. Alone in Africa, Eritrea carries little debt and accepts virtually no foreign assistance. Over the past four years, it asked all but six aid providers to leave, including Oxfam and every religious organization.” The president clearly stated, “It is not that we don’t need the money but we don’t want the dependence.” He further commented, “Aid subsidizes but corrupts the government, blocks innovative solutions to problems, so that people do not seek out and use their own resources...”¹¹

In his first address to the United Nations General Assembly in 1993, President Isaias Afwerki stressed that after 30 years of war and the destruction of the country's infrastructure and economy, Eritrea needed international assistance for relief and rehabilitation. At the same time, Eritrea has insisted on linking relief with development, ensuring that all aid contributes towards a strong base for future self-reliance. The desire to avoid dependence does not equate with a rejection of all aid.¹² That speech signifies a genuine path of the government towards self-reliance.

The Eritrean government welcomes international aid that addresses specific needs which cannot be met internally. It welcomes aid that is designed to minimize continued external support, and which complements and strengthens (instead of replacing) Eritrea's own institutional capacity to implement projects. In other words, Eritrea welcomes assistance that contributes to enhancing internal capacity to avoid long term dependence.

Ibrahim strongly criticized the UN Secretary General for Humanitarian assistance, for his false accusation against Eritrea by remarking that:

...the secretary general of the UN for humanitarian assistance to Eritrea we observed accusing the government of Eritrea on piling thousands of tons of food stored while people are getting hungry. This ridiculous accusation is really disgusting and unacceptable. How come the government who is carrying out its obligation to the point that no country is willing to feed its people deserves such an ugly accusation? ¹³

Hence, portraying the Eritrean government as deliberately rejecting help tells no one's mentality except the Aid providers which endeavor to perpetuate a needy atmosphere in countries like Eritrea, so that they can earn their living.

To break this tendency of creating a needy atmosphere, the government stipulated its commitment to emancipate from poverty on it news magazine, Eritrean Profile, under the column “Commentary”. The commentary stated:

The central objective of the various development programs being carried out in different parts of the nation is to make poverty and backwardness things of the past. And the Principle we adhere to in realizing this objective is based on ardent practical action and not on seemingly grandiose but empty theories.¹⁴

11. Speech given on ‘*Demsi Hafash*’ (an official government radio) in 1998.

12. Speech delivered on Eri-TV (the only Eritrean TV Channel) 1993.

13. Ibrahim A. Ibrahim, Self-reliance, the only path to achieve full independence in Eritrea (Sudan Tribune). Retrieved June 3, 2007, from <http://www.sudantribune.com/>.

14. Eritrean Profile, “Commentary”, *Practical Action: The Only Way To Eradicate Poverty*. Wednesday, 21st Feb, 2007. page 3

The commentary further reiterated that in today's world of muscle-flexing bullies and exploiters the risk of being oppressed and exploited is imminent if one does not endeavor for self-reliance. The commentary vehemently rejected the submission of once sovereignty for Aid as other African countries are falling in trap. ¹⁵

The government's aid 'policy' rejects any kind of aid that has strings attached to. It springs from a strong desire to avoid crippling dependence and to foster a clear sense of responsibility for the country's future among all its citizens. As a result, the government has one of the most impressive records of self-reliance in the Third World today. The existing social, economic and political systems of Eritrea for themselves witness a progress to meet the objective of self-reliance. Good governance and near zero-corruption systems are among the best qualifiers of the Eritrean government. This situation fits with the terms of UNHCR, "Progression towards self-reliance requires an appropriate social, economic, political, legal and physical environment..." as stated in "Handbook for self-Reliance".¹⁶

To signify the government's commitment in making poverty a history through self-reliance, the government drafted a Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP)¹⁷. The over all emphasis of the paper is to formulate and implement programs that are intended to stimulate rapid economic growth, reduce poverty and minimize dependence on foreign assistance.

The Eritrean people and government refuse to hand over their hard-won independence for Aid to exploiters and are instead striving to achieve economic emancipation as the first step towards ascertaining national security and independence. Self-reliance is not something that has come on a sudden. It has been a way of life since time memorial, and Eritreans identify with it. The Eritrean society values those who made wealth more than those who inherited wealth. They are skilled and proud people who by their very nature enjoy their success most when it is done without help of others.

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Notes

1. Connell, Dan . "In Context", Beyond Famine. Retrieved May 1,2007, from <http://www.context.org/>.
2. Eritrean Profile, "Commentary". Practical Action: The Only Way To Eradicate Poverty. Wednesday, 21st Feb, 2007, page 3.
3. Economist.com., A myth of self-reliance April 27, 2006. Retrieved March 26,2007from <http://www.economist.com> .
4. Harris., Self-reliance could cost Eritrea dear. BBC News: Retrieved March 5, 2007, from <http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/>.
5. Government of the State of Eritrea. Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy. Asmara: Dec, 2003.
6. Ibrahim A. Ibrahim. Self-reliance, the only path to achieve full independence in Eritrea. Sudan Tribune: Retrieved June 3, 2007, from <http://www.sudantribune.com/>
7. Reintegration and Local Settlement Section, Handbook for Self-reliance. Geneva: UNHCR, 2005.
8. Speech given on 'Demsi Hafash' (an official government radio in 1998).
9. Speech delivered on Eri-TV (the only Eritrean TV Channel in 1993).
10. The Government of The State of Eritrea, Land Reform Policy. (Asmara: 1996).

15. Eritrean Profile, "Commentary", *Practical Action: The Only Way To Eradicate Poverty*. Wednesday, 21st Feb, 2007. page 3

16. Reintegration and Local Settlement Section, *Handbook for Self-reliance* (Geneva: UNHCR,2005).

17. Government of the State of Eritrea, *Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy* (Asmara: Dec,2003).