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Rebuilding lives and landscapes in conflict-torn Eritrea

Since winning independence from Ethiopia in 1993 after a 30-year war, Eritrea's predominantly rural population has been grappling with a wide array of crippling socio-economic problems. A small and extremely poor country, in 2007 Africa's youngest independent nation had an annual per capita income of only US\$149.

Eritrea's economy is based primarily on subsistence agriculture. Sixty per cent of the population relies on agricultural activities such as crop and livestock production or fishing for food and income. Widespread poverty and food insecurity are increasing. Even in years with adequate rainfall, about half the food required to feed the population must be imported. Consecutive years of extreme drought and ongoing conflict with Ethiopia have heightened chronic humanitarian risk in Eritrea.

A multitude of hardships, grinding poverty

A large segment of Eritrea's 2 million people faces extreme economic hardship. Rural households are the poorest because of the low productivity of their crops and livestock enterprises. Almost two thirds of all households are food-insecure.

Soil erosion is one of the most serious environmental problems in Eritrea's highlands. It is a result of: high human and livestock populations, poor agricultural practices, dependence of the rural population on fuelwood for energy, erosion of traditional practices, and extreme poverty. All these factors prevent long-term investment in land improvement.

As fertile topsoil continuously erodes, soil fertility declines at an alarming rate. Low soil productivity is followed by ever-decreasing levels of agricultural production. This affects individual household food security, particularly in the highlands where households typically own less than 1 hectare of farmland.

The simmering border dispute with

Ethiopia has intensified land degradation and poverty among the rural population, especially in border locations such as the Gash Barka region. Across the country, more than 1 million people, mainly farmers, have been displaced and have lost their few assets, including livestock. Today, large tracts of fertile land and pasture remain inaccessible because they are studded with about 60,000 unexploded landmines.

The 2000–2004 droughts, by far the worst in many years, threatened the lives of more than a third of the population. Crop production fell to about a quarter of the average of the previous 10 years.

A comprehensive, integrated approach

The Catchments and Landscape Management Project is a comprehensive, integrated and multisectoral sustainable land management initiative, which will build upon the long IFAD experience in those types of projects. It will be implemented in the *zobas*, or regions, of



GEF PROJECT INFORMATION

Catchments and Landscape Management – GEF

Executing partners: Ministry of Agriculture

GEF financing: US\$ 4,350,000

Cofinancing: US\$21,678,000

IFAD: US\$12,588,000

Government: US\$ 2,814,000

Beneficiaries: US\$ 6,276,000

Total financing: US\$26,028,000

GEF PROJECT COMPONENTS

Promotion of the sustainable land management approach at national, regional and local levels through

- establishing an operational, national-level, sustainable land management platform
- establishing operational sustainable land management platforms for Debub and Gash Barka
- obtaining consensus on an Eritrean sustainable land management investment framework
- producing detailed recommendations for an Eritrean sustainable land management knowledge base and information system

Development of effective and innovative sustainable land management approaches through

- supporting baseline assessments of community land degradation status
- preparing community-based investment and land-use plans for sustainable land management investments
- establishing land degradation and land-use planning committees
- pilot testing and demonstrating alternative renewable energy

Debub (central highlands) and Gash Barka (western and eastern lowlands). Both *zobas* were affected extensively by Eritrean-Ethiopian conflicts. Natural resources and infrastructure have suffered major devastation and will take a long time, and significant resources, to fully rehabilitate.

To test sustainable land management approaches and develop systems to scale up best practices for addressing land degradation, the project's field operations will concentrate on about 16,000 households within the 32 sub-regions of Debub and Gash Barka.

Project participants will be pastoralists, poor smallholder farmers, resettled conflict-displaced people and households headed by women – the poorest and the most food insecure groups of people in the two regions.

The project will build on past experiences to develop and promote a

community-based participatory land-use planning approach. The aim is to enable rural communities to assess the degradation status of their natural resources and to prepare their own land-use and investment plans for restoring and enhancing the productive capacity and protective functions of these resources. The approach will be field tested and validated within the *zobas* of Gash Barka and Debub, with the aim of ultimately scaling up the approach nationwide.

The project is fully integrated into IFAD's Post-Crisis Rural Recovery and Development Programme (PCRRDP), which currently provides support to the government in the areas of agriculture and livestock development. The integration of the GEF project into the PCRRDP will ensure maximum impact on improving the environment, increasing food security and reducing rural poverty.



Global benefits

The project will reverse the decline in productivity of Eritrea's soil resources; restore vegetative cover and habitat diversity in areas of degraded rangelands, forests and woodlands; and increase biodiversity within crop, livestock and forest production landscapes. It is also expected to reduce carbon emissions by promoting energy-efficient stoves and switching to conservation tillage practices.

Adoption of sustainable land management approaches will restore vegetative cover in rangelands, woodlands and forests and on farms. Raising soil organic matter levels and increasing the quantity of woody and other forms of biomass will increase carbon sequestration on the land. Improved upper catchment protection will result in reduced sedimentation in the country's river systems, reservoirs, farm ponds and other water storage structures.

Innovative features

- The project promotes adaptive farmer-centred participatory sustainable land management research to identify locally-appropriate solutions to land degradation. Encouraging the government and academic agricultural research institutes to work with farmers will lead to the adoption and validation of a number of innovative and sustainable agronomic, animal husbandry, and natural resource management practices.
- The project is supporting investments in alternative renewable energy, such as biogas systems and photovoltaic cells, to reduce the demand for fuelwood and fossil fuels.

Associated IFAD-funded project:
Post-Crisis Rural Recovery and Development Programme



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