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Eritrea, Food Insecurity

Exhaustion, hunger, and poverty are three conditions that the average Eritrean knows all too well. Food insecurity, due in large part to a lack of sustainable farming practices, is a major problem in the north African country of Eritrea. While there are many factors contributing to Eritrea’s challenged agricultural system, there are a number of steps that can be taken to improve those practices and reduce Eritrean food insecurity.

Eritrea is a relatively small country located in the Horn of Africa. It has a population of approximately 3.8 million (*Eritrea population (live)* 2020) with over half of its citizens living in rural areas. Eritrea is also a relatively new country, having gained independence from its neighbor Ethiopia in 1993 after a brutal thirty-year civil war. Eritrea has a hot and arid climate (*World Bank Climate Change Knowledge Portal* 2020), which makes sustainable farming difficult. It has been under the control of dictator Isais Afwerki since its inception and follows a communist command economy in which much of its citizenry is conscripted to work for the government in farming, military, construction, and other pursuits for nominal pay.

As mentioned, apart from Eritrea’s political and economic instability, there are a number of key factors contributing to the country’s lack of sustainable farming, including: (1) mass poverty, (2) an underdeveloped system of general and agricultural education, (3) inefficient and outmoded farming equipment and practices, and (4) an unwelcoming climate.

Eritrea is among the world’s poorest countries (ISS, *Eritrea* 2024). Nearly eighty percent of Eritreans work in subsistence farming (CIA, *Eritrea* 2022) leaving little opportunity for broader economic output. The average Eritrean does not have disposable income to invest in modern farming technologies such as higher quality seeds, modern tools, or fertilizers, unfortunately the Eritrean government provides little to no additional investment or assistance in this regard. The consequence of this lack of modern farming technology is a considerable gap in agricultural efficiency between Eritrea and more developed countries. This discrepancy makes it difficult for Eritrea to overcome food insecurity and the effects of unsustainable agricultural practices that are prevalent in the country.

Eritrea also suffers from a lack of both general and agricultural education. In Eritrea, rudimentary government-sponsored education is provided only from the ages of seven to thirteen (Freeman, *Eritrea* 2022). At age thirteen compulsory education ends and most Eritrean children, especially girls and those in rural areas, drop out. Even within the governmental education system there is little to no emphasis on delivering agricultural instruction to educate Eritreans on best practices in sustainable farming, and therefore help is needed from outside sources.

In addition to its poverty and its poor education system, also contributing to Eritrea’s lack of sustainable farming are its inefficient farming practices. The average Eritrean relies disproportionately on livestock for food. Meat and biproducts from goats, cattle, and sheep are Eritrean dietary staples. A livestock over-reliance creates many long-term problems. Farmers constantly overwork the country’s arable soil. Overgrazing and overstocking have led to decimation of lands that could have otherwise been used more productively. In addition to overgrazing, Eritrea is also far behind on sustainable farming practices pertaining to crop yields. Because of its arid climate, growing crops, while a widespread practice, can be extremely inefficient. More than two thirds of Eritrea’s land is currently being cultivated (TradingEconomics, 2024) for staple crops such as sorghum, maize, pearl millet, and sesame. Unfortunately, crop rotation is seldomly practiced, and, as a result, soil erosion is rampant.

Eritrea’s dry climate serves as perhaps the largest obstacle to the implementation of sustainable agriculture. Along the Red Sea coast Eritrea’s climate is extremely arid and hot, conditions far from ideal for agricultural development. Further inland, the country’s highlands regions are more welcoming to agriculture. They boast healthier soil and more precipitation. Precipitation and the availability of water in general are among the largest threats to agricultural sustainability in Eritrea. More than eighty percent of Eritreans do not have access to clean water (Thelwell, K., 2020). The country suffers heavily from constant drought only receiving on average 350 mm of rainfall a year, well below the world average (*World Bank Climate Change Knowledge Portal* 2020).

Given all of these factors, and Eritrea’s lack of financial resources, help from more developed countries to combat Eritrea’s food insecurity is much needed. This help can come in the form of support from foreign governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). One such example of an NGO that is currently making a difference in sub-Saharan Africa is the EcoAgriculture Partners (EAP). EcoAgriculture Partners is a Washington, D.C.-based non-profit organization that works across the globe to improve sustainable farming practices.

EAP has developed education and training programs (EcoAgricultural Partners, 2023) that could be targeted to improve Eritrean farming practices and sustainability. The EAP has introduced demonstration farms, field schools, training of trainer programs, information materials, partnerships with universities and other educational institutes, on-farm consultations, peer-to-peer learning networks and more. In addition to helping improve farming practices, EAP and other similar nonprofits have worked to promote the introduction and use of climate resilient crops, which could be especially effective in Eritrea given its challenging growing conditions. And the NGO has also done work to diversify and improve dietary practices through methods like livestock rearing. EAP’s “1000 Landscapes for 1 Billion People” program, currently employed in Kenya, seeks to improve landscapes, tackle climate change, increase rural prosperity, and restore ecosystems, an especially pressing issue in Eritrea (EcoAgricultural Partners, 2023) given its widespread desertification. The 1000L program is a collaboration among many different organizations, including the United Nations and the Rainforest Alliance.

An investment by EAP or a similar organization in Eritrea could make a significant difference by providing the educational support and means of implementation necessary to modernize Eritrean farming practices. And the 1000 Landscapes program, if introduced into Eritrea, could help to address issues of desertification, overgrazing and more, all improving the quality of life of the average Eritrean and the health of its environment.

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