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### Green fingers of ‘Green Ethiopia’

By Aregu Balleh

At this very momentous period in history every ticking of the clock heralds an important event for Ethiopians at home and overseas—a new millennium. Awaiting the third millennium with new hope and enthusiasm to make it a turning point in history, citizens also honour countless historical events of the outgoing millennium that left immortal traces and which positively shaped the country's history. However the outgoing millennium as any could imagine was not all about historical incidents to honor or achievements to be proud of. As a matter of fact all the way back to the dying period of one thousand years in history Ethiopians regrettably wonder at numerous lost opportunities.

One such historical incidence that strikes a feeling of sadness on many citizens is the loss incurred in the country's environmental resources. The outgoing millennium saw the worst form of destruction in the country's forest resources. A country once referred to be one of the few geographical destinations topping the list for possessing abundant diversity of floral has now suffered from an utter loss of its forest resources.

In just a span of period not exceeding 100 years the country's forest resource coverage has dwindled from 40 % to just less than 3%. What is even more worrisome is that the unchecked destruction of the already dwindling natural vegetation at even an alarming rate has left the fate of the future generation hanging in the balance. The country had to suffer a lot as a result of such tremendous losses. Even worse Ethiopia is believed to be one of the countries that are to be seriously affected by the global climate change should the situation continue as it is.

The good news however is that the new millennium is coming up flickering also hopes. The Ethiopian Millennium Festival Celebration Secretariat has declared as its motto ‘two trees for 2000’. Based on the motto any one who celebrates the new millennium at home is supposed to plant two tree seedlings. Accordingly when the celebration of the new millennium was officially launched on June by the country's president the tree planting campaign was commenced by senior government officials thereby signaling the positive gesture of the government to address the problem. The new millennium celebration events are not only accompanied by tree planting. Virtually all regional states and city administrations have designated millennium parks. Such an impetus spurred by the new millennium creates fertile ground to rehabilitate the country's meager forest resources.

Indeed a much more consolidated and concerted effort is needed to restore the country's degraded forest resources. Such moves also require the active involvement of different stakeholders and concerned bodies including non state actors like non-governmental and civic organizations. Unfortunately the role of non-governmental organizations has so far been limited. The main reason for this is that the issue of environment has been regarded as a peripheral matter.

However, against this background a Swiss-based Foundation, namely Green Ethiopia, decided a few years ago to make environment as its prior agenda. As the name says it all the long term vision the Foundation set when it started its operation six years ago was to cover the most devastated areas in the country with trees and other vegetation.

In what seems to be a coincidence at the time when citizens, inspired by the millennium factor were carrying out their two trees for 2000 promise, founders of Green Ethiopia made their journey all the way from Switzerland to Ethiopia to inaugurate some of their ongoing reforestation projects. After driving some 15 kilometers from Bishoftu town towards south east founders and board members of Green Ethiopia arrived at an escarpment that surrounds a crater lake—Hidi Hora Kilole. The place is characterized by a sloppy barren hill degraded by deforestation and overgrazing. This has put the lake that is found at the heart of the escarpments in a vulnerable position. It was in 2006 that Green Ethiopia together with local administrations took the initiative to rescue the area, the lake and the local people who are dependent on the resources. Since then the local people supported by Green Ethiopia and the local administration started their move to rehabilitate the area and conserve ecological resources including the lake which was facing an eminent danger of drying. Accordingly the project has established a nursery centre for a large variety of tree seedlings which will be used for reforestation programme. Side by side with the reforestation the Foundation is also supporting the local people to develop various fruits and vegetables.

After visiting the progress of the project Founders of Green Ethiopia launched the reforestation programme by planting tree seedlings in the designated lakeside areas.

Dechasa Aboye is Ada woreda Natural Resources Development and Protection and Rural Energy Promotion Team Leader. He is also coordinator of the Hidi project and Dinkaka, another reforestation project in the Woreda also supported by the Foundation. According to Dechasa the Hidi project was started in 2006 right after Green Ethiopia signed an agreement with the local administration to provide support. Dechasa describes the Hidi area as one of the most devastated in the woreda. Moreover the increase in the number of the local population aggravated the stress created on the area. As the number of population continued to grow, so did the need for farm land. The situation forced the local people to use the escarpments as farm land, which eventually exacerbated soil erosion and land degradation problems. Besides the lake, which the local people used for the animals and for themselves started to diminish as a result of siltation. So the problem was so immense that it posed threat on the daily lives of the local people says Dechasa. It was at this point the local administration approached Green Ethiopia seeking support.

The main objectives of the Hidi project were to protect the lake from drying due to siltation and erosion, to assist the local people to use irrigation to improve their livelihood and to help women with low income develop vegetables and fruits. In line with this a lot has been achieved over the past six months says Dechasa. Soil conservation measures such as micro basins and water catchments were constructed across the escarpments and surrounding areas. The 60 hectare land has been designated and preparations are underway to cover it all with selected tree seedlings. Over 317,000 tree seedlings of various species have been developed in the nursery centre. Some 20,000 seedlings will be planted soon around the escarpments. The local people will also be given tree seedlings for free to plant them in their yards and around their residential places.

The local people have already become beneficiaries of the vegetable and fruits they develop near the lake. Besides with the water pumps donated by the Foundation they have started to use irrigation and develop crops during dry seasons. The other project which was supported by Green Ethiopia is Dinkaka. Dinkaka is a sloppy mountain located in Ada woreda, a couple of kilometers away from Hidi. The area, which has the size of 29 hectares was bare and degraded. According to Dechasa, Dinkaka was not only a degraded land it was also a major cause of flood accidents that were highly destructive to the surrounding farmlands. The flood that rashes from the mountain would completely destroy farm lands along its way. The local farmers used to suffer from immense losses due to the flood accidents.

Now the land which was bare is now being covered with trees and long grasses thanks to Green Ethiopia. According to the Project Coordinator the people now realized the changes and are taking care of the area. The results witnessed in Dinkaka Mountain served as a source of inspiration for the Foundation to start other new projects in the Woreda says Dechasa. Green Ethiopia is also assisting another reforestation projects in the same woreda. Tesfaye Robele is Chief Administrator of the Woreda. According to him over the past couple of years the weather condition of the woreda has significantly changed. The area is now changing into desert and the weather is also getting hotter and hotter every year. Ada woreda has a total land area of 89 hectares of which 79 hectares is arable. However, deforestation and land degradation are increasingly becoming serious challenges for the local farmers. The Woreda administration, realizing the magnitude of the problem is currently mobilizing the local people to rehabilitate the degraded areas. In his respect the national tree planting campaign in relation to the new Ethiopian Millennium will give an opportunity to keep this tempo. According to Tesfaye Green Ethiopia is providing a significant contribution in this respect. The Foundation apart from its reforestation projects has been assisting similar efforts being carried out by the administration. Community support and reforestation activities of Ethiopia at regional level are not limited to Oromia. The Adwa woreda of the Tigray State is another focus area of the Foundation where interventions are made in a more integrated fashion mainly focusing on ensuring food security apart from reforestation.

Residents of Debre Genet locality had every reason to give a heroic welcome to founders and board members of Green Ethiopia Foundation when they arrived at the locality on June 16, 2007. The local farmers accompanied by religious leaders advanced towards their guests waving green tree branches and bundles of ripe chickpeas and chanting praising songs. Needless to state the green tree branches and the chickpeas were meant to convey a ymbolic message that their efforts have borne fruits. And the area will no longer be barren for it is being covered by green trees. Land degradation and the fact that it is found faraway from the main road has put Debre Genet locality at a disadvantaged position. In such circumstances the local farmers struggle for survival by merely depending on seasonal rain was characterized by many challenges.

When Green Ethiopia consulted with the Woreda administration officials to support community based interventions in 2003 Debre Genet was an automatic choice. Accordingly one of the projects the Foundation assisted was the construction of a river diversion dam and canals which enable the peasants irrigate their fields and develop various types of crops and vegetables. The dam which was built by diverting a local, river was inaugurated in the same day. The dam has the capacity to develop 40 hectares of land. The Foundation is also assisting reforestation of around 60 hectares of erosion damaged land in the locality. Apart from Debre Genet another dam was also constructed by the Foundation in Weidi Keshi locality a few kilometers away from the historic Soloda Mountain was also inaugurated. The dam has the capacity to develop up to 30 hectares of land. Like the in Debre Genet the Foundation assists farmers in Weidi Keshi to develop various crops and vegetables in an integrated manner. Reforestation is also another

component of the project. Green Ethiopia has a nursery centre of fruit trees which will assist the livelihood of the local people. Other reforestation and river diversion are similarly assisted by the Foundation.

The Foundation's community support projects in the most vulnerable localities of the woreda are providing vital contribution to improve agricultural productivity and the living standard of the people says Goitom Yibrah, Head of the Adwa woreda Agriculture and Rural Development Office. According to Goitom apart from tree planting and construction of dams the foundation has donated among other things eight water pumps, modern beehives and honey extraction equipment. Since the Foundation started operation in 2003 it has provided 1.2 million birr in support of the various projects in the Adwa woreda. About 300,000 tree seedlings were planted in different ecologically devastated areas of the woreda. Goitom noted that the Foundation is playing a meaningful role in the efforts to ensure food security in the woreda.

### **What initiated the Foundation?**

It was in 1999 that Mr. Kurt Pfister visited Ethiopia for the first time when a friend of his who used to live in Addis Ababa invited him. After his first visit Mr. Pfister went back to Switzerland, his home country and convinced his wife Irene to visit the country too. The notion of providing community support was conceived after Mr. Pfister visited the country, this time with his wife Irene and his son Simon. The family discussed on what they could contribute to the country after their visit. "We held a family discussion and we were convinced that we had to do something for the country. By the time Mr. Pfister was about to retire from his position he assumed in a supermarket in Switzerland. His son, Simon was just going to graduate from a university.

When Mr. Pfister consulted with his intention of helping the poor in the country to the then Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Commission about his intention of providing support he had no doubt in his mind that fighting erosion could be his prior agenda. "We decided that we could support the poor farmers by fighting erosion and improving their livelihood. Soon Green Ethiopia was founded in Switzerland and later it was registered by the Ministry of Justice, as a non-profit organization. The Foundation which was initiated by Mr. Pfister's family was able to win the attention of fund providers in Switzerland who showed interest to support it financially. When it started to make an intervention in the country the main focus was reforestation. However later he was convinced that intervention would be more meaningful when integrated with other community support programs mainly focusing on ensuring food security in the rural peasants. As a result apart from the reforestation and nursery projects the foundation is providing assistance to rural peasants in selected localities in Adwa woreda of the Tigray State and Ada woreda of the Oromia State in their efforts to ensure food security.

Expanding the scope of its community support undertakings the Foundation initiated another rural support project in a rural locality near the Arsi Mountain in Hurruta woreda of the Arsi zone where it provides the peasants micro credit services for the peasants to develop fruits and vegetables and buy oxen and donkeys to improve their livelihood.

Almost all the projects the Foundation has been supporting are located far away from the main roads and are highly devastated, and geographically isolated. "When I consulted with local officials to launch the project I asked where the poorest people are found. I preferred the remotest areas because they are the poorest and the people don't get enough support," said Mr. Pfister. The Foundation has spent a total of 650,000 US dollars for the execution of the projects since it started operation in 2003. Customarily the Foundation initiates a project and continues to assist until a period when the local people who are the beneficiaries of the project are able to manage the project by themselves with sense of ownership. Then it starts another project in a different area.

Mr. Pfister was satisfied with the project outcomes and progress achieved in all the project areas it has been assisting. He is even impressed by the level of cooperation it received from local authorities and the active participation of the rural community. It is also planning to increase its annual budget from 150,000 USD to 300,000 USD, Mr. Pfister who is now 65 is looking forward to hand over his responsibility of managing the Foundation to his son Simon, who in his young age is also actively engaged in the projects. Mr. Pfister mentioned lack of communication infrastructures as a major challenge the foundation faced in some project areas.

The long term vision of Mr. Pfister and his Foundation is to see results achieved with the support of the project sustained and replicated by other local farmers- and eventually green Ethiopia.

Ethiopia's new millennium has brought an opportunity to induce a popular movement to rehabilitate the highly degraded land and forest resources and genuine interventions by non-governmental bodies like Green Ethiopia could lift up the tempo and accelerate the realization of the country's much needed economic transformation but only if these all can be sustained