

# Sustainable Land Management



## Solomon, or "The slightly different farmer"

By Lukas Frey

The steep, finely detailed topography around Adi Behnuna, a community in Eritrea's southern highlands, offers the outsider quite spectacular views of the landscape, but it means tough working and living conditions for the local farming population. For example, there is hardly a single spot of land that is reasonably flat so that it could be irrigated with the scarce supply of water, providing its owner with secure production facilities.

In addition to the difficult natural geographic conditions, however, there are also socio-economic and socio-cultural difficulties that only allow limited forms of irrigated agriculture.

Only a few small-scale farmers in and around Adi Behnuna irrigate their small parcels of land. But Solomon Ghebrekidan is one of them. During a three-week local visit while producing the Adi Behnuna Community Profile (see references at the end of the article on Eritrea), I was able to have a long talk with Solomon. Among other things, this "slightly different farmer" explained to me how and why he started irrigating his fields.

"Here on the valley floor I have three tsimdi (0.75 ha) of land, and I've been irrigating it for six years. Up on the hills I have five more tsimdi, where I grow sorghum and maize like all the other farmers. Before I started irrigating, I used to be amazed at the good crops the farmers get in the region of Mendefera, the biggest weekly market near here. So now and then I started talking to the farmers there, when I was on my way to the weekly market. I learned a lot about the advantages of irrigation and the way it needs to be done. Then I decided to start irrigating as well. I asked the village council for a piece of land on the river, and they gave me this field here. Then I sold a few of my well-fed cows and in Asmara I bought a six-horsepower Lombardini pump. I was able to pay 9000 nakfas (about US\$1000) straight away, so I didn't have to take on any loans and pay high interest."

"About 10 meters away from the river bed, I dug out a big pit into which the river and groundwater seeps. That's where I installed the pump. It's still working fine today - after all, it's imported from Italy. Also it needs less than a liter of diesel per hour. I started planting lots of different things. A few of them did well, but others were pretty much failures. Nowadays I am planting maize, potatoes, bananas, chili peppers, papaya, onions, hops, and eucalyptus. Tomatoes were never a success, I don't know why - and there's no one here who could tell me anything about it. I can usually sell most of my produce here in the village. Rarely, when there's too much pepper, for example, I have to sell the surplus at the market in Mendefera. But it's worth it for me."

"I do good business with my produce, even though there are setbacks now and then, and going from the village to my field takes more than an hour. Also it sometimes happens that someone doesn't watch his cattle properly and they break through my fence and eat their fill on my place. The owner of the cattle has to pay me for the damage, but no one can give me my crop back. My biggest worry is whether the field will still be fertile enough years from now to bring in the same big crops."

The reasons more farmers do not do the same as Solomon - particularly since his modest prosperity is obvious for all to see - became clear in my many discussions with other farmers. The few pieces of land that are suitable for irrigation have already mostly been distributed. Apart from the access to land, there is also a basic lack of specialist agricultural knowledge about irrigation, as well as the investment capital needed (purchasing a pump, additional work). Irrigated agriculture is seen as an additional burden of labor, for which there are not enough workers available, and the risks of this type of investment are also high (defective pumps, damaged crops). After a few years, it may only be possible to produce good crops by using fertilizer and pesticides, and the farmers also take this into account in their decisions. Finally, there are a number of socio-cultural factors that hold many of them back from using irrigation: farmers have high expectations of outside aid, and this puts a brake on their own initiative. And last but not least "only he who plows properly is a proper farmer." This means that people who use irrigation do not plow properly, because they do things differently from their ancestors.

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