

The COVID-19 lockdown has exposed the inequality in western health, social care and society in general. The brutal killing of George Floyd and many other black youngsters by the American Police shocked us to the core. However, in a very sad way those events have also provided us with an opportunity for deep reflections and pose a question of what matters most. As an Eritrean who has witnessed the bitter struggle for equality and equity for the last sixty years, those exposed inequalities in health and social care in the global North and the unfortunate death of many Eritreans and ethnically diverse frontline workers in the UK due to COVID-19 all of which brought strong flashbacks of the Eritrean people's struggle for freedom.

Once again time has affirmed that we had no choice but to fight for 60 years to eradicate colonialism, occupations and inequality. Time has validated once again the Eritrean people's determination for freedom, equality and equity was the only way to live in peace. To us, the Eritrean diaspora, the COVID-19 lockdown also provided us with the opportunity to recognise why we are so connected to our homeland, what it means to have a land, a culture, history, relatives and an anchor of who we are. We kept connected with our homeland, friends and families through long chats on WhatsApp, Zoom and whatever else, all to remain as connected as possible.

For the Eritrean diaspora not to be able to go home from March is far too long. In particular for those of us who grew up in Eritrea, mentally, we are there. Many of us long to go back and walk its streets, villages, valleys and mountains. We miss the smell of the roasting coffee, Fitfit, Berbere and the fresh Shiro with Taita. We miss the mangos, sweet and bitter grapefruit, the papaya and guavas. However, most of all the chats, the laughs and of course the heated arguments and debates over a coffee is what makes one feel alive and longing to go back home to Eritrea. Dreaming of a swim in the Red Sea, its waters pristine, warm, relaxing and welcoming with the winds of the East. Good for the body, the soul and the mind.

One day we dream of coming home never to leave again. Peace is taken for granted in Eritrea and is not a matter of our discussion, so we said, "all we need is development, investment, jobs, opportunities and housing", and it is true, we need those and more. We want to see a developed, resourceful and peaceful Eritrea.

We then pass to talk about Eritreans in diaspora and what we can do to help development in Eritrea. Investment and development in Eritrea in terms of agriculture, fishery, mining, manufacturing tourism and more...

The diaspora, we talk about the beauty of our country and the potential for income generation from tourism. Leaving the mining and manufacturing to the big investors, my friends and families talk about the possibility of small guest houses, perhaps a nice hotel or restaurant.

Our discussions are long, and they can be for hours sometimes. As we do, we have a lot of advice to the Eritrean government. We might not be in Eritrea, but Eritrea is inside us. So rather than discussing with my peers, I would like to share my personal opinion about one industry for development that is so often discussed: **tourism**.

The first question should be, what kind of tourism do we want to see in Eritrea? Do we have adequate infrastructure for sustainable tourism? If not, what can we learn from the other

countries who are waking up to the devastating and irreparable damage to the land, environment and biodiversity inflicted by mass tourism?

Do we want to see ostentatious 5-star hotels, overcrowded sea-sides, plastic bottles, and piles of rubbish left by careless tourists on our seashores or the development of sustainable environmentally and traditionally blended tourism in Eritrea?

We the Eritreans gave our life for freedom and we are still defending our country today despite all odds.

Surprisingly, as young freedom fighters, we did not know much about sustainability and sustainable development then, but we used to dream of a green Eritrea. We said, “we will make Eritrea Green”, it was our statement. It is quite unimaginable to dream of that while fighting and paying for war with priceless young lives every day. It feels surreal that we had such confidence and absolute certainty that the Eritrean people would achieve independence and develop a ‘Green Eritrea’. We did in 1991, after 30 years of fighting against all odds. and our green dream is progressing, but it is a slow but sure process.

Finally, the time for economic development has arrived in July 2018 after almost 60 years. It has been a long wait and with an unexpected 20 years of distraction and loss of lives , but there was no other choice. The Eritrean people who defended their country by paying their life for such a long-time are now in the process of reset the mind from defending with guns, to picking up the ammunition for development, such as knowledge, skills, technology and mass resources which takes years to develop. I believe it has to start with the following:

- Mobilising, educating, and empowering our people to make use of their national resources. Protect their history, land, minerals, waters, and biodiversity as priorities using the same strategy in how we mobilise, educate and empower our people to achieve freedom.
- Supporting, investing and developing young business and social entrepreneurs who are interested, ambitious, driven and motivated to succeed with creativity and innovation.
- Investing into sustainable national landmarks, attractions, art and culture, to generate small and consistent locally lead businesses.

With the current political climate, improving regional relations within the Horn of Africa countries and the unique offering of Eritrea makes this the perfect time for those with small or big investment capacity to think and plan for a sustainable micro-business investment strategy.

In regards to **tourism**, there is no doubt Eritrea is blessed with outstanding beauty and wildlife including the northern and southern Red Sea, the rich and lush land of Barka, and our national historical museum Sahel. The sweet temperature and beautiful landscape of Kebsa, including our pretty capital city Asmara.

Perhaps pursuing a sustainable, locally-lead, traditional hosting model of tourism might help protect Eritrea’s natural habitats and pristine environments. Such a strategy could enable communities to build their economies without harming the environment, allowing local wildlife to thrive and visitors to enjoy untouched destinations, all while contributing to the country’s economic development.

Regarding sustainability and environmental safety, Eritrea can learn from the unsustainable environmental devastation caused by modern day mass tourism and leverage the knowledge of those countries who are getting the balance right.

Community-lead, sustainable tourism strategy is built on three pillars of sustainability; environmental, socio-cultural and economic. The first step is to develop sustainable tourism anchored on history, culture and national traditions. This will help maintain or improve environmental conditions in the region where it is implemented. The next step is to have a positive impact both socially and culturally on the local population. The third step is to ensure that Eritrean communities are stakeholders of these projects and share revenues to contribute to their well-being and to the preservation of their local environment, history, and culture.

The other untapped attraction of Eritrea

In my opinion the real beauty is also the untold attraction which is the Eritrean people's history of resilience in adversity and the harmony, kindness, respect and caring culture among all ethnicities and religious beliefs. Eritrea's beauty and attractions are its history against colonialism and occupation. The attractions are the determination of its children to live free from occupation, oppression, poverty, inequality and fear. Our history will generate more income when many of us are inspired to research, paint, draw, write books and create films. Once the national infrastructure is in place, the development of a simple, natural and beautiful visiting centres, museums and many historical landmarks will not take a long time. This type of tourism does not need 5-star hotels but still generates substantial income.

I believe that the long trenches of our front lines of Nakfa should be our national and international pilgrimage. Landmarks such as Nakfa, Faah, Ararb, and Himbol should be visited regularly with trips to those places organised well to keep the history alive and generate income to the locals. Mountains such as Denden, Debre Imen, Taba Frwieni, valleys and bottlenecks such as Adi Shirum, Elaberied and many others are more than just mountains and valleys. They were the shields from bombs and bullets, shelters from heat, cold and rain and ultimately key factors to the successful attacks and unbeatable defenders. Those caves and trees were the freedom fighters schools, universities, seminars and conference halls, homes that they ate, read, danced and sang in. Most importantly, they are the last resting places to hundreds and thousands of our freedom fighters. Soon, we should be making them the best historical monuments. They are and will be the best evidence of our history of sacrifices. These places are the museums of our history, to be visited by our children and the future generations. They will be the attraction for retreat, peace, reflection and connection.

The time is here when school buses can take children to visit our historical sites, for example: walking the riverbed of the longest hospital in the world (Ararb) and visit Bliqat, where 2000 young female EPLF fighters in 1978 took their nine months military training. Moving down from Bliqat to Mahmimet, where all the young men and women took their political and military training. Arag, the EPLF centre for art and culture, where the poems, songs and lyrics of success, loss, pain, hope, love, respect and unity were written, and went on to be read and sang at the front lines in the darkness of the nights using generators and flickering torches. The final grave of Wqaw the desert hill of Awget and Grat. The bottleneck graveyard of Nadow Adi Shirum. Shieab the witness of the horror and cruelty of our enemies and Massawa and

Asab, our Red Sea ports, our pride and the witness of Qbset and last resting place of our freedom fighters who drowned on the salt fields of Salina. The last push to our freedom the front lines of Gindae and Debub, all the way to Asmara in 1991. Of course, **Sawa** the riverbed with big trees and the sweetest drinking water. Freedom fighters refuge in the past and the collage of our future legacy at present.

The wonder women of Eritrea

The unique history of the Eritrean women's participation in the armed struggle is hard to believe. Is there any history in the world that can match the sacrifices of the Eritrean women against colonialism, occupation and inequality? Which African or other country in the world has registered this kind of history except Eritrea? The Eritrean mothers are the only mothers fought on the side of their children so they can be free from murder, torture, oppression, imprisonment and fear. The Eritrean mothers were, and still are, the defenders of our freedom, history and equality. Is there any more inspiring activity than visiting the gallery of the history of the Eritrean women's heroism at the National Union of Eritrean Women? Visiting the hometown of those leaders to connect to their spirits, the places they lived in and made history such as Adey Fana and Adey Zineb.

We are the owners of a such an unprecedented unique history. We have paid priceless lives to own this history. We should be so proud of our people and should promote, share and select who should visit our country, write and research about our history and enjoy the best of our attractions. We should invite those who respect our values for tourism, education, sustainable environment and historical research. We should select tourism strategy that works for our communities and biodiversity.

This is the time we research and develops a strategy how we share our history and our heritage. Eritrean and African schools, colleges and universities could use the Eritrean history as a case study for decolonising education, gender and conflict resolution.

If Eritrea is the best place to study Conflict Resolution for the students of the University of George Mason in the US and send their students to learn about the history of Eritrea it should be an inspiration for African universities to send their students to experience its history.

Finally, my good friend Razia Aziz visited Eritrea in 2019 and she wrote a letter to the Eritrean people on the occasion of Independence Day 2020. This is the last paragraph of her long letter after her observation of our country and our people hospitality as a visitor.

"And the fourth, and most important, stone of all is the earth itself, your piece of our home planet. Eritrea is a country of a great wealth of natural resources. Whilst humans have born the war- and sanctions- imposed penalty of economic hardship, the plant animal and mineral life that comprises the country's ecosystem has flourished quietly, grateful for the relative absence of polluting and exploitative violation of its right to coexist peacefully with the human species. Your unspoilt Red Sea coastline has been a haven for thousands of sea life species. Mining has not yet hopelessly poisoned the water table. Your air is still breathable. Your soil has not yet been thoroughly degraded by the mass industrial use of fertiliser, pesticides or herbicides, your animal herds not yet thoroughly poisoned by widespread use and abuse of hormones and anti-biotics. You have the most valuable of all assets in the land and species that sustain the diversity of life. You eat goodness. Your immune systems are healthier from good nutrition, sunlight and exercise. Please remember

this when the promise of rapid 'development' becomes an imminent reality. Be prepared to enter the value of the earth and her resources as 'infinite' and 'indispensable' in your cost-benefit spreadsheets. Work with her and she will reward you". Razia Aziz May 2020.

The aim of my writing this article is to share and perhaps create some dialogue about our dream of a prosperous, green and developed Eritrea and how we achieve those so that the generations after us can say something good about us. I am sure we are all looking to develop our nation without tipping the environmental, historical and cultural balance. Whether it is tourism or food processing, or other businesses, how do we create jobs and opportunities to the younger generations at home without spoiling their land and contaminating their drinking waters?

We should take the right development path today so at least they will be grateful to their ancestors for fighting and martyred for freedom and eliminate all kind of colonialization but also for leaving their environment safe.

So, what kind of development do we want to see and what kind of Eritrea do we wish to leave behind for the next generations? Let us engage in a meaningful and forward-looking discussions!

Thank you

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