

From freedom fighter to seed investor

By Gebrehaweria Berhane, ISSD knowledge sharing and communication expert

In the Tigray region of Ethiopia, there used to be no locally produced onion seeds. The government used to bring improved onion seeds from the central parts of the country. In 2008, a project called Integrated Seed Sector Development (ISSD) planned to solve this chronic lack of local seed supply by supporting private investors working on improved seed multiplication, production and dissemination.

Yohannes Girmay and ISSD Tigray

One of the investors was Yohannes Girmay, a former member of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). He started a private business in onion seed multiplication and received an ISSD grant to help expand his business. By consulting with ISSD Tigray to get professional capacity building and grant, the Tigray Agriculture Research Institute, and the Bureau of Agriculture, he now produces plenty of onion seed varieties in Wukro district of the Tigray region.

Yohannes used to struggle because he had little farm land, starting capital and market linkages. He submitted a proposal to the Tigray Land Use Administration and not yet secured a plot. He borrowed some money from a micro-finance service. Now he is promoting the seed he produces using different mechanisms such as house to house, field visit and providing support to farmers about sowing and weeding period etc. He ensures his onion seed is of superior quality and the only one in the region produced in accordance with the Certificate of Competency, awarded to him by the regional regulatory body in 2014.

ISSD gave Yohannes an investment grant with which he purchased a water pump. "ISSD encourages me to stay in the onion seed business when I have doubts about it," he said. "The project supported me in lobbying to ease the previous stringent regulatory requirements in getting the Certificate of Competency. It facilitated the smooth communication with authorities by creating different platforms and consultative meetings. Moreover, ISSD opened opportunities for trainings, workshops, seminars, field visits, and experience sharing events."

More, better seed

Yohannes does not have his own land, but he rents plots from smallholder farmers. Land rent per hectare costs him from 25,000-30,000 ETB per harvest. As his yield increased from four to 40 16 quintals per hectare, he now earns threefold the rent for land. Not only does he benefit himself, but his achievements provide quality onion seed to all who are in need. He supplies them with different onion varieties, such as Bombay Red with its high market value, and Adama red with its shelf life.



The produced quality seed is supplied to government bodies, investors and smallholder farmers via direct seed marketing in the areas of Shire, Adwa, Axum, Enderta, Raya-Alamata, Wukro, Hawzien and Adigrat. Here, the mixing of poor quality and the improved seeds are the main challenges he encounters.

In the past, Yohannes's family was not food secure. However, after starting his seed business, he is able to feed the family, construct a house, and send his children to attend school regularly. Now he no longer worries about his livelihood.

Even though he already overcame the many challenges he faced, Yohannes still welcomes support similar to that of ISSD. Eventually he plans to export onion seed to neighboring countries like Sudan.

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