

HEALTHY SOIL HEALTHY FOOD & AGROECOLOGY SUCCESS STORIES

Above: Rehabilitated degraded land at Abreha We Atsbeha. Photo Credit: Dawit

Landscape Renaissance: The Ethiopian village reversing degradation and drought

TIGRAY, ETHIOPIA – Nestled in the northern region of Ethiopia, the once drought-stricken village of Abreha We Atsbeha is now hailed as a beacon of success in landscape restoration. Since 1998, a transformative initiative has brought about not just an environmental revival but also a socio-economic renaissance for its residents.

Abreha We Atsbeha, once fraught with the threats of deforestation and land degradation, was provided with two options by the Ethiopian government: relocate or rejuvenate. Opting for the latter, the community took matters into their own hands, determined to turn around their landscape and fortune. Their efforts were aimed at combating forest degradation, land degradation, water scarcity, soil erosion, decline of agricultural productivity, and food insecurity.

As a result of their persistent efforts, backed by expert technical designs, the village now stands as one of the premier examples of restoration in the Tigray region. Their remarkable transformation has garnered attention nationwide, with thousands of farmers, government officials, and international agencies touring the area to learn and derive inspiration.

“The leader must be a model farmer and take the initiative to test techniques and crops, to demonstrate to other farmers that they work. It’s challenging to change others without altering the leader’s attitude,” remarks Gebremicheal Gidey, affectionately known as Aba Hawi (Father of Fire), the visionary village leader behind the initiative.

This community-led endeavor’s accomplishments are numerous. Of the 6,766 hectares that form the Abreha We Atsbeha watershed, 69% has been restored. The restored land, combined with the increased groundwater recharge, has greatly diversified and boosted agricultural production. This has led



Hand dug well with water at Abreha We Atsbeha. Photo Credit: E. Ludi

to improved nutrition, heightened food security, increased income, and thus, a stark reduction in poverty. Specifically, the village has seen an 80% reduction in soil loss, a 20–50% increase in cultivated area, and a 300% rise in crop production.

Beyond the numbers, the human impact has been profound. Women, who previously walked long distances for water and firewood, now have easier access to these resources. They, along with the village youth, played a pivotal role in the restoration activities. The project has enabled young residents to find viable income opportunities in their hometown, stemming the tide of migration to cities or abroad.

Despite its success, the initiative isn’t without challenges. The potential damage from heavy rainfall remains a concern. Still, the story of Abreha We Atsbeha is one of resilience, community spirit, and transformative change.

The lessons from this village are clear: landscape restoration isn’t just about the environment; it’s also about sustainable economic and social development. It’s a tale that underscores the significance of

community involvement, effective collaboration among stakeholders, and the need for a comprehensive approach that combines economic and environmental benefits.

The landscape transformation journey of Abreha We Atsbeha didn't just breathe new life into the soil; it infused a renewed sense of purpose and self-reliance among its inhabitants. The integration of women and youth into the heart of restoration activities is a testimony to the holistic and inclusive nature of the project. Their involvement not only expedited the restoration process but also ensured its long-term sustainability by instilling a sense of ownership and responsibility across all demographics.

The village's success wasn't merely a result of hard labor and dedication but also due to the strategic incorporation of innovative techniques. Implementing terraces and percolation trenches proved critical in reducing erosion and boosting groundwater recharge. The environmental benefits were swiftly followed by economic gains. The boost in groundwater levels paved the way for irrigation of once barren lands, promoting cultivation of fruits and vegetables. The local market soon flourished with produce from the village, further stabilizing the economic condition of the residents.

One of the pivotal success factors was the community's shift from a mindset of dependency to one of self-reliance. Guided by forward-thinking leadership, they developed locally-agreed bylaws that supported landscape restoration, ensuring that the project remained rooted in local



A young Boy Collecting Guava fruit. Photo Credit: The Community



Checkdams along the gully at Abreha We Atsbeha Photo Credit: REST



Household with agroforestry at Abreha We Atsbeha Village. Photo Credit: REST



Landscape of Abreha We Atsbeha. Photo Credit: REST

needs and values. This community-first approach has been the bedrock upon which the Abreha We Atsbeha transformation stands.

However, as the village marches ahead on its path of continued growth, the need for vigilance is ever-present. The structures vital for the landscape's revival are susceptible to damage from intense rainfall. Thus, regular maintenance and monitoring are imperative to safeguard



Aba Hawi using Water lifting Machine to lift water from his Borehole. Photo Credit: Dawit

the community's hard-earned progress.

Furthermore, the experience of Abreha We Atsbeha provides valuable insights for regions globally facing similar environmental challenges. Emphasizing the importance of community involvement, the blending of traditional knowledge with modern techniques, and the pivotal role of effective leadership, this village serves as a blueprint for sustainable landscape restoration.

In conclusion, the tale of Abreha We Atsbeha is a testament to human resilience, innovation, and community spirit. It is a stark reminder that, with a united front, even the most challenging environmental issues can be tackled, leading to a harmonious coexistence of man and nature. The village stands as a shining beacon, not only for Ethiopia but for communities worldwide, underlining the transformative power of unity, vision, and unwavering determination.

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