

# HEART & SOIL

ISSUE 10

MAGAZINE

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# HEART & SOIL MAGAZINE

ISSUE 10 REVIVE THRIVE

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# *A Young Woman Who Transformed Stones into Fruits*

in the Lowlands of  
Tigray, Northern Ethiopia

By IFOAM – Organics International

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**M**rs. Haregu Gobezay is a young woman who lives in Merebleke district, in the Central Zone of Tigray region. Thanks to her ambitious attitude, alternative thinking and immense efforts, she was able to transform a previously degraded land into a biodiversity hotspot and contribute massively to the economic development of her community.

Haregu, similar to other women farmers in Tigray, depended on small-scale agriculture and the salary of her husband to secure her livelihood.





### **The back-story**

Having stopped her formal studies in grade four, she did not have many academic options to pursue and entirely depended on her husband as the only source of income for the family. This dependency was a challenge that pushed her to find other livelihood options that could enable her to support her husband in providing for the family.

“One day I started thinking that this type of livelihood from hand-to-mouth was not sustainable and so I decided to make a list of the different livelihood options I could engage in,” shares Haregu.

As she was thinking and staring out into the vast land ahead of her, an idea occurred that she hadn’t thought about but seemed so obvious. The degraded land in front of her eyes could be worked upon and in turn be productive to her if she put 100% of her focus on it. And that is what she did!

She hired some of the community members who helped in clearing the stony field and because of this the farm was established in 2005.

## Establishment of the farm

At the time, she was practicing irrigation on 1.5 hectares and now she is practicing on 12 hectares of land. During the first five years, she was able to grow vegetables such as tomato, onion, and pepper for cash. However, she later found out that the soil was not fertile enough to support future agricultural productivity, even with the use of inorganic fertiliser. She knew she would have to make some big changes, and they weren't going to be simple or mainstream.

She decided to replace the topsoil with other fertile soil from somewhere else. To avoid any chances of degrading the soil again, she decided to ban any use of inorganic material on the farm including all synthetic inputs. She has instead developed her own method to develop biological pesticide or insecticide using the leaves from the true neem trees and the urine of her oxen. The mixture is fermented for 15 days, and the liquid is applied as an Integrated Pest Management (IPM). The leaves of Desmodium are also used for similar purposes.

Moreover, she also made a shift from vegetables to fruits like avocado, orange, papaya, mandarin, and various mango varieties, for instance: Apple, Kent, Tommy, Kit, Dado, and many others. Currently there are more than 6,000 fruit trees on her farm. Side by side, she has also planted fodder grasses like Desmodium, elephant grass, and the True Neem tree (which is used as a biological pesticide/insecticide), and many others.

She has transformed her traditional farm to a Certified Organic farm that follows the four principles of organic, and this extends to her dairy and poultry farm as well.

With over 100 chickens and 10 cows and four calves, the animals feed on the fodder grasses like Desmodium, elephant grass, Rhodes grass, and alfalfa. The milk produced from these dairy cows and the eggs from the chicken are used for both home consumption as well as an additional source of income for the household.

The cows also produce manure that is used in a small-scale biogas digester that provides energy that is used for lighting and food preparation.









Haregu does vermi-composting which is a process of converting unavailable organic substances into available form or readily available for use by plants. She uses the weeds on her farm as input for the vermi-compost, and she uses red earthworms (*Eisenia fetida*) to facilitate the composting.

### **Contribution to the community**

The activities on her farm were not the only thing in Haregu's mind when she envisioned her farm – she wanted to take advantage of the endless possibilities she could tap into.

To have a better water management system on the farm, she constructed an irrigation canal which was a 1.2 million Ethiopian birr investment that provided adequate water to her 12 hectare farm without leakage. Moreover, this canal is used not only to irrigate her farm but also provides water to other farms in her community.

She also constructed a bridge to facilitate movement and transportation of produce from the farm to other towns. This bridge was constructed with a total cost of 820,000 Ethiopian Birr, and it has benefitted more than 80 households who were previously struggling with the big gully between their town and other towns, for instance, Woreda town. This bridge opened doors and access that were previously closed to the many farmers in the region, and this is just an additional community service that Haregu has selflessly offered to the community, in addition to an irrigation canal.

Moreover, her engagement has contributed towards fulfilling a number of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), such as SDG 4 which deals with fostering education, SDG 15 that promotes the protection, restoration, and use of ecosystems through reversing land degradation and halting biodiversity loss, SDG

2 which aims to achieve food security and promote sustainable agriculture, and SDG 8 which advocates for economic growth which she has done through trading her farm produce and creating employment opportunities.

With all this work happening, she hired many people from the community to whom she provided job opportunities and a stable source of income. She mostly targets employing school dropouts and those greatly affected by poverty. Unlike other farm owners, Haregu helps her employees have a plan for how to get out of poverty, for example:

- offering training and seedlings to those who want to start their own farms
- helping the employees save some of the money for the future
- hiring students on a shift basis so that they do not miss out on classes but can still earn enough to cover the costs of their studies
- providing quality seedlings to the community including the governmental and non-governmental Organisations

As a result, she has greatly contributed towards economic development and a reduction in school dropouts in the area.

Needless to say, the work done on Haregu's farm is a lot and tremendously impressive in spite of the challenges she faces, for instance, lacking access to agro-processing industries that could help in adding value to the fruit produce. She still tries to overcome these challenges while creating enormous opportunities for others in her community – and this all started with a once degraded land that she rehabilitated.





### Acknowledgment


Special thanks to Dawit Gebregziabher Mekonen, a researcher at the Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics in Mekelle University and other members of his faculty for writing the report through which it was possible to hear and write Haregu's success story.

**IFOAM - Organics International** is the worldwide organization for organics which represents over 700 affiliates in more than 100 countries and territories. It aims to increase the adoption of organic farming practices around the world by facilitating the transition of farmers to organics, raising awareness of the benefits organic brings to public goods, the role it can play in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, as well as advocating for policies that support organics.



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