

“ The idea of promoting cactus cultivation was new for us. We did not consider cactus to be a plant with great agricultural potential. Thanks to Helvetas we now know its potential. Today, cactus cultivation is part of our development strategy. ”

Ato Mezgebe Tsegay, Vice-Chairman of the Bureau of Agriculture and Rural Development



CACTUS DEVELOPMENT PROJECT IN TIGRAY

QUICK FACTS

Location	Tigray Regional National State, Northern Ethiopia
Project start	2004 (Phase 1, 2004 – 2006)
Current phase	Phase 2 (2007-2009)
Budget for current phase	900,000 CHF
Main partners	Cactus cultivators in Eastern and Southern Zones of Tigray, Bureau of Agriculture and Rural Development, Tigray Agricultural Marketing Promotion Agency, Bureau of Trade Industry and Transport
Major donors	FERSTER Stiftung
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extension workers, women cooperatives) and supports small cactus-based business initiatives with technical know-how and financial contributions.

THE PERSPECTIVES

The potential of the cactus plant – largely thanks to Helvetas – is by now quite well known in Tigray and efforts to promote the development of a cactus-based economy receive keen attention at the highest level of the government. Helvetas is well respected as an expert in the field of cactus promotion and is, therefore, in an excellent position to act as a link between the different stakeholders. The biggest challenge in future will be to ensure that the benefits of a growing cactus sector also reach the small producers. With its long standing experience in participatory and grassroots development Helvetas can play an active role in steering the process in such a way that it benefits small products and has a maximum poverty reducing effect.

A Thorny Way out of Poverty

“ My life has greatly improved since I have become a member of the cactus promotion cooperative. With the money I earn from selling cactus flowers I can feed and clothe my children and send them to school. ”

Weyzero Acheberet, member of the Nigisti-Saba-Cooperative in Mai Mesanu, near Adigrat

The region of Tigray located in the far north of Ethiopia is characterised by severe ecological degradation and extreme vulnerability to natural disasters, especially drought. Nevertheless, more than four fifth of Tigray's population of approx. 4.3 million depend on the land as their primary source of food and income. More ecological and at the same time more efficient ways of using Tigray's sparse natural resources are desperately needed. Helvetas' Cactus Development Project – promoting better use of one of the region's most underestimated crops – is leading the way.



Annette Bouveller Bild 32605

THE CONTEXT

Tigray Regional National State is Ethiopia's northernmost state, bordering in the north on Eritrea and in the west on the Sudan. Tigray was one of the regions hardest hit by the civil war of the 70ies and 80ies and lately of the border-conflict with Eritrea (1998-2000). High population pressure, ecological degradation and the effects of climate change (recurrent drought and erratic rainfall) complement the list of the region's woes.

Economical opportunities are limited. The majority of people depend on subsistence agriculture, daily labour provided by public works and/or aid initiatives and food aid. Among the young, migration to the Arab states or to a Western country is considered one of the few means of bettering ones lot – even if the price of reaching one's goal is high.

One of the few agricultural assets of the region is the cactus plant (opuntia ficus-indica). Brought to Tigray by Italian missionaries in the early 19th century, the plant has subsequently gained an important place in the local livelihood systems. The cactus pears help many people survive the difficult months during the summer rainy season when food reserves are finished and the new crop has not yet been harvested. The cactus leaves are fed to the cattle. Cactus processing and marketing, however, was until recently not known in Tigray.

THE PROJECT

The Cactus Development Project was started in 2004 with the chief aim of raising awareness among the population as well as private entrepreneurs and officials in Tigray and elsewhere of the manifold potentials the cactus plant possesses. In its first phase, the project put special emphasis on promoting the use of cactus leaves for human consumption and propagating ways of processing cactus, i.e. by producing cactus marmalade, juice and candy.

ACHIEVEMENTS SO FAR (2004-TODAY)

- 280'000 people have been familiarised with the manifold uses of cactus for cooking and income generation
- 16'000 production and processing manuals and 20'000 cactus and food security newsletter have been distributed; 1 cactus documentary film was produced
- 430 model farmers and 60 development agents and have been selected and trained in modern cactus cultivating techniques
- 260 potential entrepreneurs (women and youth) and 900 small restaurant owners have been trained on cactus processing and the preparation of cactus meals
- 7 cactus processing and marketing cooperatives with a total of 150 members have been formed and trained
- 3 cactus business centers/promotion windows are operational
- 60 tons of cactus fruits (Beles) were transported to Addis and sold
- 3.5 tons of dried cactus flowers have been exported (Germany)

In the ongoing second phase (2007-09) the project is focusing on food security and natural rehabilitation, marketing of specific cactus products and value chain development. The objectives of the second phase can be summarised as follows:

- Enable households to fully exploit the multipurpose use of their cactus plantations for food security and income generation;
- Establish and enhance specific product value chains in the cactus sector so that producers gain access to local and external markets;
- Create networks and facilitate exchange among stakeholders engaged in cactus promotion and exploitation.

The role plaid by Helvetas in implementing the project is one of facilitation and coordination. Helvetas sees its function mainly in accompanying and coaching individuals, organisations, firms and institutions working in the cactus sector and promoting exchange and knowledge sharing among stakeholders. Furthermore, Helvetas conducts regular trainings on cactus cultivation and processing for different target groups (farmers,

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