A thriving Ethiopian iodized salt co-operative

Shewit Salt Producers Co-operative
The success story of the Shewit Salt Producers Co-operative is unique. Situated in Mekelle, the capital city of the Tigray region in Eastern Ethiopia, Shewit has been successfully pursuing universal salt iodization for over 12 years, and it is committed to innovation and staying abreast of the latest technology. Most members of the co-operative are former servicemen who played an important role in the downfall of the Derg regime. In collaboration with the agricultural sector, Shewit is participating in a salt iodization program with the goal of bringing high-quality iodized salt to the public.

In Shewit’s early days, production involved crushing slabs of amolecio salt and adding iodine, which created iodized salt for animal consumption. With UNICEF funding, a trailer was rigged with a jaw crusher, vibratory screen, and a diesel engine powerful enough to crush the slabs, producing a coarse salt ready for iodization.

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Training workshops were organized for the members to cover different aspects of salt iodization, general production management, and quality control and assurance. Soon after the launch of iodized salt for animal consumption, good quality salt from Lake Aflera came onto the market, and Shewit started to produce high-quality iodized salt for human consumption. Despite many setbacks over the years, today the co-operative is growing from strength to strength. Its distribution network continues to expand, and Shewit is poised to enter the Addis Ababa market. The factory co-operative currently employs 26 members on a full-time permanent basis, and 44 temporary workers, which supports the community and helps to fuel the local economy.

Salt as currency in ancient Ethiopia

In Ethiopia, as in many other parts of Africa, salt was the principal article of exchange for at least a millennium and a half. The first known reference to salt was made by the Egyptian monk Cosmas Indicopleusters, who learned of its use around 525 AD. Alvarez, a priest who accompanied the first Portuguese diplomatic mission to Ethiopia almost exactly a thousand years later, said that the mineral was used as money throughout ‘the kingdoms and dominions of Prester John,’ i.e., the Empire of Ethiopia, and was so widely accepted that ‘whoever carries it finds all that he requires.’ The salt in question, according to the seventeenth century Jesuit traveler, Almeida, came from ‘perpetual and inexhaustible supplies on the Dankil side of the borders of Tigre and Angot, where it was cut into blocks by axe.’

Alvarez described the pieces thus produced as a span and a half long and almost three inches in the other two directions. But although they were virtually identical in shape and size, these bars of salt varied considerably in value from locality to locality in direct proportion to the distance from the mines. The salt was thus ‘very cheap where it was obtained and very dear at Court,’ while in the far-off region of Damot it was said to be worth almost its weight in gold.