



2021 GCHERA World Agriculture Prize Laureate

Professor Mitiku Haile

Soil Science and Sustainable Land Management

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Profile Statement



Dr. Mitiku Haile is Professor of Soil Science and Sustainable Land Management in the College of Dryland Agriculture and Natural Resources (CoDANR) of Mekelle University and the Founding Father and First President of Mekelle University, Tigray, Ethiopia. He was the Associate Dean of the School of Graduate Studies from 1988 to 1991, and Academic Vice President from 1992 to 1993 of then Alemaya University (currently Haramaya University). In 1993 he was appointed Dean of the newly established College of Dryland Agriculture and Natural Resources at Mekelle where he began with a meeting under a *Faidherbia albida* tree, locally known as “*Momona*”, leading to three BSc programs and 42 students. He later transformed the College into a University College and eventually into Mekelle University serving as its first President from the year 2000 to 2011. From July 2011 to November 2015, he served as Ethiopia’s Deputy Permanent Delegate to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). He received his BSc in Plant Sciences and M.Sc. in Agronomy from Addis Ababa University, Alemaya in 1980 and 1983 respectively and his PhD in Soil Science and Land Evaluation from Ghent University in 1988.

Dr. Mitiku has spent over 30 years in leadership positions in higher education in Ethiopia and is recognized for contributions to building educational institutions, human capacity development, and his dedication, and impact on the sustainable development of the Tigray Region of Ethiopia and beyond. His greatest achievement is the founding of Mekelle University and its impact on the development of his country under his leadership. As stated in the recommendation letter by Dr. Zeray Alemseged, Donald N. Pritzker Professor of Organismal Biology & Anatomy, University of Chicago “Professor Mitiku pioneered the birth and expansion of Mekelle University shepherding the institution from its modest beginnings as college of Dryland Agriculture and Natural Resources to what is today a prominent Ethiopian university enrolling over 30,000 students. In addition to his leadership activities, he has also been heavily involved in teaching and mentoring students including PhD and postdoctoral research fellows.” From the time of its creation, Dr. Mitiku’s vision and leadership were critical in Mekelle University’s growth and impact as they began with little resources. As explained by Dr. Alemseged, ‘I asked Prof. Mitiku how he was going to run the university with pretty much no resources. What was most impressive about his response was that he was more concerned about expansion and his vision for the future

than the immediate challenges. He said ‘if we all give it our hearts and brains, the challenge is not insurmountable’”. The importance and relevance for Ethiopia of what Mekelle University has become due to Dr. Haile’s efforts and vision is recognized by Dr. Alemseged “Going back to the university today one can see that Professor Mitiku’s vision has become an intellectual monument.”

Throughout his academic leadership at Mekelle University, he played an instrumental role initiating and developing a diverse range of BSc, BA, MSc, MA and PhD programs in a broad range of disciplines. These programs include, but are not limited to, Dryland Agriculture and Natural Resources, Health Sciences, Law and Governance, Business and Economics, Social Sciences and Languages, Humanities and Arts, Natural and Computational Sciences, Veterinary Medicine, and Engineering and Technology. He also made invaluable contributions in developing specific PhD programs directly linked with agriculture and life sciences such as in Soil Sciences, Dryland Ecology and Natural Resources; Climate Change and Rural Development; Climate and Forest Resources; and Climate and Food Systems. He also played a critical role in the establishment of three other universities Ethiopia’s Tigray Region (Aksum University, Adigrat University and Raya University). The 80,000 university graduates of the diverse programs of Mekelle University have gone on to play key roles in the agricultural sector in the Tigray Regions and throughout Ethiopia, including leadership roles internationally and at other Ethiopian Universities.

Dr. Mitiku’s innovative leadership characteristics have been widely recognized in carrying out research, teaching and work with the communities; he is famous among his staff and students for his professional values, which are evident in his rigor and scientific method in the service of humanity and human progress, advancing knowledge, practically oriented teaching style and emphasis on skills and attitude. Dr. Aster Gebrekirstos, Senior Scientist for World Agroforestry (ICRAF) stresses in her recommendation letter that “he is an inspiration and a mentor for many of us. I have known him as an authority in the field of Soil Sciences, for his outstanding contributions in mentoring students and his staff, as founder of higher institutions, and his tremendous contributions in the country’s best-known Universities in Agriculture and Life Sciences and beyond”. Dr. Mulugeta Gebregziabher, Professor and Vice Chair of Public Health Sciences Director of the South Carolina Public Health Training Program shares that “Some of his best qualities that deserve underlining include his principled and egalitarian approach to life, his respect for the dignity of each individual regardless of background and his overall fatherly dedication to nurturing his students.” He has consistently sought to provide conditions and opportunities for gender equality in all his endeavors throughout his professional career.

While assuming the leadership of building a major university Dr. Mitiku projected a vision of the critical role that universities have in supporting and driving community development which he led through his own research and by promoting and mentoring the university’s research and

outreach efforts directed towards the sustainable development of the Tigray Region and beyond. He was one of the lead scientists that prepared the 10-year Soil Strategy of Ethiopia's Ministry of Agriculture, a comprehensive strategy for creating soil health and fertility for Ethiopia. He built numerous collaborative research and development partnerships over the years with diverse stakeholders at the national and international level as part of these efforts. His own research approach has been classified by Dr. Joseph Deckers of Katholieke Universiteit, Leuven, Belgium in his secondment letter as "truly participatory and farmer-driven, right from the conceptualization of research themes through to empowerment of farmers while participating in the research process." As Dr. Deckers further shared about the research collaboration led by Dr. Mitiku between Mekelle University and several Belgium Universities; "The impact of this long-standing collaboration in terms of farmers' livelihoods but also in terms of academic output was enormous, not only in Tigray Region but all over Ethiopia, where this model of agricultural research for development successfully inspired Jimma University, Bahir Dar University and Arba Minch University." Dr. Mitiku has also been recognized for his research that he led entitled "Policies for Sustainable Land Management on the Highlands of Ethiopia" conducted in collaboration with the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI) and the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) for which he was granted the 2001 Neville Clarke Award for his Outstanding Team Work.

Dr. Mitiku has played a pivotal role in the sustainable development of the Tigray Region providing the Regional Government with technical and strategic advice over the last 30 years in his efforts to rehabilitate the degraded drylands of the Region. He contributed to the development and strengthening of institutions in Tigray such as the Sustainable Agriculture and Environmental Rehabilitation of Tigray (SAERT) and Tigray Agricultural Research Institute (TARI). His research approach led to enhance development of practitioners' and local community capacities to lead national Soils and Water Conservation programs that have significantly reduced land degradation, depletion of ecosystem services and biodiversity loss and that has ensured the long-term productivity of marginal lands and family farmers. Dr. Haile's considerable scientific publications over the last three decades has greatly engaged in innovative research ventures that benefited the scientific community and society locally on the ground. He has published more than 250 articles in peer-reviewed journals and wrote a book entitled "Sustainable land management-A New Approach to Soil and Water Conservation in Ethiopia". In addition, Dr. Jan Nyssen, Professor of Physical Geography at Ghent University mentions in his nomination letter that "His most recent paper addresses again a crucial problem for sustainable rural development: 'Global soil science research collaboration in the 21st century: Time to end helicopter research'" (paper published in *Geoderma*, 2020) and he goes on to stress the primary message of the paper, that "rural communities and local academics should be involved" in local research collaborations. Dr. Mitiku continues to devote efforts to restoring degraded drylands in Tigray as team leader in a collaborative project Tropenbos International (TBI) and the Pastoral & Environmental Network in the Horn of Africa (PENHA), "Scaling up dryland restoration and sustainable dry forest

management in Ethiopia". Mitiku's footprint in the rehabilitation of degraded drylands in Tigray is enormous. His efforts have earned him the title of "father of restoration" by the local community.

Dr. Mitiku continues his commitment to the development of his country and the Tigray Region in particular through education, research, mentoring and community engagement. As Dr. Decker shares "Although Prof. Mitiku has already reached retirement age, he is continuing his teaching and research under the horrendous situation of the on-going war in Tigray. This is the third war he and his family are going through, but he is persevering in his mission, convinced that also this war will come to an end and science-based wisdom will be more needed than ever to rebuild Tigray from its ashes." Dr. Nyssen added "Additionally, Prof. Mitiku Haile was and is playing a leadership role in numerous international and national organizations related to agricultural development." Moreover, he was and is an active member of Prolinnova (Promoting local innovation in ecological agriculture and natural resource management); a Global Partnership Programme in the spirit of the Global Forum on Agricultural Research (GFAR).