

## **On the Edge of a Cliff**

### ***A Reflection for the Alemaya Class of 1985***

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#### **Introduction**

This is a reflective account from two members of the Alemaya University Class of 1985 who, early in our professional lives, found ourselves caught between scientific integrity and political power. What began as a routine technical assignment evolved into a defining moral test—one that compelled us to confront fear, responsibility, and the meaning of professional ethics under an authoritarian system.

For our fellow alumni, this story is not merely about agricultural machinery. It is about who we were as young professionals shaped by Alemaya, how we responded when evidence collided with authority, and how quiet, principled decisions—made without publicity or protection—can alter the course of events. It is also a reminder that education carries moral weight long after graduation.

#### **Beginning Our Careers**

Like many in our graduating class, we were assigned to the Institute of Agricultural Research (IAR). We were fortunate to be posted to the Nazareth (Melkassa) Research Center, joining the newly reorganized Agricultural Implements Research and Improvement Center (AIRIC). Unlike classmates trained in Plant or Animal Sciences, we arrived with limited formal grounding in research methodology. What we possessed instead was curiosity, humility, and a willingness to learn.

Those early years proved transformative. Through an FAO-UNDP-supported program, AIRIC hosted respected international experts, including Professor Pathak, Mr. Ozark from Hungary, and Mr. Hans from the Netherlands. Professor Pathak, in particular, reshaped our intellectual foundation. A scientist of global standing, he demanded rigor beyond anything we had previously encountered. His weekly one-on-one sessions challenged our assumptions, sharpened our analytical thinking, and anchored our confidence in method and evidence rather than hierarchy or rank.

In retrospect, those sessions were the most consequential education we received after Alemaya. Our work at AIRIC ranged from machinery design and evaluation to field research and extension. Yet one project eclipsed all others—not because of technical complexity, but because it exposed how fragile scientific independence could become when confronted by political urgency.

## **The Shadow of History**

We did not face this moment in ignorance of the past.

Years earlier, the Nazareth Tractor Assembly Factory had been launched amid similar political certainty. Expert warnings—particularly regarding the importation of tractors without adequate adaptation and testing—were ignored. Those who resisted paid dearly. Some were reportedly imprisoned, while others were subjected to torture. Technical integrity yielded to political authority, and the consequences were severe.

That history lived quietly within IAR. It shaped the unease that surfaced when a new proposal arrived and explained why senior researchers responded not with enthusiasm, but with caution shaped by memory.

## **The Project Arrives**

In 1989-1990, AIRIC was unexpectedly tasked with evaluating agricultural machinery linked to a 60-million-dollar foreign aid and debt package from Bulgaria. The proposal promised modernization through the establishment of an agricultural equipment factory in Ethiopia. On paper, the assignment appeared routine. In reality, it reopened unresolved tensions between science and politics.

Researchers quickly identified concerns. Beyond limitations in infrastructure and testing capacity lay a deeper ethical dilemma: we were being asked to validate equipment under clear political expectations rather than objective performance criteria. For those who remembered Nazareth, the implications were unmistakable.

Fear was pervasive—quiet, internalized, and deeply human. Our supervisor, who had just welcomed his firstborn son, captured the moment with painful clarity: “Before I have even raised my first child, I am facing this ordeal” (ልጄን ሳላሳድግ እንዲህ አይነት ፈተና ገጠመኝ). The concern reflected not only professional anxiety, but personal vulnerability.

## **A Narrow but Principled Path**

When initial reservations were dismissed and a directive issued to proceed, we chose the only path consistent with professional integrity. Rather than produce a superficial endorsement, we committed ourselves to a rigorous, transparent, and internationally defensible testing protocol already under development at AIRIC.

The Bulgarian equipment arrived with engineers who displayed confidence in their designs and attentiveness to procedure. Oversight shifted to the Ministry of Industry,

intensifying scrutiny. Yet within the testing environment, an unexpected contrast emerged. The Bulgarian engineers behaved as professionals—observing procedures, verifying data, and signing off on results. Our own officials from the government, by contrast, appeared tense, burdened by political expectation rather than technical curiosity.

## **Testing and Results**

The evaluation proceeded in three phases: laboratory testing, field performance trials, and durability assessment. Equipment was subjected to Ethiopian conditions across multiple locations—Nazareth, Debrezeit, Asella, Adelle, Wolenchiti, and Awassa—representing diverse soils, climates, and agricultural practices. Data were meticulously collected, documented, and jointly verified.

The results were unequivocal. With the exception of two machines, most equipment failed to perform adequately under Ethiopian conditions. Even the two that advanced to durability testing proved inferior and more costly than existing alternatives.

Our reports were written with deliberate care—technically precise, restrained in tone, and aligned with international standards. We documented deficiencies honestly while acknowledging strengths. When these findings reached the Ministry of Industry, the collision we had long anticipated became unavoidable.

## **The Summons**

The matter was escalated to the Prime Minister’s Office. We were ordered to appear immediately.

Panic followed—along with memories of earlier reprisals. Small details took on disproportionate meaning: who would speak, what we should wear, whether silence might be misinterpreted as defiance. With limited means, we ironed our clothes and went.

Inside the Prime Minister’s Office, fear became almost physical. Beneath portraits of authority and ideology, the Deputy Prime Minister framed the issue as one of national security and international solidarity. His disappointment was unmistakable. When pressed to explain the failures, our administrator responded simply: “We are technicians doing our job.”

The reaction was explosive. The Prime Minister struck the table and declared, “IAR has made it clear that it does not support our efforts to advance modernization and national security.” He proposed that we collaborate with Bulgarian experts to redesign and retest the machinery, indicating that a directive would follow.

At that moment, the ethical boundary became unmistakably clear. To design, test, and approve the same machinery would compromise the integrity of evaluation itself. We stated this—carefully, respectfully, but firmly.

The meeting ended abruptly. We left uncertain not only about our professional futures, but about our safety.

### **Quiet Leadership**

The matter was eventually elevated to President Mengistu Hailemariam. At this stage, leadership entered the process quietly but decisively.

The Director General of IAR—methodical, reflective, and principled—reviewed every detail of our work. He confirmed the rigor of the methodology and prepared a case grounded not in defiance, but in evidence.

When he met with the President, the discussion centered on data, procedure, and documented findings. Facts prevailed over rhetoric. The decision that followed was swift and unpublicized: the Bulgarian factory project was halted indefinitely. There were no public statements and no celebration. Yet something profound had occurred.

### **Reflection**

Lives were preserved—not only physically, but professionally, intellectually, and morally. The destructive pattern that had once consumed experts during the era of the Nazareth Tractor Assembly Factory was interrupted. This time, evidence, institutional leadership, and collective restraint prevented escalation.

For us, the episode marked the end of a long walk along the edge of a cliff. We returned to our work changed—more cautious, yet more grounded in the knowledge that integrity, even under intense pressure, can matter.

For our fellow alumni, this story belongs to all of us. It reflects the education we received at Alemaya, the values instilled in us, and the responsibility that accompanies professional competence. The edge of the cliff may take different forms across generations—in laboratories, ministries, corporations, or classrooms—but the moral choice remains familiar.

Education equips us with knowledge. Character determines how we use it.

As one friend once said, everything passes—only to remain as story, or as history.