

Ethiopia's Italian connection

Italy's close past and current economic ties with Ethiopia, particularly in the agricultural and food sector, were highlighted at "Wheat, Flour, And...", a high profile sideline event held concurrently with the IAOM MEA Conference in Addis Ababa and at Ocrim's world headquarters in Cremona, Italy.

Ocrim SpA, the Italian embassy, and the Ethiopian Millers Association co-sponsored a gathering that drew more than 200 participants and included a live video conference with a panel of Italian food entrepreneurs in Cremona. Sergio Antolini, vice-president of Ocrim, noted that his company has been in Ethiopia for 35 years, having supplied many of the first industrial wheat mills in the country.

Given the presence of 12 Italian equipment companies exhibiting at the IAOM, the transfer of milling and pasta production technology was one of the main themes.

Pasta has been popular among Ethiopia's urban consumers since its introduction after the first contacts with Italy 120 years ago. In the last decade an increasing number of food enterprises, particularly milling companies, have installed new pasta production lines, but wheat quality and availability is a constraint.

In the past, semolina millers and pasta pro-

ducers could import their own durum in containers, but foreign exchange controls and the government monopoly on commercial wheat imports prevent this option now.

Tiberio Chiari of the Italian Agency for International Cooperation (AICS) observed, "Ethiopia is importing 40,000 tonnes of pasta per year, so there is a demand for quality."

Ethiopia is now growing an additional 50,000 tonnes of durum wheat per year, thanks in part to support from AICS, which imported 40 tonnes of improved durum seed from Italy selected for planting in Ethiopia's Bale region. It has dry growing conditions similar to Italy, Europe's leading durum producer with a forecast of nearly 5 million tonnes forecast in 2016-17.

Ethiopia's state minister for industry, Mebrathu Meles, outlined Ethiopia's ambitious goal to attract foreign direct investment and become "the leading country for light manufacturing in Africa."

He noted that Ethiopia offers a wide range of agro-ecological zones where almost anything can be grown, and so is seeking to attract agro-processing investment. Noting that Italy is a successful model of development of light industry and high value agricultural products, he asserted, "We have a long-term rela-

tionship with Italy. We should maximize it."

AICS general manager Ginevra Letizia said Italy has committed to invest \$180 million over five years in agro-industrial support, particularly the building of infrastructure.

Meles elaborated on the government's own support for infrastructure, outlining plans to build four major agro-industrial parks around the country to house food processing companies. The first such park is under construction.

AICS senior economist in Ethiopia, Andrea Ghione, validated the concept.

"Industrial parks are clusters for processors and a pull for producers," Ghione said. "They can provide a steady demand for certain products with certain quality. There are opportunities for agro-processors."

Ghione further observed that the agro-industrial parks will provide some economies of scale in warehousing and require aggregators to deliver standardized quality raw materials like grains in 16.5-tonne trucks as the minimum marketing unit.

Ocrim presented Captain of the Year awards to food manufacturers Bira Food Complex and K.O.J.J. Manufacturing, as well as the Oromia Agricultural Research Institute for their contributions to development of the cereals value chain in Ethiopia.



Left, Ocrim CEO Alberto Antolini addresses attendees at the Cremona, Italy, portion of Ocrim's "Wheat, Flour and..." video conference event. Right, Ocrim Vice-President Sergio Antolini speaks to attendees at the Addis Ababa, Ethiopia portion. Photos courtesy of Ocrim.