

Concept Paper: Shared Satellite Platform

Objective:

To provide a shared and cost-effective television broadcasting satellite platform for Eritrean human right groups, civic societies, religious groups and others concerned with the gross human rights violations in Eritrea.

Background:

In September 2001, the Eritrean Government banned the vibrant and growing independent media outlets in the country citing “national security” reasons following the unnecessary and disastrous war with Ethiopia between 1998 and 2000. Since then, there has been no independent media in the country. Eritrea today has a single radio station, one television channel and a daily newspaper - all owned and controlled by the regime. The Government hires and fires journalists at will, controls editorial decisions and imposes restrictions at the policy and technical levels. The State media has become a propaganda machine; a mouthpiece of the Government’s corrupting influence on the general public.

Eritrea has an exceptionally low internet access with less than 0.5% of the population having intermittent access that is religiously controlled by the regime. According to *ictworks*, there are apparently “146 fixed broadband subscriptions in the entire country. Dial-up home access costs US\$200 per month. There are 100 Internet cafes in the country – most have fewer than 10 computers”. Internet cafes are vigorously watched and spied upon by the regime security forces. These limitations make it impossible for internet communication and social media within and to/from outside the country.

Eritrea was bottom of the World Press Freedom Index for eight consecutive years up to and including 2016. In both 2017 and 2018 it was ranked 179 out of 180 - just ahead of North Korea. In 2019 it was ranked 178 ahead of North Korea and Turkmenistan.

In June 2015, the UN noted:

'In the area of freedom of expression, the [Eritrean] Government systematically silences anyone who is perceived as protesting against, questioning or expressing criticism of the Government and its policies, even when such statements are genuine and legitimate in the context of a democratic public debate'.ⁱ

The African Commission on Human and People’s Rights, in its May 2017 session in Niamey, Niger, condemned Eritrea’s treatment of Press Freedom and its journalists. The African Commission highlighted that Eritrea breaches several articles in the African Charter, including that of freedom of expression. The Commission has demanded that all detained journalists in Eritrea be freed.ⁱⁱ

It is against the above sad and tragic background Eritrean activists in diaspora initially setup website platforms, followed by radio and in the last year television broadcasts to the country. All this with the single aim of informing the Eritrean public the truth to counterbalance the regime’s relentless propaganda machine.

Independent satellite television channels:

Assenna Television (ATV) and Eritrean Satellite Television (ERISAT), both launched at the beginning of 2019, are the two main channels broadcasting to Eritrea based in the UK and the US respectively. Satellite broadcasting to Eritrea is, therefore, at its infancy and the experience of the last 12 months can only be seen as a pilot.

Nevertheless, the impact of satellite tv in Eritrea has been huge, beyond the wildest expectation. The two channels far eclipse the ineptly government managed EriTv in terms of audience numbers, reliability and breadth of coverage. Their success is to a large extent underpinned by the locally manufactured satellite dishes that is widely available at affordable price. Foreign diplomats and visitors to the country acknowledge satellite dishes can be seen in some of the remotest villages. Approximately 90% of the population view these tv programmes at least on ad hoc basis and thereby enabling messages from the opposition to reach them regularly. In the cafes, bars and restaurants around the country, people, including high ranking government officials, talk about the latest independent tv broadcasts. These viewers express their admiration whilst at the same time detest the local tv as the mouthpiece of a discredited regime.

The government angered by the success of these truth telling satellite channels attempts to jam them frequently but is has only succeeded to do so on a few occasions. Due to the lack of technical knowhow and associated cost, the government disruption attempt has been minimal. Their endeavour has considerably diminished over the last few months despite the intensity and frequency of independent tv broadcasting.

The key lessons from the tv broadcasting pilot over the last year is that it can be a catalyst for change and a most effective medium of communication with Eritrean's inside and outside the country. If used sustainably and professionally, tv may well be the tool that will get the Eritrean people to rise up to repression and gain their independence from the yoke of Isaias' rule.

About ERISAT and ATV:

ERISAT is a not-for-profit media organisation registered in the State of California, as 501 C3.

“ERISAT’s mission is to ensure universal access, over-the-air, high-quality content to its Eritrean audience inside and outside Eritrea. It is committed to disseminate fact-based news to inform, educate, create awareness and bridge the information gap that exists among Eritreans inside Eritrea and in the diaspora, thereby creating a full picture of the political, social, economic and cultural life of Eritreans and provide correct information and project hope and optimism throughout all programming.”

“ERISAT’s vision is to be at the forefront of nurturing democratic culture and justice in Eritrea by creating a platform for diverse voices thereby encouraging and promoting tolerance and engagement among Eritreans inside and outside Eritrea.”

ERISAT is run by a Board of Directors who are responsible for its governance and accountability. It is wholly funded through donations from members of the Eritrean diaspora and their friends.

ATV is an arm of Assenna Foundation Ltd. Assenna Foundation (the Foundation) was launched in 2007 as an independent opposition website; www.assenna.com. This was followed by a shortwave radio broadcast in 2009 and ATV in January 2019.

Assenna Foundation is a limited by guarantee private company registered in England and Wales (7586129), headquartered in London, UK. The Foundation Memorandum and Articles of Associations set out its remit, objectives and governance arrangements in line with the UK Companies Act 1985 and 1989. The objectives of the Foundation are:

- (a) *To broadcast news* - unbiased, truthful news and analysis to audiences both in Eritrea and in diaspora to counterbalance the Eritrean regime's propaganda;
- (b) *To raise awareness and foster democratic values* - to educate the Eritrean public the importance of political participation in order to build a democratic country, underpinned by the rule of law with human rights at its cornerstone.
- (c) *To advance Eritrean cultural heritage* - promote Eritrean cuisine and drinks, poems and plays, music and dance that encamps all of the nine ethnic groups. Instil awareness of religion as the foundation of Eritrean society and culture.

Assenna Foundation is governed and managed by a Board of Directors who are also registered with the Companies House. It files annual returns and statutory accounts with both the Companies House and HM Revenue and Customs. The Foundation is wholly financed by members of the Eritrean diaspora and their friends.

The financial sustainability challenges

Both ATV and ERISAT are “wholly financed by members of the Eritrean diaspora and their friends.” This means both channels have the same and identical source of funding vis-à-vis the Eritrean people whose means are by and large pretty tight given family commitments back home. We are therefore beginning to witness donation fatigue with funding streams to both channels increasingly dwindling over the recent months.

The cost of a satellite leasing is prohibitively expensive and inflexible. The lease is for 24/7 and at least of one-month duration, although some providers ask for up to 12-month term. ATV currently pays \$9,750 and ERISAT \$20,000 per calendar month. A combined cost of \$29,750 per month for 48 hours per day airtime. In reality, ATV uses 4 hours each day on fresh programmes and the rest is used for repeat programmes. On the other hand, ERISAT apparently broadcasts three hours a day with the rest of the time used for repeat programmes (TBC).

Assuming the above figures for both ERISAT and ATV are correct, a combined 7 hours of the total 48 hours of daily airtime or just 15 per cent appear to be used on fresh programmes. On the face of it, this does not deliver value for money. As such, the financial sustainability of both organisations is at stake with one if not both of the channels likely to cease broadcasting in the short to medium term. This damaging scenario may, however, be averted through shared satellite platforms, which could potentially save c. \$20k per month (c. \$240k per annum). [ERISAT cost and data TBC officially]

Proposed solution:

It is important TV broadcasting to Eritrea is not monopolised by one channel. Advocating merger of ERISAT and ATV may therefore not be the best way forward even though their target audience and core message by and large is identical. This, however, does not preclude sharing a satellite to

generate economies of scale and efficiencies. One shared satellite is more than enough for both channels with a significant amount of airtime still available for others to lease and generate income to help cover some of the cost.

A shared service satellite arrangement had, of course, been explored last year but it did not happen for various reasons, including concerns about reliance on a competitor. This hurdle can be overcome by bringing in a third party with responsibility for leasing the satellite and for the two channels (and others) to buy airtime from it on cost recovery basis. This can happen in one of three ways:

- i. ATV novating its satellite contract to the third party and ERISAT cancelling its contract;
- ii. ERISAT novating its satellite contract to the third party and ATV cancelling its contract; or
- iii. Both ATV and ERISAT cancelling their respective satellite contracts and a fresh provider is brought in.

For the first six-month, Eritrea Focusⁱⁱⁱ is willing to provide a third-party service on pro bono basis. Beyond that, there may be a levy to cover a part-time administrative assistance cost of no more than \$1,000 per month with Eritrea Focus continuing to provide managerial function on pro bono basis.

Eritrea Focus, in line with its mission, will be open and transparent in the way it manages the shared satellite platform. Accordingly, it will be published monthly budget and performance reports which will be shared with satellite users and made public.

Financing and fundraising arrangements:

1. Deposit for satellite leasing: ERISAT and ATV to transfer part of their current deposit equating the total monthly leasing fee to Eritrea Focus. This will be passed on to the provider.
2. Fundraising: both channels to continue raising funds to cover their respective costs which should be substantially reduced as a result of the shared satellite platform.
3. Donation to Eritrea Focus – donors will have the option to donate directly to Eritrea Focus. The donation will then be shared out in proportion of airtime to user channels.
4. Subleasing airtime – ERISAT and ATV will be able to sublease a proportion of their airtime to Eritrean organisations with empathy to fundamental human rights, religious freedom and equality for all.
5. Subleasing airtime by Eritrea Focus – human rights, religious and civic groups will be able to buy airtime directly from Eritrea Focus depending on availability. The money generated will be recycled and offset against cost of satellite leasing in proportion of airtime used.
6. Fundraising – On behalf of satellite users, Eritrea Focus will solicit charitable donations in Europe and the US. Donations received will be shared in proportion of airtime used.

Timeline:

- ✓ 1 – 28 February: Consultation with interested parties
- ✓ 29 February: Sign off a Memorandum Of Understanding (MOU) between parties
- ✓ 1 – 31 March: Novation of contract from ERISAT to Eritrea Focus or from ATV to Eritrea Focus. If this is not possible for cost or other reasons a new provider to be found and contracted by Eritrea Focus.
- ✓ Early April: Launch of shared satellite platform
- ✓ Early October: carry out a review of the first six months

Shared satellite risks:

Ref	Risk Description	Risk Type	Net Risk		RAG
			Likelihood	Impact	
1	Failure to agree the shared satellite concept	Strategic	4	5	R
2	Failure to secure the necessary funding	Strategic	4	5	R
3	Failure to attract other players to use platform i.e. potential for growth	Strategic	4	3	A
4	The Eritrean Gov't jams transmission	Operational	3	3	G
5	Messy and lengthy novation of contracts	Operational	3	4	A
6	Ineffective and costly management structure	Operational	2	4	G

Key Score

R	= 16 to 25: High Risk
A	= 10 to 15: Medium Risk
G	= 01 to 09: Low Risk

Next steps:

If the proposed shared satellite platform is acceptable to both ERISAT and ATV, we will proceed to draw up a MOU with the parties concerned before a satellite contract is novated to Eritrea Focus or a fresh provider is appointed.

The MOU will contain a clear and explicit break clause. Parties will have the option to terminate their MOU by given a one-month written notice. Furthermore, all users will be required to adhere to strict guidelines in line with fundamental human rights, religious tolerance and equality regardless of ethnicity, gender, place of origin etc.

Conclusion:

Shared service is a business model geared to reducing cost and deliver value for money, especially in the not-for-profit and social enterprise sectors. With commitments and cooperation, I see no reason why it would not work for a shared satellite platform for the Eritrean Community.

We owe it to our donors, who are not awash with cash but nevertheless give generously, to make a shared satellite platform work. Collaborative working such as this would certainly send shivers down the spine of the regime in Asmara whilst at the same time energise the Eritrean public to rise up against dictatorship.

We do not necessarily need one entity or merge channels to succeed in this critical endeavour for the long-suffering Eritrean people but imperative we work hand in hand to achieve our common goal.

Habte Hagos
Chairman, Assenna Foundation Ltd, and
Chairman, of Eritrea Focus

ⁱ United Nations, Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea, June 2015, para 32, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G15/114/50/PDF/G1511450.pdf?OpenElement>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.africareview.com/blogs/Eritrea-must-release-its-detained-journalists/979192-3921794-kfhvi5z/index.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ www.eritrea-focus.org