

# Ethiopia: Women with disabilities harness the power of entrepreneurship

This is a story of empowerment made possible by the ILO-Irish Aid Partnership Programme who set out to provide and promote entrepreneurship training for disabled women in Ethiopia, in partnership with local organisations. Partnerships with both the Federation of Ethiopian National Association of Persons with Disabilities (FENAPD) and Tigray Disabled Veteran's Association (TDVA) as well as with the Ethiopian National Disability Action Network (ENDAN) form an integral part of the ILO-Irish Aid's strategy aimed at building capacity within local institutions to deliver sustainable programmes of training and support for its disabled women members. It's an innovative approach which is designed and implemented in close consultation with training providers, micro-finance institutions, and national and local governmental authorities. Disabled women in Ethiopia are gaining skills to realise their potential and contribute to their families and local communities.



Photo: Aaron Maasho

“It’s a major thing to be able to be self-sufficient ...there’s nothing more difficult than being dependent on others”

In a small corrugated iron shop in central Addis Ababa, the clanks of iron tools reverberate across the rundown neighbourhood. Shemsiya Hiyar and her employees are crafting bags, belts and sandals out of fine leather.

Shemsiya, who has a disability caused by a childhood injury, first learned to make leather goods shortly after finishing secondary school. In less than a decade, her income has increased from about 100 birr, or approximately USD 8, per month to about 600 birr, or USD 50 a month, from a diversified business making belts and wallets that now provides jobs to five individuals.

Shemsiya's rise to self-sufficiency was not easy. Loans were difficult to come by from the local council that feared she could never repay. Eventually, one person's confidence swayed the others to agree to lend her the money she needed to start her own business. *“I have been lucky with what I have,” she says. “I managed to pay back my loan much earlier than others.”*

Today, she not only has a shop, but has also learned how to run a viable business and manage staff using skills obtained from ILO-Irish Aid supported training on business development. What is more, she has also managed to rent her own house. *“It’s a major thing to be able to be self-sufficient,” she says. “There’s nothing more difficult than being dependent on others.”*





*“People think we are incapable of working and becoming self-sufficient. They can come and look at how our lives have changed and the services we provide.”*

*– Nuria Kedir, a member of the Yegenew Sanitary Services Co-operative*

## The problems

It is estimated that the figure of disabled people in Ethiopia could be as high as 8 million. Because of stigma and discrimination, many are isolated and excluded from their communities, with women facing a double challenge: the fear and misconceptions about people with disabilities is multiplied by bias based on their gender. Disabled women are more likely to be poor than disabled men and non-disabled women. Their poverty is linked in part to the fact that they have very limited opportunities for education and skills development.

## Strategic partnerships

The Federation of Ethiopian National Associations of Persons with Disabilities (FENAPD), founded in 1996, is an umbrella association of the six disability-focused national associations. Supported partially by (external) organizations such as ILO-Irish Aid, FENAPD coordinates, plans and implements business training for disabled women entrepreneurs, facilitates access to microfinance and mobilizes women with disabilities to participate in mainstream training in business, vocational and marketing skills. Women with disabilities were included on the project management committee – a ‘first’ in empowering these women to take charge.

The ILO-Irish Aid Partnership Programme started promoting employment opportunities for people with disabilities in Ethiopia in the early 2000s. Since then, it has been working with the government, workers’ groups, employers’ groups, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), including those of and for disabled persons, to support equal access to services and opportunities for women entrepreneurs at all stages of their economic development.

*“Business is very important in changing the lives of these women. If they learn how to make money for themselves they become respected in their communities and contribute to people around them,”* said Menberu Tequam, General Manager of FENAPD, *“In Ethiopia, being a woman is a disadvantage itself. Even from the beginning, boys are better positioned to go to school and are*

*likely to benefit on all fronts. When you add to that a disability, you have a far worse picture. FENAPD shows the importance of having vocational training programmes in place that enable disabled women to change their lives”.*

A similar strategic partnership involved the Tigray Disabled Veteran’s Association (TDVA), based in the rural area of the country’s northernmost region. TDVA was established in 1996 with the aim of rehabilitating and integrating veterans into society. As a result of both the country’s civil war which ended in 1991 and the conflict against Eritrea which ended in 1998, the region is now home to over 100 000 people with disabilities. TDVA’s ability to convince the Debit Credit and Savings Institution to provide small lines of credit to its disabled veterans overcame one of the biggest barriers to business: access to credit. *“Currently, we have more than 1 600 persons with disabilities accessing credit from microfinance institutions,”* says Fiseha Tegegn, the association’s liaison officer in Addis Ababa. *“Before the programme, persons with disabilities were considered risk groups; they were excluded from the mainstream services. We carried out a lot of workshops for our members and lending partners and were able to help our disabled veterans get access to credit”.*

Partnerships with both FENAPD, TDVA as well as with ENDAN, the Ethiopian National Disability Action Network, is ensuring that activities will be sustainable beyond the project timeline. Women entrepreneur associations also play a key role in the strategic partnership alliance. The second phase of the Programme saw an expansion in the partnership network to include women entrepreneur associations such as the Amhara Women’s Entrepreneurs’ Association (AWEA) and the Adama Women Entrepreneurs’ Association. Roman Deksiso, President of the Adama Women Entrepreneurs’ Association, which boasts a membership base of over 300, instantly saw the advantages of opening up their services to groups of women entrepreneurs whose needs had previously been ignored. *“It is very harmful to segregate women with disabilities from those who do not,”* she says, *“Including them in the mainstream is very important and*



# I am transformed from a beggar to a self-employed woman



Photo: T. Tesfaye

*this gives them a new lease of life through confidence.”*

Closer links between the ILO-Irish Aid Partnership Programme on disability and another Ireland-funded ILO project, Promoting Women's Entrepreneurship Development and Gender Equality (WEDGE), which supports women micro-entrepreneurs, during the second phase of the programme, also enabled access to a wider range of training tools, business development services and promotional events by disabled women's entrepreneurs. In 2007, nearly 900 Ethiopian women, both disabled and non-disabled, honed their skills and gained confidence by participating in the entrepreneurship programme. The women expanded their knowledge on a variety of business topics ranging from building skills to accessing finance and new markets to networking. Most importantly, they were able to realise their potential and achieve success in business to the benefit of their families and communities. On the basis of interviews conducted with programme participants, an increase in women's income was also accompanied by more money being spent on the family's health and financing of their children's education, thus empowering future generations.

## The story of Chaltu Hassen

Having contracted Hansen's disease (or leprosy) during her childhood, Chaltu, 70, was accustomed to begging for a living. But, she was determined to change her life for the better. The opportunity came a few years ago, when she heard about a new training programme supported by the ILO-Irish Aid Partnership Programme called 'Improve Your Business'. The experience helped change her life. *"It was the first time that I attended this kind of training with non-disabled women,"* she says. *"I was not happy at the beginning going to the training. I was timid and considered myself inferior. But having seen people come and shake my hand and treat me like a mother, I was filled with joy; it was like a rebirth for me. For the first time, I felt myself equal with others. Most importantly, I now have the confidence to interact with people without being inhibited by my physical appearance."*

After training, she was able to access credit through microfinance institutions. Today she carries out her business selling organic hops known as 'gesho', found only in the highlands of Ethiopia, and charcoal in a small market in Addis Ababa. *"I am transformed from a beggar to a self-employed woman,"* says Chaltu.

Late in her life, Chaltu has learned something new that changed everything. Now she eats three meals a day, pays the rent, helps pay for her grandchildren's education, and puts aside some savings for the future. And most importantly for Chaltu, she did it herself.

## The story of the Yegenew Sanitary Services Cooperative

The Co-operative came into being after a proposal by FENAPD to provide shower and hand laundry facilities in Addis Ababa won a World Bank Development Marketplace Competition prize in 2003. The proposal was one of 186 chosen from over 2,700 submissions. ILO-Irish Aid provided initial support to FENAPD for training Co-operative leaders as well as the working capital. At its 30 sites, the Co-operative now employs more than 180 people – all of whom have visual, hearing or mobility impairments, Hansen's disease, or have children with intellectual disabilities. Four years ago, workers earned approximately USD 8 per month. Now the wage is USD 50 per month, on the higher end of the scale.

Nuria Kedir, a member of the Co-operative, asks society to stand up and notice. *"People think we are incapable of working and becoming self-sufficient. They can come and look at how our lives have changed and the services we provide."*

## The doors are beginning to open but much remains to be done

Since the early 2000s, the Government of Ethiopia has implemented a number of laws and policies aimed to improve the employment and employability of people with disabilities. Yet, cultural taboos, negative attitudes and stereotyping of disabled

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persons continue to present barriers to their effective participation in everyday life as well as in the workplace.

More recently, Ethiopia's new Proclamation concerning the Rights to Employment for Persons with Disabilities, No. 568/2008, offers new hope to the country's disabled jobseekers. It prohibits discriminatory practices that limit equal opportunities for persons with disabilities. ILO-Irish Aid has made a significant contribution to the legislative process through its support of dissemination initiatives led by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MOLSA) which involved a series of national, regional and local-level awareness-raising workshops largely aimed at enforcement agents – judges, labour inspectors, employers and workers representatives. “*The Government is trying to make sure that everyone understands that disabled people are capable of working and that they do not need to be discriminated against,*” said Mikael Birhanu, Policy and Programme Expert at MOLSA's Social Development Department, “*We have to continue to raise awareness so that we can increase their employability.*” The new law offers much in terms of promoting decent and productive work and a key to an independent life for many disabled persons. Yet, much work remains to be done to guarantee that all Ethiopians with disabilities are ensured equality in all levels of society and to achieve the Millennium Development Goals.

The Ethiopian Center for Disability and Development (ECDD), a recently established NGO based in Addis Ababa, believes that one reason government offices and development agencies, among others, fail to include persons with disabilities as participants and beneficiaries of their programmes is a lack of awareness, knowledge and skills on how to include persons with disabilities. To address this concern, ECDD provides practical advice on how to include persons with disabilities in mainstream development and poverty reduction programmes, enterprise/entrepreneurship development services and formal sector employment. The NGO has also encouraged Ethiopia's leading private employment agency to extend their recruitment and counselling services to jobseekers with disabilities.

### Lessons learnt

Among the key aspects of empowerment of the donor-supported Programme was the building of self-confidence and entrepreneurship skills among disabled women, which facilitated their involvement in productive economic activities and in associations. The inclusion of disabled women in women entrepreneur associations has also greatly contributed to creating a sense of ‘belonging’ in society, as useful members of the community. As a result, today, many women with disabilities across Ethiopia have greater economic independence and self-worth. Learning new business knowledge and skills, they are not only achieving success but also working their way out of poverty. In the process, they are sharing their experiences and encouraging other disabled women to replicate their successes.

Another element of empowerment emerging from the ILO-Irish Aid story is the Partnership Programme's unique approach which combines awareness raising of the situation of women – and men – with disabilities and the barriers they face in earning a living and taking part in society with the promotion of disability considerations in national laws, policies, services and programmes. In less than ten years, the approach has begun to bear fruit: partnership with the Government has supported the development and enactment of Proclamation No. 568/2008, and alliances with other groups and associations have helped to institutionalize inclusive approaches to training and support for disabled women.

This has been an approach that has helped bring many disabled persons into mainstream society, often for the first time in their lives. Most importantly, it is an approach designed to have long-lasting effects, beyond the project's completion, as it also helps to empower future generations through higher family spending on health and education.