



ethiopian enterprises

## Newsletter November 2020

### *Dear Friends of Ethiopian Enterprises*

*After a seven-month break in our regular visits to Raya, Lesley was finally able to return to Ethiopia in mid-September. A row of decisions needed to be made, and discussions on a dozen topics were required. Our manager Melkamu Abate had been valiantly handling the entire management load throughout this period as well as organizing our emergency relief with the help of colleagues from Mekelle University and teachers from Lemlem Baro School. But by September, our active presence on site was needed. Never before was the growing importance of our mentoring and advisory role in our region so clearly visible as during this trip at a time of crisis.*

### **Raya Scholarship Program**

COVID-19 has left its mark on Ethiopia and with that, on the country's poorly organized education system. On April 8th, all schools and universities were closed, and the economy of rural areas in particular went into a downward spiral due to the closure of markets. Our scholarship students were unable to travel out of Mehoni, Raya-Azebo or Cher Cher to their relatives further afield due to strict travel regulations, but in their school regions there was no casual work for them. In order to support them and their families, Ethiopian Enterprises therefore raised the students' monthly allowance to USD 16 in May, and paid their monthly allowances during July and August as the students could not return home for the summer break. We have now made a final adjustment for the coming school year to USD 20 per month.

Depending on the students' individual family situations, some of them have done better than others during the lockdown. Those who are orphans and used to tough times have fought back, studying as much as possible in order to be prepared for the reopening of their schools and in some cases for their national exams this month. Others seemed to have lost hope and for this reason it was particularly important that EE was personally present at their semester interviews in September. Two of the saddest cases were two of our boys who had both lost their mothers last year and who were still grieving badly when the COVID-19 lockdown hit. They had little moral support from other family members and were desperate by the time of their September interviews. However, after long talks with the team about their situations, they cheered up somewhat. We hope that they will do better now that the lockdown is easing and they can be with other family members more regularly.

Our project manager Melkamu Abate, and teacher Haftom Nigusse who is in charge of the scholarship program on site, have worked hard to monitor the students' circumstances during the past 7 months. We are indebted to them for their efforts, as are the students. At the end of September, EE president Thomas Baumann also launched an initiative with the support of our Lemlem Baro School headmaster Nigus to have our well-stocked library opened for our scholarship students to read and study. Throughout October we paid bus-fares for those who came from Kukufto and Cher Cher, and provided snacks for those who wanted to

remain the entire day. Our library is large enough for the Preparatory School students to maintain social distancing, and we are ensuring that the building remains well aired. The students are also using masks. We also organized an English essay-writing contest for the students to help them revise their English reading and writing, and provided an English revision test for those facing their national 12-grade exams in November.

**Participants of the Raya Scholarship program**



The national Ethiopian Department of Education has now provided dates for a gradual return to school. 12th grade students returned to their Preparatory Schools at the end of October prior to facing their competitive 12th grade exams which should have taken place in June. Their results will either open or close the door to their chances for tertiary education. We cannot tell how our students will fare as in each case their success will depend on how much they really studied during the lengthy lockdown period. There was no internet learning and little support from their teachers so this was a challenging time indeed for all of them. At the moment, we can only wait for their results and then support each of them individually towards their next steps.

Those of our students who were in 10th grade (final high school year) will face a different challenge. Overwhelmed by the number of students and the need to somehow come to terms with the impact of COVID-19, the education department has made what we consider to be a fatal decision. Instead of exams or pre-selection based on first semester performance, all 10th grade students will be allowed to commence 11th grade (Preparatory School) in the coming weeks. This is a recipe for absolute chaos. Until now, rural areas have had a 20-30% pass rate for 10th grade students in their national exams so only this fraction of students were able to enter Preparatory School. Even with this number there has always been a shortage of classrooms and teachers, and many classes are overfilled with 50-65 students. Perhaps you can imagine the chaos these schools will now face when instead of 20-30% of 10th grade students, they receive 100%.

We think that this decision is a move to avoid the student unrest which has been growing in Ethiopia and also the growing unemployment levels among young people. Sadly, in rural Ethiopia it is going to lower the quality of education in Preparatory Schools still further. We will be monitoring our new preparatory students extremely carefully and offering coaching and other study support to those who need it.

The good news is that we have recently received an offer from a foundation to sponsor 20 new students for the next two years. This will enlarge our program of currently 43 students to 63. We are delighted about this additional support, and the screening of the new students will be completed in the coming week.



### Our project school, Lemlem Baro Elementary School

Visiting the school which has played a central role in the lives of EE board members for the past six years in the midst of lockdown was a surreal experience. It was quiet, and normally a school with 1'500 students coming and going in two shifts each day is anything but quiet. The grounds were unusually clean as were the water channels which collect and direct rainwater in the wet seasons. While there is nothing to be happy about in the pandemic situation either here or there, we and our local team have at least made the most of the downtime to get things done.

Tef growing where the children usually play



The second perma garden at Lemlem Baro



The third ring infiltration pit, a clone of the ...



... first



For instance, the classroom doors of the grade 1-8 classrooms were in bad shape after 5 years of heavy wear and tear. Better quality metal doors have become available over the past couple of years. These doors have a strong metal frame in which the closing bolt is incased, and they last much longer as there is far less wear on the walls than with a door which has its bolts locking directly into holes in the cement walls. After checking the costs involved, we decided to have our construction team replace the original doors with the 'new generation' doors. The latter are much sturdier and stronger and will help us with cleaning as they don't allow so much dust to enter the classrooms.

Lemlem Baro School now has a second gardener and the two young men are helped by a group of our former students who have formed a close-knit group. There are now 3 RIPS in the school (Rainwater Infiltration Pits) and they were looking amazing in September after the rain. While Lesley was there she witnessed produce from the gardens being sold at the market (which has recently reopened) for good money. The income from garden produce goes immediately into the school maintenance account which is carefully kept by the school

accountant. Headmaster Nigus proudly showed Lesley the bank book for this account and also the bookkeeping ledger. Everything was as it should be.

**Lemlem Baro school compound seen from space (Early Learning Center with red roof)**



What pleased us particularly is that the gardeners now understand the importance of diversity in the garden planting. Last month the school was able to sell lettuce, silver-beet, beetroot, carrots, papayas and various herbs. The reputation of the gardens is now such that a man recently approached our team and asked if he could set up a plant nursery on a plot within the compound for which he would pay the school some rent. Discussions are underway on this subject as if he is willing to explain to our students what he is doing when they gather around him in their break-times, this could be valuable additional education for those of them who may set up their own gardens or gardening businesses in the future.

This year, far more of the school land was sown with tef than usual. Headmaster Nigus wanted to take advantage of the absence of hundreds of feet crossing some garden areas, and sowed tef in parts of the school compound as well as in our allocated fields. It looked fabulous in September, and the school was dreaming of the income it would bring. In fact, this was the case all over the region and we rejoiced at the fact that the good harvest would certainly make up for some of the losses incurred by the rural economy during the lockdown. As you will read in our emergency aid report below, we rejoiced too early.

The Ethiopian federal education department has now decreed that primary schools should recommence 8th grade classes as these students – like the 12th graders – will shortly face their national exams. Our 8th grade classes at Lemlem Baro began on November 2nd. We hope that there will be a gradual return of other grades over the coming weeks but with the new drama unfolding in Tigray currently it is unclear what will happen. Our school leadership team has faced its greatest challenges this year, and we are doing our best to support them.

Lemlem Baro School has been a center for our emergency relief activity in the Debubawi zone throughout the pandemic. We were able to use one of the classrooms to store and measure grain for the food allocations, and our large cobbled compound was suitable for organizing the distribution as it allowed for social distancing even when hundreds of people came to the school to collect their



grain. Headmaster Nigus along with two of our teachers (Haftom Nigusse, science teacher and accountant, and Fitsum Weldesenbet, Arts&Crafts teacher), provided invaluable support. Clearly, though, the hero behind our efforts on site during the pandemic is our manager Melkamu Abate. Melkamu is a former university lecturer and has excellent organizational and logistic skills. We could not have provided the aid we supplied, or made the progress we have made in the past 9 months, without his skills and his great dedication to our work in the region.

**Melkamu Abate – our manager on site**



### **Emergency aid during COVID-19 lockdown**

As those of you who read our last Newsletter in June 2020 know, Ethiopian Enterprises made a decision in April this year to provide emergency food aid and hygiene materials to the communities of Cher Cher, Raya-Azebo and Mehoni. This was not an easy decision to make as emergency aid is not part of our official mandate. This is the task of larger organizations who have government sponsored budgets for exactly this type of support. However, as we reported in our March and June Newsletters, our region received no other aid from any official aid organizations during the entire lockdown period.

Over the past seven months, Ethiopian Enterprises raised and allocated nearly CHF 100'000 for emergency aid, and was able to keep several thousand of the highest risk families in our region alive with this help. During her return visit to Ethiopia last month, Lesley participated in one of the allocations in Cher Cher and sent back this report.

*'The millet for distribution to over four hundred high-risk families in Cher Cher had been weighed and packed into the appropriate colored bags before I arrived in Mehoni. The work had been done at Lemlem Baro school so it was all ready to be packed onto the lorry along with cartons containing bottles of cooking oil and bars of soap. But on Wednesday morning when we were due to leave for Cher Cher, the lorry we had ordered was no longer 'available'. Fortunately Melkamu was up at 4am overseeing preparations and he contacted the construction team from our new school. There was a lorry at the site and the driver agreed to make the delivery for us. By 5am a group of young laborers had packed all the remaining grain onto the lorry and it was on its slow drive to Cher Cher along a largely unsealed road. Teachers Fitsum and Haftom accompanied the lorry to check that there were no 'mishaps'. In desperate times bags of grain are highly prized, but the lorry-load arrived without any problems.'*

*By the time we arrived at the site, the bags were already being laid out at intervals over a large field. On one side of the field there was a group of soldiers who were very surprised to see me getting out of the van. Actually they were surprised at the whole scene as they had been planning some sort of military exercise on the site and had not been informed that it was reserved for us that morning. Fortunately, a short discussion was all that was needed to solve the issue, helped by the fact that we had government officials from Cher Cher with us.*

*While we were adding the oil bottles and soap to the bags of grain, the recipients arrived. It took a long time for them to get their names checked on a register and to be allowed to sit on their bag. Part of the problem was that many of the older designated recipients were too weak to even walk from their home to the field and had needed to send a neighbour or family member to collect for them. These had to be checked as well. Our workers helped many of the older, ill people to carry the grain to their homes. Although the whole exercise took several hours, it was extremely well and safely organized. Melkamu has directed these allocations several times now and his protocol really works.'*

Grain and cooking oil distribution at Lemlem Baro School in summer ...



... and in Cher Cher in September 2020



While Lesley was in Cher Cher for the distribution, she was told that desert locusts had landed on some of the local farmers' crops. After she returned to Switzerland, this huge plague spread throughout the southern Tigray zone of Debubawi in which all our project regions are situated. Sadly, a large part of the harvest in Cher Cher has been destroyed, and there has been a loss of crops in some parts of Mehoni. Due to the fact that helpers from Mekelle and Axum were billeted in all school buildings in Mehoni to help with the fight, including at Lemlem Baro School, our school tef fields were saved and the tef has now been harvested. The helpers worked day and night lighting fires (locusts don't care for smoke) and also firing bullets into the air to discourage the locusts from landing or settling in.



However, this new hardship coming on top of COVID-19 will take its toll on our communities yet again in the coming months. By the end of October the price of a quintel of millet, 100 kg, for which we paid an already high ETB 2'030 during our emergency aid in the lockdown phase, has risen to ETB 2'600. This is a huge increase and frankly a price which the majority of those in the worst-hit areas simply cannot afford.

#### **Early Learning Center at Lemlem Baro Elementary School**

Despite the COVID-19 lockdown, the Ethiopian government allowed many construction projects to continue. Both our new school Mehoni Marsa (→ report below) and our Early Learning Center (ELC) have made progress in the face of all the challenges which have arisen. Workers employed for the construction of the ELC camped on the school grounds or slept in their trucks at the height of the lockdown. Families who lived close by prepared their food for them as all restaurants were closed for several months.

The design and detailed plans for the ELC were created by Swiss architect Ruedi Birchler. We had wanted the building to have an element of the traditional round buildings still to be found in Ethiopia, but with the stability and materials required for a long-lasting structure. The octagonal inner shape of the two classrooms is reminiscent of these earlier buildings, and the generous verandah can be used as an outdoor classroom or playing space in poor weather. A teachers' office and a small sleeping room for small children who may be feeling poorly complete the central building.

COVID-19 has of course created some delays. The tiles which we hoped to have are no longer being made because a core ingredient cannot be imported at this time, so the tiling and painting of the building has been considerably delayed. However, given that so far only 8th grade students have returned to primary school, the registration of kindergarten students will be delayed in any case. In the meantime, toilets, a nursery garden and a playing area will be added as quickly as possible. We had hoped to open the Early Learning Center at the end of this year but current political developments in the state of Tigray suggest that this will now be impossible. Still, whether the opening takes place in 2020 or 2021, the good news here is that the construction did not lie dormant for the entire lockdown period.

**Early Learning Center on the site of Lemlem Baro School**





### Mehoni Marsa Elementary School

Back in March we informed you that we had made an agreement with our local government to build at least the first classroom block of a new elementary school, as well as the enclosure for the entire new school compound. The agreement was made based on strict criteria, including the ruling that the same conditions and rules which we have made for Lemlem Baro Elementary School will be applied. These include the need for regular community participation in caring for the school, the opening of a separate second bank account for maintenance, etc.

Due to growing ethnic unrest over the past year in Ethiopia, southern Tigray has seen substantial numbers of families in which one or both parents are Tigrayans returning to Tigray in order to have the protection of the state of Tigray. Thousands have moved into our region and our schools have been seriously overrun. Part of our agreement for building the new school building is that students who joined our school unexpectedly last September and who live in the part of Mehoni in which the new school is under construction will join the new school as soon as it is completed. This will relieve our overcrowded classrooms considerably. Whether we continue with other parts of the new school in 2021 will depend largely on whether the government implements all the components of our written agreement. We learned some lessons in this respect the hard way in our early years at Lemlem Baro and have developed a clear protocol for continuation at this school.

### Mehoni Marsa School under construction



‘Marsa’ is being built by a new construction team, and we are monitoring its progress closely through our manager and his helpers. We are still hoping that the first block of 4 classrooms, which will house 400 students in the two-shift system, will be complete by the end of this year.



Mehoni Marsa Construction site seen from space



### Ethiopian Enterprises Film Channel on YouTube – EE on Instagram

EE board member André Cardinaux has used some of the lockdown ‘downtime’ to put together our EE film library. Ethiopian Enterprises now has its own YouTube Channel where our films can be viewed. The latter range from those made during our first project years in Hageresalam up to the present. We are particularly proud of the development of Lemlem Baro Complete Elementary School which is clearly visible in the films made between our start in Raya in 2015 and February 2020. We hope that you will enjoy the films and, if you do, please send the link on to others who may also be willing to assist us. In this way you can help us ensure that our work in the Raya region continues to expand and that we can sensibly support our growing communities. You will find us on YouTube via this link:

<https://m.youtube.com/channel/UCS-nvQQYNtYxhDbdaPOshJg/videos>

We have also created an Instagram presence (ethiopianenterprises). Due to the limited project visits we are currently able to make there are only a few contributions online. Nevertheless, please follow us on Instagram as there will be considerably more to come once we can return regularly to Ethiopia.

### A word about donations.....

For your interest we have outlined below how donations to Ethiopian Enterprises are allocated to our various projects.

Currently Ethiopian Enterprises finances and manages four separate activities:

1. **Lemlem Baro Elementary School**, with its new **Early Learning Center** currently under construction
2. **Marsa Elementary School**, our second elementary school, currently under construction
3. **Raya Scholarship Program**
4. **EE Emergency Fund** (emergency food or water distribution, emergency health care, etc.)

Donors are welcome to specify an activity for which they would like their donation to be used when making their donation. The latter will then be dedicated to that

activity. Donations can also be made without a specific target activity, which allows us to dedicate that donation to where it is most needed. But no matter whether a donation is specifically dedicated or not, one thing remains the same in all cases: all donations are channelled in full into our fund. There are absolutely no exceptions to this as our board members cover all administrative expenses of our association privately, and pay all expenses involved in project visits themselves.

If you would like to cover a specific item yourself, or give a friend a donation as a Christmas gift, here are just a few of the items we urgently need and the unit cost price in each case. Every item donated helps us and our community greatly.

- 50 exercise books for orphans: CHF 18
- 20 teachers' marking pens: CHF 25
- Kindergarten student chair: CHF 28
- 50 kilograms of millet to feed a family of 5-6 people for a month: CHF 35
- Primary school integrated desk and seat for three students: CHF 85
- Kindergarten table for 6 students (we work with hexagonal desks in our Early Learning Center and 1st grade classrooms): CHF 140
- Work table for teachers' staffroom: CHF 85
- Cupboard for Early Learning Center: CHF 95
- Climbing bars for playground: ca. CHF 120
- Fruit day for 1'500 students: CHF 400 (each student receives an orange or banana)

In the run up to what may be a different Christmas in a difficult year, we board members of Ethiopian Enterprises as well as our communities and their leaders want to thank you again for your support this year. We are also exceedingly grateful to those of you who found a way to increase your support so that we could help so many thousands during the lockdown period. Perhaps this extract from the email we received on November 1st from Melkamu Abate sums it up best:

*'I know that this unanticipated call for support has eaten up a lot of your time, your energy, thought and resources. However, of all the life-changing support the community has received from EE to date, the emergency aid support they have been given over the past months has had the most touching recognition. This is because the support they have received has had a direct impact in their daily lives and, since it was very timely, the community has spoken out loudly about it. EE friends and their support are honoured in the hearts of thousands. The food aid is the most memorable support they have ever had. I have had a lot of very positive feedback from the community. I hope later they will directly meet you to officially acknowledge these unforgettable stories. Heartfelt thanks to all at EE who participated in this goodwill. You were able to save the lives of thousands who were threatened by starvation. We call this TRUE HUMANITY.'*

### **Ethiopians Pray for Peace**

In this past week, there has been a grave escalation of political differences between the Ethiopian federal government and the state of Tigray. The conflict which has accompanied our work increasingly in the past two-three years, and which reached a climax with the postponed elections in August during the Corona lockdown, has erupted in the past days into armed conflict.

Our plans to return to Ethiopia in the coming week have been cancelled. Ethiopian air space has been closed, and Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has declared a state of emergency in the country. There is currently no way for us to know when we can return. We are grateful that we were able to see and interact live with our community last month, especially as all phone and internet communications have



now been blocked. Ethiopians are reporting that the country is 'at war' but it is impossible for us or journalists to get exact information at this time.

Ethiopia's stability in the last years has played an important role in the Horn of Africa, and destabilization at this time would be a disaster. We hope that the efforts by international bodies to help resolve the differences peacefully will be successful. Rural communities in southern Tigray such as ours have had enough tragedy this year with Covid-19 and plagues of locusts. If Tigray becomes a fully fledged battlefield in the coming weeks, the suffering of the rural Tigray population will be hard to imagine. We are continuing to pack our materials for our next return visit and are hoping that this will nevertheless soon be possible.

Stay well, and many many thanks for your assistance.



Lesley, Caroline, André and Thomas

Lesley Stephenson Baumann



Thomas Baumann



Caroline Barlow



André Cardinaux



**Ethiopian Enterprises**  
**Gartendörfliweg 11, CH-8135 Langnau am Albis**  
**[info@ethiopianenterprises.org](mailto:info@ethiopianenterprises.org)**  
**[www.ethiopianenterprises.org](http://www.ethiopianenterprises.org)**  
**+41 (0) 79 419 27 50**

**Bankverbindungen:**

**Raiffeisenbank Ägerital-Sattel**

Postfach 463, CH-6314 Unterägeri

PCH: 60-7369-0

IBAN: CH17 8145 9000 0080 8702 1

BC-Nr. 81459 / Swift: RAIFCH22

**Paypal**

[info@ethiopianenterprises.org](mailto:info@ethiopianenterprises.org)