



ethiopian enterprises Newsletter March 2021

Dear Friends of Ethiopian Enterprises

After a complete breakdown in communications with our project manager and the team at Lemlem Baro School between November 4th and December 8th, we were delighted to finally receive the news on December 9th that our team members were safe and that the three Woredas of Raya Azebo, Cher Cher and Mehoni Town were more or less OK. A lot has happened since then.

In this Newsletter we want to provide you with a status report of our projects after the most challenging year we have experienced in Ethiopia. Added to the pandemic are the continuation of armed conflict and the administrative chaos in Tigray. We would love to tell you that the civil war is over but it isn't. The massive propaganda machine of the TPLF as well as the TPLF pods of 'guerilla' soldiers around the state of Tigray present a constant threat to the return of stability. While the interim governments set up in all regions are doing their best to cope, lack of information and logistic ability are severe obstacles.

Emergency Aid

Following Ethiopian Christmas on January 5th, we started to secure the large quantities of millet required for our January allocation of emergency aid for Mehoni Town and Cher Cher. In that allocation alone over 1'100 families (5'000 – 7'000 people) received grain, oil and soap in a procedure master-minded by our project manager Melkamu and his helpers. Some of the latter were students from our scholarship program who had proudly organized their own EE-branded T-shirts for the work. We are extremely grateful to the five foundations and over 50 private EE donors who have helped us raise over CHF 130'000 for emergency aid in the past year.

The logistics involved in the allocations are considerable. For the operation in January 1'140 sacks were required. These had to be filled with millet and weighed to ensure that each family received the appropriate amount – 25 kgs or 50 kgs – depending on the number of family members. On the morning of the allocations, the bags had to be placed at strategic, 'socially distanced' intervals in whichever area was being used. In Mehoni Town, the compound of Lemlem Baro School provided a suitable meeting place. Hundreds of recipients or their stronger, younger representatives arrived at the school after being pre-selected by community leaders. Lists had to be checked and only then could the recipient claim their grain. While the process may seem cumbersome, having witnessed it first-hand in Cher Cher last September, we know that it is the only way to ensure that the allocations truly serve the most needy.

In one of the pictures from Lemlem Baro School you can see hundreds of people lining the driveway to the school under the Dredwa trees planted four years ago by EE. What you can't see is the queue OUTSIDE the school gates of people who were desperate for food but whose names were not on the lists we had to follow. We are glad to say that a private donation from EE board members allowed our team to extend the list further and to help many of those who had been waiting

for help outside the gates. This is one of the greatest benefits of a small organization: we can move fast when we need to!

Despite some media reports to the contrary, emergency food aid from large organizations has started to arrive in Tigray. For instance, the rural region of Raya-Azebo which has the largest population in our zone received food from US Aid in the final week of February. However, due to the destruction last October of a large part of the zone's harvest by locusts, there are still thousands of families in our region with virtually no food. In Mehoni Town alone there are several hundred families still at high risk and we are hoping to make a final allocation to these families this month. After that we'll be placing our entire focus and resources on our core mandates and on helping our school and its community rebuild. Many thanks again to those institutions and private donors who have already supported our emergency aid activity so generously. Many thousands of people are alive today due solely to your support.

People lining up for food aid at Lemlem Baro



Physically-distanced food distribution



Status of Education in Tigray

Over the past couple of weeks, the United Nations has published some dramatic statistics on the impact of COVID-19 on education. UNICEF claims that over 168 million students worldwide have missed an entire year of school, 214 million have missed more than three quarters of a school year, and a whopping 888 million continue to face either total or partial disruption to their classes. To make matters worse, these figures do not include data from several African countries like Ethiopia because there is no reliable data available.

Following almost a full school year lost to COVID-19, locust plagues and civil war, the education system in Tigray is in total disarray. Many school leaders who had received their appointments largely through their allegiance to the TPLF – Tigray Peoples Liberation Front – have fled their posts due to fears of reprisals under the new interim governments. The new school leaders who have replaced them are in many cases unfamiliar with their locality, community and school staff. While they may prove better long-term, the current situation is challenging at best.

In the Ethiopian school system there are now two national exams, one at the end of 8th grade (end of primary school) and one at the end of 12th grade (end of preparatory school). The 8th grade exam is the gateway to high school while the 12th grade exam determines who can enter tertiary education and who will not. An exam at the end of 10th grade – the end of high school – to see who could enter the two year preparatory school was abolished a year ago with the explanation that students would move on to preparatory school merely on the basis of recommendations from their teachers. This decision has some merit in that more students would have a chance to stay longer at school and would stay

off the streets or avoid early marriage. However, given the severe overcrowding in Ethiopian schools, the shortage of teachers and classrooms, and the lack of basic teaching materials such as books, we do not see how this will work. In addition, this new system is open to abuse. Class favorites, the children of friends or of other teachers are likely to be 'promoted' ahead of more deserving candidates. For now, however, no one knows how this new system will work out because its pilot was scheduled for the past year, a year which simply didn't take place in the classrooms of Ethiopian schools.

Scholarship students with manager Melkamu allocating emergency aid



EE Scholarship Program

In September last year, schools were told that they should open their gates to 8th and 12th grade students so that they could prepare for their national exams in early November. At Lemlem Baro School, 8th grade restarted at the beginning of October for just a month. Then, on the evening of November 3rd, the well planned attack on Ethiopian National Defence Force soldiers by TPLF soldiers in three military camps in northern Tigray lit the fuse for the outbreak of civil war. Schools were shut once more and exams were postponed yet again.

During this entire period, Ethiopian Enterprises maintained its scholarship program. Our students in Mehoni, Cher Cher, Raya Azebo and Kukufto received their scholarship allowances through 2020 and into 2021 without a break, whether their schools were open or not. This was essential for them as many of these young people are orphans or are the bread winners for elderly parents or relatives. With little casual work available, their monthly scholarship allowance was in some cases their only income. When schools slowly opened at the end of September /early October, we arranged for them to use the well-stocked library at Lemlem Baro School to help them with their final exam preparation. As reported in our November Newsletter, Lesley saw all the scholarship students at the end of September in Mehoni.

Since then, the program has been increased by 28 students. 20 are the sponsees of the organization Mankind is My Business, and a further 8 have joined our regular program in the past weeks.

While Lesley was back in Tigray last month, new dates for the postponed 12th grade exams were announced for the week of March 8th. At the same time she learned that TPLF supporters were using the exams to further destabilize the new

administrations wherever possible. We are sharing this information from her report for our board below:

‘While in Mekelle I met with some students we have known for many years who were facing their repeatedly postponed 12th grade exams. I asked the group if they were excited to be sitting for their finals at long last. There was total silence. Then, reluctantly, some of them told me that they would not be attending their exams. When I asked why not, they told me that they and other students had received warning messages through their mobile phones that they should not attend their exams which would be held on university campuses. TPLF supporters who had organized the message campaign claimed that ENDF soldiers planned to kill the students while they were together for their exams so that there would be a brain-drain in Tigray.’

12th grade students all over Tigray had received this warning, and we acted on this information immediately. We discussed the situation with the education authorities in our region and with Melkamu’s help we organized for 12th grade students from the preparatory schools in our region to be accompanied to their exams in Maychew University by their school principals. Maychew is a 40-minute drive from Mehoni. We took this warning very seriously even though we considered it highly likely that this was a destabilization manoeuvre on the part of the TPLF. Of course it was left to the students to decide whether to attend the exams or not, and they all faced a very tough decision. A decision to stay away from the exams would mean that their chances of tertiary education were over. It is not possible to repeat 12th grade in Ethiopia unless the student does so in a private college. Few students would be able to afford this option.

Scholarship students with their clothing items



On Sunday March 7th project manager Melkamu travelled to Maychew where many of the students had arrived the night before. He found a group of total 82 students from Mehoni town. And his arrival was timely. Except for our kids who received their monthly scholarship allowances last week, virtually none of the students had any money with them at all. They had been told that they would have accommodation and food in the university, but the food was due to start only the following day. In addition, they needed pencils and erasers, pencil sharpeners (exams have to be filled in with pencil), and photos to attach to special examination ID cards. Most of the students didn’t have these things, but there was a photo shop working overtime to take and develop these photos. Through

Melkamu, EE was able to finance the photos and writing materials for all these students as well as food. Again, this is the advantage of a lean organization.

Unfortunately one of our earliest students from our pilot program did not get to his exams. Two days before the group went to Maychew, he came down with what appeared to be a kidney infection. We transferred him to a hospital in Mekelle where he underwent extensive testing. He is now safely back in Mehoni but has to stay on medication for some time. We are surprised that not more of the students are sick given their high stress levels over the past year.

Lesley took school materials and clothes for our scholarship students to Ethiopia last month, and nutritious food snacks. These were then given to the students the following week. All the students received the food items and school materials. In the picture above you can see one group of scholarship students after receiving the clothing items in the lottery procedure we always use to ensure fairness. These students are amongst the cleverest from our region. We will continue to do all we can to avoid them dropping out of school too early or entering the illegal migration process which is particularly threatening at this time. We want to avoid that they become part of Ethiopia's lost school generation.

Lemlem Baro School

In the midst of all the trouble our region has seen in the past year there are also some positive stories. After the first round of armed conflict in Mehoni in November, and before the new administration teams were installed, a group of older and respected business people from Mehoni took it upon themselves to prevent looting in the town. It is partly thanks to their efforts and those of Melkamu that Lemlem Baro School and the town's other schools have come through the war with minimal looting. We have been told that this extra support by these townspeople was partly inspired by the emergency aid we had given our region during COVID-19 and the war. We were very proud to hear this. In other regions, schools were totally ransacked and every piece of moveable furniture was removed. A commission from the Mekelle Bureau of Education which visited Mehoni last week deemed our school to be in a condition for an immediate return to teaching.

Public schools in Ethiopia are financed from different sources. Salaries for teachers are paid by the national government, and the schools receive a lump sum for school materials. In addition, when students are registered at the beginning of each new school year, they or their relatives have to pay a registration fee which builds the budget for school expenses such as the payment for school guards, additional school materials, etc. Since we began in Raya, that fee has been ETB 50 per student, around USD 2 per school year.

With 1'500 students, this registration income builds an important cushion for Lemlem Baro School. However, right now the school (and likely all public schools in Tigray) is facing a crisis. First of all, many students have not returned to the school at all during the past year, even when its gates were open. They were not registered last September and October. Secondly, many families simply don't have ETB 50 to pay. They don't have the money to buy exercise books and pens. Those who are farmers in many cases had no harvest last autumn, they had no work or income during the closure of markets, and have in many cases relied on food aid for months. This tangle of interrelated factors is toxic for the schools and poses a dilemma which they cannot yet solve. It is also a dilemma for us. If we help our school with this issue at this time of crisis we would need to help the other schools as well. With 7 schools in Mehoni town alone, and another 7 in Cher Cher and Kukufto, we would face total registration costs of roughly USD 30'000 in order to help them restock. This is yet another issue which concerns our teams both here and on site.

We are particularly proud of Melkamu, who has done so much for the region over the past year. He has faced an extraordinarily difficult time during the war as a half Tigrayan/half Amharan. Under threat early in the war as were all Amharans living in the TPLF stronghold of Mekelle, he narrowly escaped an attempted assassination attack in Mehoni at the end of January. Two of the men involved are now in jail, and the ringleader will face court proceedings in the near future.

Garden Group

As outlined in our yearly report, we lost a student from Lemlem Baro School garden club in a fatal traffic accident in January 2021. Fanno, who had started high school last year, had helped in the Lemlem Baro School gardens since their creation, along with several other boys. The group had become very close and even those who had moved on to high school had continued to return regularly to Lemlem Baro to see us and to help the gardeners. Fanno's mother is HIV positive and too ill to work; his father died some years ago of AIDS. He was cared for by the owner of a coffee shop in Mehoni who took on the role of his foster mum.

In early January, Fanno went by bike to visit his mother. On the way back he was hit by a Bajaj (known in Asia as 'Tuck-Tuck') and likely hit his head badly when he fell. He was taken to the local hospital in Mehoni where our manager visited him the same evening. At that time he was conscious and arrangements were made to transfer him to a properly equipped hospital in Mekelle the next morning. But in the early hours of morning, he died. EE helped his foster mother to finance the large 'wake' which as usual in Ethiopia lasted for several days.

Garden club boys with photo books



Fanno



We have been greatly saddened by Fanno's death. He was a cheeky, often naughty but good natured boy with a handsome face and a wonderful smile. As we looked at the many photos we had taken of him and his garden club colleagues over the past five years we realized that he had never seen most of the photos of himself. As a result, our board spent many hours in January combing our photo libraries. Board member André made photobooks for Fanno's mother, and then for each of the three other garden boys who have moved on to high school. Two other books for boys still in 8th grade at Lemlem Baro School are currently in production.

Lesley took the books to Mekelle in February and they were delivered to the boys and their families in Mehoni some days later. Fanno's mother and foster mother were overcome to receive the book full of photos of their son as they had no photos of him at all. Students in Ethiopia don't have a yearly school photo; no one has a camera except teachers or administrators with regular salaries who own

mobile phones. What moved us when we were preparing the books was to see the development of these boys from the time we met them 6 years ago to the present. Through both their work and games with us at Lemlem Baro School they have matured into confident young men. You can see some of them with their books in the recent photo above and also a picture of our Fanno taken a year ago.

Early Learning Center at Lemlem Baro Elementary School

We also managed to get more of our teddies down to the school in February. These hand-knitted teddies made by a group of lovely women in Australia are destined for our new kindergarten students when our kindergarten (Early Learning Center) is opened. After the fearful events of the past months, the teddies will truly be 'Trauma Teddies' for our tiny tots.

Unfortunately, work on the ELC has been disrupted by the war. The TPLF-owned cement factories in northern Tigray remain closed, and construction projects everywhere are largely on hold. Flooring materials are currently not available, and visits to five different stores in Mekelle during Lesley's recent visit failed to produce what we needed. However, the furniture for the ELC is close to completion and we were able to check the items in our Mekelle carpenter's workshop. They will be transported to Mehoni ready for final assembly later this month. We are doing all we can to move this project to its completion.

Teddies (handmade in Australia) waiting for the first Kindergarten-children



Mehoni Marsa Elementary School

Construction at our new second school in Mehoni has moved forward step by step. We hope that Lesley will be able to return to Mehoni in the coming month and that, when she does, we will be able to provide a more detailed report.

General comments to the situation in Tigray

For months now we have heard in the press that Ethiopia's Prime Minister did not want to have peace negotiators becoming involved in the feud in Tigray. This is misleading. Already prior to the outbreak of war on the evening of November 3rd, groups of religious leaders and well known functionaries from Addis Abeba had gone to Mekelle to try to help resolve the growing conflict. One of these people

was Yetnebersh Nigussie, the famous blind Ethiopian woman who was a founder of Light for the World. She personally confirmed this visit to Mekelle in a conversation with us. However, the former head of Tigray refused to acknowledge or meet that delegation. Exactly in the week of Lesley's February visit to Mekelle, a new attempt was made by a group of 40 functionaries from Addis Ababa, comprising leaders of both the Muslim and Coptic Christian communities and other well-known functionaries. They were welcomed by the new head of Tigray, and meetings took place. However, again in a telephone message campaign, TPLF supporters did all they could to disrupt the visit, organizing for street blocks and demonstrations to take place in Mekelle and elsewhere.

Similarly, we have heard for months that the national government of Ethiopia was stopping emergency aid from entering Tigray. Both Lesley and our team members and other reliable sources in Mekelle saw plenty of evidence that emergency aid from large NGOs like US Aid, Red Cross, etc. was being brought into Tigray. Between Mekelle city and Mekelle airport alone Lesley sighted dozens of food trucks on her incoming and outgoing journeys, and members of our team in Mehoni had seen hundreds of food trucks in the previous two to three weeks on the road between Mehoni and Mekelle. Hundreds of households throughout Mekelle have received food aid, but the process is slow due to the need to reassess TPLF food aid lists. In any case, by early February in most of the large market in Mekelle there was a return to business as illustrated in Lesley's photos.

Mekelle market largely back to business as usual



As you can see, there is work to do everywhere. With your help, Ethiopian Enterprises has been able to support our region significantly during the past turbulent year and will continue to do so. With our 12th graders having now all safely completed their exams, our primary focus now will be to assist Lemlem Baro School to clean up and reorganize, to complete our two construction projects, and to support the students in our enlarged STIP program of over 70 students. Our emergency aid program should come to an end for now at the end of March.

Stay well, and many many thanks for all your help

Lesley Caroline André Thomas

Lesley, Caroline, André and Thomas

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Melkamu Abate, local project manager



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