

Water and Job

Medihanit Chekol, 22, is making a name for herself in a town. She is rising to fame by doing the kind of work most women might only have less aspiration for at first place. “It is not too difficult for women and not too easy for men,” says Medihanit with electrifying smile all over her face as she strongly rebuffs this notion.

Berihe Tesfaye, 28, is another star in the making. He has amassed an insurmountable respect among his colleagues and the communities. These all are due to the job he once thought, “Not paying off.” However, in an intriguing turns and twists, Berihe mastered the skills most dearly needed to earn the living.

What do these guys have in common?

For these two energetic and enthusiastic youngsters, scraping and excavating the surface of the earth to provide their community with safe water has become a career. They are local artisans – professionals with the skill and knowledge to construct safe water supply schemes and latrines.



Medihanit and her colleagues mixing cement and gravel

Including these pals, there are 253 local artisans in Endamehoni district of Tigray National Regional State, where Medihanit and Berihe reside. They have founded 31 different cooperative enterprises which are specializing in the construction of water supply. “Currently all of them are active and well on the course of meeting the two major targets which are job creation and safe water provision,” says Atakilti Tadele, head of the district’s office for Micro and Small Enterprise (MSE) – a governmental organization responsible for supporting and

accelerating the establishment of business oriented cooperatives, sometimes are also called private limited companies.

The eligibility requirement at the provincial MSE office is clear on who should the cooperatives comprise as members. According to Atakilti, here are the major conditions his office considers in reviewing the applications. First, a certified technical and vocational trainee must produce an evidence that proves the applicant does not own a private property such as land and house. Second, the candidate should be the local resident and unemployed. Willingness and ability to contribute to the starting up capital is the third major standard required of the applicant.

These requirements are for the starters who are only licensed in 11th and 10th grades - the starting point where grade implies the growth levels all the way to the highest level, also known as 1st grade. The initial grades whose mandate falls under the jurisdiction of the district is only

illegible to construct a project whose total construction cost does not exceed 50,000 birr. In essence, such projects are low level technologies that include hand dug wells, spring developments and small rural piped scheme

The COWASH effect

That makes Community-Led Accelerated WASH (COWASH) - a bilateral project between governments of Finland and Ethiopia - is the most attractive to the local artisan cooperatives tremendously. At this moment, COWASH is one of the projects that support the implementation of Community Managed Project (CMP) approach; a rural safe water implementation modality in which communities are the planners, executors and managers of the projects.

Four years on since its introduction into the area, COWASH has made substantial contribution in enabling the enterprises to sustain and grow. In 2012, the project trained artisans who were representatives of new and existing cooperatives on construction of low technology schemes. “It was an icebreaker for me. By then, I just finished the college trainings. Those were theoretical ones. I never had anything as practical as this. I am hugely indebted to COWASH for everything,” says Berihe Tesfaye, the owner of Berihe Tesfaye Water Supply Contraction Share Company. For the following three years in the row, COWASH organized another refreshment trainings for these cooperative enterprises.

The effect of the training has been spiral. The first batch trainees of COWASH offered on-the-job trainings to their colleagues. Berihe Tesfaye stands out as an example in sharing these skills with his colleagues and others. “I did not have any formal training in spring development and hand dug wells. It was Berihe who trained me and my colleagues on constructions of these schemes,” says Gebre Birhanu, one of the founder of Gebre and Nigus Water Supply Construction Share Company.



Meles, Medihanit and Gebru posing for photo

In Endahemoni district, COWASH is widely applauded for another different reason. The project has been an important source of jobs for a number of local artisan cooperatives. Medihanit Chekol, one of the founders of Medihanit and Meles Water Supply Construction Share Company, started her career in safe water provision by constructing a COWASH project in Galosa kebele. “More than the 31,000 Birr profit, we gained very important lessons and

skills,” says Medihanit. “I believe COWASH is supporting us as much as it is assisting the communities. By working with this project, we have gained skills that are essential in our career development. And indeed we also are making money for both the immediate needs and future growth,” says Meles Hagos, Medihanit’s colleague.

Reports from the water office of the district disclose a number of temporary and permanent jobs that the cooperatives have created. On average, during construction of a hand dug well, according to Medihanit, 10 – 15 informal jobs are created. Similarly, Berihe reckons at least 5 professional jobs are created over the construction period of an irrigation canal. Further promising is the skill transfer; because for which some, who have no knowhow at all before this intervention, are now active in the business of safe water provision. “Significant number of unemployed high school graduate youths from the target communities have got job opportunities due to these artisan enterprises. And interestingly, some of them have now started their own businesses,” says Tilahun Gizahu, Endamehoni district CMP supervisor.

Commendable work discipline is another crucial lessons these artisans learn from the project according to Atakilti Tadese, the head of Micro and Small Enterprise. As communities are the owners, COWASH projects are under the heavy surveillance of the communities. “The communities are at the site day in and day out supporting and supervising the construction process. They want do the job as soon as possible. Artisans have no leisure time. They need to be efficient in quality and time,” says Atakilti. The intensive supervision of the water experts from the district water office is another completing reason to prompt the efficacy of artisan. The pressure to deliver the project in a timely fashion accelerates good work ethics that will remain important in the artisans’ future endeavors.

The gear behind the desire

Of course that is another blessing. Berihe who has been very much involved in the construction of a number of community managed projects has earned community’s love and respect for his quality and timely work. “It gives me extra impulse to work more when I see my community drinks safe water. What a privilege to be someone who helps create that,” says Berihe who was one of the six founders of Berihe and Hiluf Water Supply Construction Share Company (2011-2013).

For the startup capital of this cooperative, every one of the six members contributed the ‘hard-earned’ 100 Birr. After two years in the business, when they decided to spilt up and chart their own way, each of the founders went home with 16,000 Birr. With the total of 20,000 Birr Capital, Berihe who has already fall in love with safe water provision, re-entered the business in December 2013. This time round not only with a bigger grade, 9th grade license, but also with a bigger ambition to make its footprint in the sector.

Another passionate and ambitious person is Medihanit Chekol. Medihanit, who is the living example of what lack of access to safe water does to girls, has become resolute in the urgency of construction of water supply schemes. “I have seen firsthand the challenges of walking hours to collect water. I know what that means to the girls. I still remember those days I had to return home because I was not able to make to school in time. Now I am happy that I am

one of the fixers of this problem,” Medihanit recollects her childhood memories about the impact of lack of access to safe water.

Unlike some, who she likes to call ‘the uncommitted’, Medihanit is adamant to pursue the dream to provide the community with access to safe water. “It is a call that I should answer. This is the duty that I should attended to. I decided to continue in the construction of water supply,” says Medihanit who is very sympathetic to the communities with unsafe water. She doesn’t get it why some would pull out so quickly and completely. Artisans have a lot of work to do with pretty good reward in return. “I believe it is possible to prosper while supporting the community in safe water provision,” she reaffirms her underpinning logic to continue in this business.



Medihanit smiles for the successes she has achieved

It is less ambiguous to understand why Medihanit insists on sticking to this business. As a lady whose school performance was impacted by lack of access to safe water, she wants to see high performing school girls whose lives are not marred with that same problem. Another reason is purely an economic purpose in nature. Medihanit who once upon a time barely made the ends meet is

surging so nicely. With the

profit from last year’s work, after paying all the bills, she started a petty trade, an additional business, from which she is making some good savings also. “Although my priority is the construction business, the two businesses are going fine along each other. I sale eggs and hens when our enterprise is not active in construction,” she states.

In Maichew town, seat of the district and where she currently lives, Medihanit is rightly making headlines for a different reason. She wholeheartedly embraced the artisan job most women would be less likely to consider. Medihanit who never doubted her career choice, has successfully dispelled the notion that artisan is men’s job only. She says, “I started this business not only because of I was unemployed person but also out of interest to contribute. I encourage other women to join me.” Medihanit believes women can make the best artisans for they understand what it means to have access to safe water in a village to mother and girls whose experience they share in practice not in words like some of these men artisans.

The stumbling blocks

In this job, Medihanit admits there are challenges. But that is not less of a problem to men also. Every artisan, regardless of sex, once in a while face a bit of hiccup regarding where to stay the nights during the constructions of water supply in remote rural areas.

Others are common challenges. Most of the project sites are inaccessible. Due to its remoteness and uneven landscape, some of the target areas are difficult to access. This makes transportation of construction materials problematic. Land ownership disagreement between the original owner and the community over the water supply scheme site is another challenge. The effect is a potential setback that undermines the efficiency of artisans. This is exactly the problem Medihanit and Meles Water Supply Construction Share Company encountered this year in Wihudet and Simiret kebeles. Unfortunately, these are COWASH projects. "When we started the construction, the original land owner forbade us. We stopped it. Now the district has intervened to settle the case amicably. Hopefully we will get back to work very soon," says Medihanit who implores the stakeholders to always address this challenge beforehand.

Some community members' inclination to demand payment for their labor contribution during the construction of the project is an awful practice that artisans mention as a concern. It became a hot issue as the challenge reached the peak last year when Medihanit's enterprise had to pay a community member for the skill contribution. "That payment was unbudgeted and unaccounted. We had to pay from our pocket," says Medihanit. In instances when cooperatives hire unemployed skillful people from the community, which would otherwise be an excellent means of job creation, some members who, due to obvious reasons, missed out on the opportunity ferment discouraging behaviors. Berihe view this as cases that put job creation and skill transfer attempts at a greater risk. It is alarming as most of this challenges are related to community managed project. Supporting community understand the very concept of community managed project approach can do far better in correcting the wrongs.

The takeaways

Apart from these easily remediable restraints, Medihanit emits hope. A hope to help bring safe water to the community who still suffers from the lack of it. A hope to improve the life of not only herself and those akin to her but also of others through job creation. "I don't know anything other than this that would satisfy me completely," says Medihanit whose cooperative enterprise hires dozens of unprofessional daily workers during the construction period. She is also in this to portray the fallibility of the mythical narrative that belittles women's role in this sector. Her astounding courage is the real testimony that she is in the water supply construction business for a longer haul.

Another strong character, Berihe, married and a father of a 2 years son, considers his current role as a mission. As the only child of 9 - number of children born to his parents - to escape the wearisome rural life, where access to safe water is a far cry, he wants to help create a bright future for this generation. To attend to this aspiration, he believes provision of access to safe water is the cornerstone. "I feel proud to be in this. I am encouraged to play my part in increasing the safe water coverage while growing my company," says Berihe.

This is the story of the two dream chasers. An account of a lady who accidentally run into the job she now takes to heart as a calling. It is a recollection of a gentleman who was ironically running away from the job he now cherishes most. Above all this is also a story of the local artisan cooperatives who are enabling access to safe water in the rural areas of Endamehoni district of Tigray region in Ethiopia.