

## “ALL MY STORIES START SMALL’-Because ‘BIG-Starts Here’ ”

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**Introduction:** I am one of the founding members of the humanitarian organization Love in Action Ethiopia (LIAE), which began its intervention at low scale.

In 2000 one of the me and other founders of LIAE were surprised to hear that a great number of children attending a school under a tree canopy, which was run by volunteers from adjacent faith-based organizations. Following extensive discussion and advertising, some of the founding members including myself contributed industrial materials (nails), and the community built a low-quality, open-walled, dusty floor, and dry grass-roofed 7m by 8m classroom and transferred the students to this new house. This action led to motivation, then Love In Action Ethiopia, which was eventually registered as a national organization in August 2001.

LIAE, the small organization, has now reached over 497 districts across ten regional states in Ethiopia; and accomplished over 48 major projects that would benefit 1.7 million people in the country's most remote, neglected, and vulnerable communities. LIAE has also been leading seven



different grant clusters as a prime organization. As I entitled above, my belief is that all stories begin small, which is a significant start, as do big dreams and movements. The other crucial lesson I took away from the **COADY Leadership Courses on Partnership in Multi-Stakeholder Environment (PMSE)** is

that tackling complicated and multifaceted problems requires not just sound ideas and proposals but also the collective efforts of several partners. On the basis of these two insights, out of all the projects that I have developed for LIAE, I would like to share with you one story about how the simple concept of youth economic empowerment has transformed the lives of numerous young people and their families. The major steps of the change were:

**The Triggers:** I encountered young people who had graduated from different universities sitting on village corner-stones when I went to my room after visiting one of the project sites in Central Ethiopia Regional State. One of the young graduates knew that I was working in humanitarian organization and kindly gestured for me to stop my car and speak with him as I was passing his village. He gradually started telling me about his frustrations and difficulties in life after I pulled

over. It was a small discussion with a young man but challenging issues. His friends joined the conversation in the middle of the process, and the agenda was broadened. After more few minutes of conversation, I exited my car and sit on the stone with them to discuss. Then I also had the same repetitive and progressive conversation on other days. By the time, hearing about their struggles and the consequences of living without a job made me feel sad and depressed.

By then, I had counseled them to dream of the future rather than dwelling on their current issues. I also promised them to put in a lot of effort to find solutions. Since then, I had trouble sleeping and dreamed that their lives must have changed somewhat. Therefore, in COADY's courses I learned the values of partnership to solve complex issues; as a result I initiated collaboration activities with partners including the youth groups themselves, to collectively recognize the problems and dialogue on the solutions, rather than becoming overwhelmed by the scope of the unemployment problems.

**Love and Compassion:** We rely on projects funding for our growth, sustainability and community concerns and government needs. However, the aim of assisting these young people sitting in the street was not about to raise funds for projects and how much money I received for the initiative, but about how much love I shared with the unemployed youth, and passion that drove me to raise the challenges. As a result of this, I began communicate effectively this 'love' and 'passion' regularly with friends, existing donor partners, government offices, community leaders, the like.

**Internal Communication and Prospecting:** After that, I discussed with LIAE board, staffs and management about the problems facing young people in order to show empathy for the youth challenges and looked for job through their networks. Alongside this, I also tried to give a small amount of personal financial support to a few recent graduates, while making a concerted effort to connect with possible donors and supporters both domestically and overseas.

**Bridging Thought:** At times, when I was prospecting for internal and external supports from different actors and individuals at various places, one of the board members came up with an inspiring idea during discussions in board meeting sessions about the job problems facing young people. This idea was the most effective and promising way to begin addressing the problems facing the unemployed youth in general. He put us in touch with a powerful individual (who headed one of

the largest donor organizations) to start discussion of our idea on ‘Whatsapp’. This helped me to expand optimism on success of my ideas.

**The Small Thought Grown:** This small hole as the eye-glass which was promised by the donor-person could make us saw better and bigger about not only the small number of youth we already targeted but also large mass of unemployed youth in Hadiya and Silte Zones of the Central Regional State of the country. Originally it was intended to support no more than 20 young people, the idea evolved into a trend with a wider reach and bigger scope as a result of these new involvements. Our small plan to account for various perspectives and inspirations was illuminated by this connection. It also gave us direction and insight to transit from small, simple and less-organized to large complex project. These donor organizations were known as BMZ and KKS, promised assistance.

**Formal Partnership Invitation:** Through KKS: Karl Kübel Stiftung, and the BMZ: Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development of Germany had extended an invitation to support our new big idea or concept in 2021. During difficult times, these organizations—which we believed to be flying angels—helped us identify solutions to problems facing young people without jobs on a large scale. I will always remember the thrill I experienced when I received green lights to funding from these donor groups, even though the majority of the other funding requests we made excuses about the income difficulties faced by young people. In February 2021, we held sessions to share detailed profiles of LIAE and get to know our new donor partners. Similarly, we designed this partnership in accordance with other **multi-stakeholders**, which included the active participation and collaboration of local actors including 5 government offices, 20 advisory teams, 10 community organizations, 4 universities, 20 marketing and credit insinuations, and others.

**Sharpening the Axe:** As previously said, the PMSE among local actors, donors, and the young themselves provided us with a number of opportunities. However, I thought that my dedication for the unemployed youth wouldn't be fruitful and forward-thinking unless the issues and challenges facing youth as a whole could be resolved scientifically based on real evidences. According to an Ethiopian proverb, I will sharpen my axe for half a day if it takes me a day to cut a large tree. In the same way, we put a lot of effort and diligence into developing scientific data, information, or proof of the difficulties faced by unemployed youth in the two largest zones (Hadiya and Silte Zones) of

the Central Regional State. As a team, we decided that the process of generating evidence and identifying problems (summarized below) helped to pinpoint the root cause of youth unemployment and clearly demonstrated the extent and depth of its impact on young people.

**Summary of the Problem Analysis:** as part of sharpening our axes, we analyzed secondary data on unemployment. Generally, Youth unemployment of urban 25%: male about 20% and Female 30% (critical). 200,000 graduates every year nationally but only 58% were employed, with 70% are being engineers and ICT.



**Summary of Secondary Data in the Target Regions:** The project operation areas of this project are Hadiya and Silte Zones of Central Ethiopia Region of total population 4 million.

*Figure 1: The Target: Central Ethiopia Regional State*

### **The major challenges identified were:**

**Political:** The two zones lacked a mechanism to raise the social and economic standing of the target societies and have significant gaps between policies and their implementation.

**Social:** There are disparities in health and education services in both zones, and problems of equity and access, including the distribution of infrastructure and the removal of social barriers.

**Economic:** In Hadiya and Siltie zone more than 75% of the youth are living in rural areas but the average land holding falls less than ½ hectares per household (very low) that also constituted 67 % of the total unemployment. The economic dependency ratio for Silte and Hadiya Zone is 103 and 130, respectively. The total unemployed-registered youth in Hadiya and Silte Zones were estimated to be 60313 and 15398, respectively.

Rural-to-urban migration, high international migration rate, poor quality of education/skills, absence of job opportunities in urban areas, child employment, harmful traditional practices/HTP-like rape and early marriage, lack of infrastructure, lack of work connectivity and networking, lack of access to financing, slow job creation capacity, lengthy bureaucratic procedures, lack of entrepreneurship education, skill mismatch, and other associated problems were the main challenges of unemployed youth in the target areas.

## **Project Concept Development:**

For me, this concept was more than just an idea. Addressing young unemployment issues by assisting them in developing strong attitudes and minimizing their loneliness and dissatisfaction, among other activities, were my enjoyable ways to feel accomplished in life. Likewise, this initiative provided an opportunity for me to successfully assist youth in their personal and professional development by enhancing their self-confidence and employ-ability. On the basis of this idea, I created a concept that aided in the implementation of concept to minimize young unemployment in two zones of Central Ethiopia. The main steps of the concept development were:

- a. Scope Determination:** In the two zones, my team and I decided to focus on 12634 unemployed youth and other intermediaries, specifically university graduates, young women without jobs, low- and no-income families, marginalized groups, and youth vulnerable groups. To determine the possible involvement of community, youth, government, CSO, and private level players and stakeholders, structured and deliberative methods of PMSE were employed.
- b. Design Theory of Change (TOC):** Since a lack of entrepreneurial mindset in terms of skills, ethics, and attitudes was one of the problems facing young people without jobs, LIAE developed a Pull system (a peer learning system) where 10,000 young people signed up to learn the essential business knowledge and skills using Capacity Building Action Kits (CB-AK). A new business development model with EIGHT steps was then presented to a few chosen members in groups. Additionally, the TOC created a PMSE system for financial, technical, partnership, and credit supports.
- c. Designing Intervention Model:** The EIGHT-STEP progressive growth models, which I created for the purpose of strengthening and maturing Small Business Groups (SBGs) (from Per-Organization to Sustainability stages), served as the general basis for the Key Strategic Business Development Methodology. The government's small business development programs were completely in line with this model.
- d. Develop Impact Matrix (IM):** At this stage, KKS/BMZ was typically advised to provide a brief summary of my concept on their impact matrix, which included important goals, significant tasks, and outputs. We were all thrilled when the IM was unexpectedly approved because it was the first donor-side approval for our efforts to address the youth unemployment mentioned earlier.

- e. **Develop Concept Note:** In April 2021, KKS/BMZ requested to expand the impact matrix to a concept note which was entitled "Combating youth unemployment and promoting business start-ups for unemployment youth in Hadiya and Silte Zones, Ethiopia". According to the email sent in October 2021 with the subject line, "Dear Aklilu, KKS finally received a feedback from BMZ on LIAE concept note and its result is an A-rating," one of the biggest donors in the world approved the concept note. When I heard this, I became overly excited.
- f. **Conduct Feasibility Study:** Following acceptance of our concept note, I worked with federal level universities to undertake a feasibility study by considering samples of 271 female (51%) and 260 male (49%) respondents and other qualitative approaches.
- g. **Conduct Baseline Study:** After we recapitulated secondary and feasibility study data, as primary sources of data we conducted baseline study among the target jobless youth of the two zones using analysis of structured primary data collection and FGDs.
- h. **Design Full-Fledged Project Proposal:**

I created the Economic Empowerment Department (EED) for my organization, which is dedicated to improving livelihoods, creating jobs for youth, and advocating for macroeconomic policies. Thus, this particular project was a part of LIAE's established EED, which used eight step-models to improve the livelihoods of 10,000 youth without jobs. It also contributed to the government's plan to close the 20 million job gap by 2030. We connected High Yield Business Sectors (HYBSs) with Small Business Groups (SBGs) and empowered them as part of this project's methodology. At least 70% of the SBGs are expected to transfer to Investment Business Groups (IBGs) in five years.

Initially, the project educated young people the basics of business. Then in the first phase, qualified and successful Start-up Business Groups (SBG) were formed from the 10000 unemployed youth registered. Per our baseline study report: 52% of the youths are graduates, 35% are members of vulnerable groups, like girls, and 70% reside in urban areas with high unemployment-related problem rates. This pilot project had a total budget of 730,000 euros, which will be phased out in 2027.

**Project Results:** This is not the result of the project, but also the products of the idea started very small at first and the key part of this story.

The major project achievements were:

**Development of Mindset:** One of the identified issues facing young people was a poor work culture that lacked motivation, adaptability, and resilience. As a result, this project created the Capacity Building Action Kit (CB-AK) to teach young people in peer education groups on the fundamentals of business. The CB-AK was organized in collaboration with community and governmental stakeholders in 20 districts/Kebeles, and qualified instructors and club leaders. Additionally, we can use this pool, as a source and a connection point to SBG programs. As a result, these curriculum-based sessions were very successful, as 10,236 youth finished the entire peer learning cycle, which included eight different courses.

**Job Creation:** Five hundred youth in the two zones were employed by the fifty viable Start-up Business Groups (SBGs) that were selected from the pool, mentioned above. In front of the media, government officials, experts, universities, credit associations, bank representatives, etc., two-step screening procedures were employed for selection. To date, every group has gone through five of the project's eight business development stages, including the pre-organization, organization, and strengthening, activation, and integration phases. The SBGs have benefited from a variety of serious mentoring services, training, technological assistance, financial assistance and awards, access to credits, and marketing supports. As of right now, 30%, 22%, and 48% of all young people have entered and established businesses in the agricultural, industry/manufacturing, and service sectors, respectively. 75%, 23%, and 2% of all SBGs have high, medium, and low performance respectively in terms of their capacity to turn a profit and their established business structures.

**Partnerships in Multi-Stakeholder Environments (PMSEs):** Local government and communities supported project interventions. Project Mainstreaming Committees (PMC) were created to coordinate youth empowerment initiatives, including: recruiting jobless youth; developing skill sets and mindsets of youth; facilitating relationships; reducing bureaucratic barriers; monitoring peer learning sessions; ensuring business idea competition at the local level; facilitating supportive supervision sessions, and others.

Along with working with more than fifty different level government institutions, LIAE also signed a project agreement with four government offices to directly handle a number of activities, including handling monthly follow-up, program re-alignments, target selection, small business competitions, regular review meetings, SBG mentoring, warehouse and work station provision, credit facilitation, financial accountability, and more. In a similar vein, the project involved roughly 21 organizations

with ties to the financial and market sectors, including local lenders, credit associations, and national banks. These financial institutions played a key role in helping SBGs access the services and guidance they required, including business credits, interest-free loans, and a reduction in the requirement for collateral—a critical component of loan applications.

**Transfer from SBGs to Innovative Business Groups (IBG):** By the project's fifth year, this program seeks to promote 30 promising SBGs (70% of the SBGs) to the status of Investment Business Groups (IBGs). Our evaluations show that some SBGs are nearly identical to IBGs or potential investors who may register and participate in the Private Limited Company (PLC) capacity. This is a component of the final three stages of the model, which will require additional time to complete for 70% of the SBGs.

**LIAE's Implementation Capacity Strengthened:** The project has recruited so many staffs and given them both short-term and long-term training opportunities for economic development inside the country and Europe. Similarly, the initiative helped LIAE to improve its administrative recording, research, material, IT, and M and E systems.

### **Personal Learning:**

Some of the understandings I myself identify as important to my own and others learning are:

Partnerships in multi-stakeholder environments are crucial for setting shared goals and fostering change. They involve the active participation of diverse stakeholders, including government, communities, youth groups, financial institutions, businesses, and universities. These partnerships engage stakeholders in planning, resource allocation, and decision-making processes, leading to meaningful outcomes and transformation.

Furthermore, I learned that these partnership and collaborations efforts are crucial for addressing youth challenges, connecting diverse expertise, and overcoming obstacles. It also provides support and resources, even in difficult times.

I also learned that models or tailored solutions and inclusivity are essential for project success, and inspiring youth and promoting their involvement throughout the process.

## **SAMPLE PICTURES**

Consultation with Stakeholders



SBG Sample Business Activities:



Business Plan/Idea Competitions and SBG Trainings

