

# 4

## Bridging Gaps and Building Opportunities: Reflections on My Experience of Engaging in Community Development in Azena

*Getnet Tadele*

*The bridge has brought a sigh of relief to the women and men in this community. Many of our sisters and daughters used to dread the day they will give birth. With no bridge over the river, there was no easy way of getting a woman in labor to the clinic. We were separated from our families and relatives, we couldn't even go to market to sell our produce and buy things we needed. Every journey across the river was perilous. But the bridge has put an end to all of that and today we are able to come and go as we please. (A woman from Azena area)*

*The high school and preparatory schools have brought a lot of joy to our lives. First, these schools are fully equipped, fully staffed and modern so our children are getting the best education they can. That is cause enough for happiness by itself. But what makes us even happier is that they are getting such an education right here while they are with us. In the past, our children had to go far away to attend high school and preparatory school. They had to live apart from us and that meant a lot of costs. From food to housing, everything required money, and there weren't many who had it. Even if they could afford the costs, there was the separation from family, which made things hard for both children and parents. Children missed their families and parents missed their children. So all of that made education a lot harder than it ought to be and it was painful. It was especially hard for our girls; they*

*risked a lot by going somewhere and living amongst people they did not know. They could be robbed, they could be raped, and they did not have anyone they could call upon for help. But not anymore. Today our girls and boys can pursue a good education right here amongst us without having to go through all that trouble, and this has brought so much joy to all of us.* (A female resident of Azena in November 2015).

## **Introduction**

I grew up in the rural village of Dogen near Azena Town in the Anekesha Gugsu *Woreda*, Agew Awi Zone of the Amhara Regional State. During my childhood I became aware of two major problems the people of my village and surrounding communities faced, namely the threat of drowning when crossing the local Ayo River and the lack of access to elementary and secondary schools within a reasonable distance. After moving to Addis Ababa, where I obtained my university education, I decided to help the Azena community to safely cross the Ayo River and obtain better access to education. Since 2006, I have been working with NGOs and the community of Azena, in which I attended elementary school, to design and implement the construction of a bridge over the Ayo River, upgrade the Azena elementary school to include a high school by building additional classroom blocks and a library and laboratory facilities, renovate the elementary school, and build a senior secondary (preparatory) school. This chapter describes the implementation process, impacts, challenges, and lessons learned from these infrastructure projects.

The initial impetus for undertaking community development projects in Azena was the annual loss of lives to the Ayo River during the main rainy season. This seasonally swollen river used to claim about 20-30 lives during every rainy season, and it was heartbreaking to witness babies taken by the river from the backs of their mothers. It was traumatizing for families and relatives to find the bodies of the drowning victims, which sometimes took days or weeks. The river also

swept away property and goods. I grew up with such sad memories and in 2005, when I returned from my PhD studies in the Netherlands, I decided to do something to help.

Together with Getnet Mossie from Azena I developed a proposal in English and Amharic and e-mailed it to around 250 charities operating in Ethiopia, asking them to partner with the Azena community in constructing a bridge over the Ayo River. In spite of the lack of positive responses from these charities, I pressed on with my requests for support. In 2008, while browsing the internet, I came across the Partners in the Horn of Africa's (PiHA) website and contacted the country office. PiHA found out that Azena community is very poor and remote and yet there was no NGO operating in the area. The onsite needs assessment carried out by PiHA revealed that the need for a safe river crossing was great and long overdue, prompting the organization to support this project.

I played a key role in mobilizing the community, serving as a liaison between the community and PiHA and facilitating the smooth implementation of the project. Motivated by the success of the bridge project, I continued to play a pivotal role in addressing the other equally important need of the community, which is dear to my heart: enabling children to access elementary and high school education within a reasonable distance from home

### ***The project area***

Agew Awi is one of ten zonal administrations of the Amhara Regional state of Ethiopia. Agew Awi is named for the Awi sub-group of the Agaw people, some of whom live in this zone. Agaw Awi is characterized by a flat to undulating topography, fertile soil, and adequate rainfall, making it food sufficient in most years. Elevations range from 1,800 to 3,100 m, with an average altitude of about 2,300 m. The economy is based on mixed agriculture of the subsistence type, including livestock husbandry and the cultivation of the staples *teff*, wheat, maize, and pulses.

In the 2007 census, Agew Awi Zone had a total population of 982,942, an increase of 37.1% since the 1994 census. Of this population, 12.5% lived in towns. With an area of 9,148.43 square km, Agew Awi had a population density of 107.4 persons per square km and the average household size was 4.6 persons (PDRE 2008).

Aneksha Guga *Woreda* is one of the seven predominantly rural *woredas* of Agew Awi Zone, with a population of 226,004 in the 2007 census, 94.5% of who lived in rural areas (CSA 2007). Administratively, the *woreda* is divided into 3 urban and 29 rural *kebeles* and the two towns of Azena and Gimjabet. The population density of the *woreda* was 283 per square kilometer in 2007 and average land holdings were less than 1 hectare.

Azena is a sub district of Aneksha Guga *Woreda*, in which Azena Town is located.<sup>1</sup> The economic base of the sub district is predominantly mixed farming involving animal husbandry and the cultivation of the staples *teff* and maize. The average farm size is less than two acres, precluding further division of most farms among children and making education important to future livelihoods.

My familiarity with the Azena community and the consequent fruitful collaboration with local authorities and international NGOs were crucial in developing the four projects I helped implement, as described below.

### **Ayo River Bridge Project**

Cognizant of the devastation the Ayo River during the rainy season and the importance of road transport and local infrastructure in local economic development, this project intended to solve one of the basic problems that strongly hampered community development in the Azena area (Figures 4.1 and 4.2).



Figure 4.1. Ayo River during the rainy season in July 2008.



Figure 4.2. Ayo River during the dry season in April 2008.

The bridge project was beyond the financial and technical capacity of the Aneksha Gugsa *Woreda* and Azena community. When I learned that PiHA constructs bridges, I contacted the then-country representative (CR) of the charity. Subsequent discussions between the CR and PiHA's executive director, who at the time was visiting Ethiopia, resulted in an exploratory visit to the river by the CR, who interviewed some villagers crossing the river in April 2008. In the report developed by the representative, the following facts emerged:

- An estimated 60,000 villagers on both sides of the river cross the river in the main rainy, or *kiremt*, season. An estimated 11,000 people crossed the river every Saturday to go to the market in Azena Town, the only market in the area.
- As many as 600 children had to cross the river to attend the only secondary school (grades 9 and 10) in the area in Azena Town. Many students missed exams and repeated grades when the river was high and a considerable number of students drowned.
- Pregnant women in labor and people with serious illnesses could not access medical services that are found in towns on the other side of the river.
- Attending burial ceremonies and important church services, visiting family members and friends, or accessing government services such as courts and police stations were often impossible during the rainy season.
- Between 20 and 30 people drowned each year trying to cross the Ayo River and many more lives were lost due to the barrier this river posed to transporting patients to medical care.

During the site visit, the CR interviewed a farmer who was standing at the river in a depressive mood and gave the following account of a personal tragedy:

*I asked him if he knew any one from his village who had died while trying to cross the river and he told me that he lost his wife, the mother of their eight children, last August. He and his wife had gone to the Azena market to sell grain and buy, among other items, new clothes for the children for the Ethiopian New Year. Having accomplished their mission, they hastened back home to show the new clothes to the kids and make them happy. However, he was the only one who was lucky enough to cross while his wife and the clothes and other items they had bought were swept away. It took him, his neighbors, and relatives four days to retrieve his wife's body. After surviving the ordeal and when he realized that his wife is no longer with him, he contemplated drowning himself (suicide) but thought of his children, who would be orphaned, and changed his mind. I asked this devastated farmer how much he could contribute if this bridge was to be built. He replied, "I have one sheep and I will give that."*

Convinced there was a dire need for a bridge, I facilitated extensive discussions between PiHA and the community representatives and local government officials on issues such as bridge design, cost sharing, and the most suitable time for construction (when farmers are free to provide labor and materials and the water is low). Thus with financial support from PiHA and local engineering support, a 48 meter span steel bridge was built and inaugurated in May 2009 before the main rainy season (Figure 4.3).

I was instrumental in mobilizing the community, serving as a mediator between the community and the NGO, and facilitating the smooth implementation of the project. The bridge has been heavily used by people from *kebeles* and communities in the *woreda* for accessing education and healthcare and for social, economic, and political purposes (Figures 4.3 and 4.4). More than 60,000 people living in nine peasant associations on both sides of the Ayo River, as well as health and agricultural extension workers and non-government employees, are now using the bridge. According to local people, since completion of the bridge there has not been a single loss of human life or property due to flooding of the river. I am glad to be part of this precious project and

to have played key roles in getting the right charity involved; liaising between the charity, the community, and government officials; and facilitating the completion of the bridge on time and on budget.



Figure 4.3. The bridge under construction and during the opening ceremony in 2009.



Figure 4.4. Daily traffic on the bridge.



The opening ceremony was proof of how crucial a safe crossing was for every villager and the local government. The attendance included priests dressed in their regalia, regular people on beautifully decorated horses, women and men in the clothes they wear only for special occasions, government officials from different zonal and *woreda* departments, and the chief administrators of the *woreda* and zone. The event was documented by the Amhara TV program. As poor as the community was, its members killed an ox and two sheep and brought local drinks. One of the sheep was killed at the entrance of the bridge, according to local custom, to protect the bridge from evil acts and to express hope for its great longevity. Some people shared their feelings about the bridge at the unforgettable ceremony. One of them expressed his appreciation as follows:

*I have mixed feelings today. I cry for our children, brothers, and sisters who were carried away by the river for lack of a structure like the one we have now. On the other hand, I feel extremely happy that we will never lose any soul any more. We are grateful to PiHA, the only NGO we know of, and Canadians who gave cash to save lives in a remote part of Ethiopia. We still need your support.*

The *woreda* administrator said the following:  
*Had we known the technology and the cost, we could have built a bridge much earlier and saved more lives.*

By facilitating access of mothers and children to health services and schools and by enabling farmers to market their agricultural outputs and inputs and other social and economic necessities, the bridge solved varied and extensive problems of the community and hence helped expedite rural development. I was happy to see my lifelong dream come true with my support and to witness an event that marked the end of the loss of human lives and property. I was even happier that day and continue to be when I think of the contribution the bridge can make to local socio-economic development and, more importantly, by introducing a technology that can be replicated.

After five years of using the bridge, a woman from Azena said: *Our community had several problems. The lack of a safe crossing over the Ayo River during the main rainy season was among the major ones. From June to September, we could not get what we wanted as the farmers could not bring their produce to market. The river used to claim the lives of many humans and pack animals along with hard-earned assets. It was a constant challenge for students to go to school and for villagers to access different services and attend social events. However, since the constriction of the bridge, no life and property have been lost. Such a project could not have been possible if we hadn't had educated people who worked tirelessly to get the crucial support from the Canadian charity and we should invest a lot in educating our children.*

Another man added:

*As you all know, the river has been a constant menace to this community for many, many years. It has stood between brothers and sisters, between parents and their children; it kept each one of us apart from our friends, relatives, and our loved ones. It has also taken the lives of so many in our community. But thanks to a Canadian organization and Dr Getnet, we were able to build a bridge over the river and put an end to all of that. Today, we are able to pay one another a visit, we are able to take our sick ones to the hospital, we are able to go to the market as we please, celebrate our joys together, and bury our dead and mourn for them together because of that bridge. It has brought people of this community together and it has also brought the government closer to the people. I cannot put in words all the joy that this bridge has brought to this community; I can only say thank you to Dr Getnet and the Canadian organization and congratulate the community on this tremendous achievement.*

While most of the cost of constructing this bridge was covered by PiHA, the community participated in different ways over the course of the life of the bridge project. It donated locally available materials (rocks and sand) and unskilled labor (villagers worked for free by turn). Members of surrounding communities participated in site selection and

the Council of the Aneksha Gugsa *Woreda* Administration assigned a focal person to mobilize the community and monitor the progress of the project. The total cash and in-kind contribution from the community was estimated at Birr 85,313 (37.1%); PiHA covered the remaining 62.9% of the total cost of the bridge (Birr 229,257)<sup>3</sup>, and provided a cost-effective design and an experienced construction consultant.

The bridge helped increase school enrollment and improved school attendance and participation but failed to ensure the progression of students to high school and beyond. This situation led me to become involved in the school projects described below.

## School Projects

### *Upgrading Azena Elementary School to a high school*

Dogen Village, where I was born in 1968, is a 30-minute walk from Azena Town across the Ayo River. I attended the old Azena Elementary School between 1975 and 1977 and then the junior high school in Gimjabet (12 km distance) before moving to Dangila Town (65 km from Azena Town) for my high school education. Many students who finished elementary school were unable to attend high school in Gimjabet or Dangila even though most of them (both females and males) had good academic standing. They stopped their education simply because their parents were too poor to pay for meals, transport, and rent for them to live far away from home. I believe that if there had been a high school in Azena, most would have graduated from it and pursued higher education.

Until 2006, Aneksha Gugsa *Woreda* had only one secondary school in its capital, Gimjabet Town. As mentioned above, I had to move to Dangila to attend high school. Lack of a high school in Azena Town meant that students had to go to Gimjabet to attend high school. Transportation and living costs were beyond the economic capacity of many parents and the majority of the students had to drop out and become subsistence farmers; females had to marry early men chosen

for them by their parents and usually much older than they. Because of sustained demand from the residents of the Azena community and through mobilization of resources from the community, the only elementary school in Azena was upgraded to a high school by construction of two buildings with ten classrooms in 2006.

In the face of abject poverty, the people around Azena are well aware of the situation in which they have to educate their daughters and sons. The fact that some of the students resumed their high school education when grade nine was opened in Azena in 2006, after having dropped out for a dozen or more years, demonstrates that education in the area is increasingly perceived as a coping strategy in an environment of abject poverty. Parents seem to understand that educating girls and boys really pays more than the value of the children's immediate labor contribution to subsistence farming in the face of dwindling land plots. By and large, parents appear to understand that the future of their children depends on education, which creates opportunities for a better life. However, in the past, the absence of a high school in the area made it difficult to get access to education.

Although the elementary school was upgraded to a high school through the efforts of the Azena community and grades 9 and 10 were opened, the condition of the school was sub-standard. It lacked essential facilities like a library and science laboratories, a situation which forced the Amhara Regional Education Bureau to issue a warning threatening to shut the school down in September 2009 unless those facilities were made available. I then had to work with the community to ensure that many girls and boys retained access to a quality high school education close to home. Once again, I asked PiHA to join hands with the community to put library and laboratory facilities in place.

In addition to the official requirement and fear of closure, we were motivated by the fact that the library and laboratory facilities were not luxury items but rather fundamental requirements for the functioning of the school and necessary for providing quality education to students.

Because of the absence of a library, there was a serious shortage of text and reference books in the school, precluding the lending of books to students. Moreover, most of the students come from rural areas and walk every day back and forth to school, creating the need for a library in which students can read during the school day. Passing exams and entering preparatory school or college/university is not easy given the increasing number of students and a nation-wide competition for admission to higher education. Therefore, a library with adequate space to accommodate many students is important for high school students to study and pass their exams.

The absence of laboratory facilities in Azena High School was dismaying also because students completed high school without any exposure to chemistry, biology, and physics experiments. Given the current government education policy, which dictates that 70% of students be enrolled in natural science at different levels, including university, the lack of laboratory facilities was not consistent with this policy and was detrimental to students trying to succeed in an increasingly competitive education system.

Against the above backdrop, we developed a project proposal and solicited support from PiHA with the ultimate objective of equipping Azena High School with a library and laboratory facilities so the school could fulfill the government requirements and properly carry out its functions, thereby enabling girls and boys from surrounding areas to pursue secondary education while living with their families.

Thus, with the financial and technical support from PiHA and active participation of the community, the library and two laboratories were built (Figures 4.5 and 4.6), supplied with books and materials, and inaugurated in 2010. Putting library and laboratory facilities in place gave girls and boys from the Azena community and beyond the opportunity to attend high school and eventually improve the livelihoods of their families and the *woreda* population at large. One of the community members (a woman) said the following regarding the importance of this project:

*Access to high school was a privilege to the few whose parents had the economic means and the awareness to send their children to major urban centers where there were high schools. The opening of the high school has created equal opportunities for elementary school graduates to continue their education irrespective of their family background.*



Figure 4.5. Two laboratory buildings constructed in 2010 (photo taken in November 2015).

Building library and laboratory facilities made the secondary school complete and full-fledged, thereby promoting access to and quality of education. If the high school had been closed by the Regional Education Bureau due lack of these facilities, many students would have dropped out of school for their parents could not afford to send them to the high school located 12 km from Azena Town. Access to the library and laboratory facilities encouraged school participation and reduced the dropout rate. Preventing the closure of this school saved parents substantial expenses for transportation, food and house rent for students.



Figure 4.6. The high school library built and furnished in 2010; officials visiting the library (top); the exterior of the library (bottom) (photos taken in November 2015).

Moreover, the new facilities improved the educational performance of students, thereby increasing the number of students who pass the annual grade 10 national examination. Out of the total cost of Birr<sup>3</sup> 970,523, the community contributed 340,497 Birr while the remaining Birr 630,026 Birr were paid by PiHA.

A male resident of Azena said:

*We did not have a high school in this community. Because of that, many children were forced to abandon their education once they completed elementary school. Thanks to Dr Getnet and the development organizations that he has brought here, we were able to build a high school for our children right here. Today, we can boast for having a fully functional, well equipped high school.*

### ***Renovation of the elementary school and building a library and toilet facilities***

Azena High School described above was built on the premises of the former Azena Primary School. In order to vacate some buildings and to cope with the shortage of classrooms, the community raised some funds and built five mud blocks (three each having four classrooms and two each having five classrooms) at another location.

In 2010, when I wrote the project proposal for the renovation of Azena Elementary School, it was one of 95 primary schools in Aneksha Gugsa *Woreda*. It provided services for the children of three rural *kebeles* and one urban *kebele* (Azena Town). Starting with grade 1, the school has been gradually opening new grades and accepting more students. In 2010, the school had classes for grades 1-8 and there were 2,224 students, of whom 1,114 (50.1%) were female. In spite of the large and growing student body, the poor infrastructures and absence of other facilities, including a library, and deficiencies in the building structures and furnishings were bottlenecks to delivering quality education.



Some of the problems this community-built school faced at that time were the shortage of classrooms; the sub-standard condition of classrooms; and the absence of a library, furniture, and other inventory. Due to shortage of funds, the classrooms lacked doors, windows, and concrete floors as well as student desks (Figure 4.7). Apart from failing to reduce distractions from external noise, the lack of doors and windows also reportedly made teachers reluctant to post teaching aids on the walls. Teachers feared that some students might damage the posters and charts if the doors and windows could not be locked outside class hours.

The dirt floors made cleaning difficult and resulted in dust piling up. The dust exposed children to respiratory and other infections. Further, the mud walls of the classrooms had been eroded by rain. All of the classrooms lacked desks and chairs, forcing children to sit on the dusty floor or wooden logs, adding to the disease and accident risks inherent in these substandard building structures.

One woman from the community described the poor conditions of the classrooms as follows:

*The elementary school was below standard by all measures. For lack of desks, many students used to sit on eucalyptus logs and rocks on a dusty floor. For lack of a cement floor, the pile of dust was a breeding ground for bugs, which used to attack the feet of children, many of whom were barefoot. Unable to stand the challenges, many children were forced to drop out of school. The upgrading of the school (concrete flooring, cement plastering of the walls, and furnishing them all), thanks to the tireless effort of Dr. Getnet and the generosity of Canadians, has attracted and retained many students.*

The elementary school also lacked properly functioning latrines. The existing latrines were poorly maintained and the students found it too risky to use them. Boys often used the open field instead. Girls, who need more privacy and who can't use the open field for obvious reasons, found it hard to attend classes, especially during their



Fig.4.7. Two elementary school classrooms before renovation.



menstruation periods. The lack of safe and proper latrines was reportedly one of the main causes of low class attendance among girl students. The school had many students eager to learn but did not have a library that could help them develop their reading and comprehension skills and language and intellectual capacities through reading. As a result, students did not have access to any kind of book besides text books.

The main goal of the renovation project was to increase enrollment and improve the quality of primary education. The project aimed at improving the teaching and learning environment in Azena Elementary School by renovating and furnishing five classroom blocks (22 classrooms); constructing and furnishing a new library and supplying books; constructing a new latrine connected to a water system (six holes for girls, and four holes and urinals for boys), together with a hand washing basin.

To attain these objectives and in order to create a safer environment more conducive to teaching and learning and increase the school's enrollment capacity, the five sub-standard classroom blocks were rehabilitated and furnished with 18 combined desks per classroom (one desk for three students). An estimated 2,224 students (around 60 in each classroom) benefited from the improved facilities. One table and one chair were supplied to teachers in each of the renovated classrooms. The renovation work also included installing new ceilings, doors, windows, and a concrete floor. The outside walls were plastered with cement and pavement and drainage pipes were installed. The new school provides students with adequate seating, working, and recreation space (figures 4.8, 4.9).



Figure 4.8. One of the elementary school classroom blocks (top) and a classroom (bottom) renovated in 2011 (photos taken in 2015).



Figure 4.9. Surroundings of some of the renovated buildings.



Figure 4.10. Elementary school students in a renovated classroom.

A new cement block library was constructed in three months' time. The library was furnished with eight tables and 90 chairs for students and one table and chair for the full-time librarian. This made it possible for up to 90 students to read at a time in addition to those who borrow books to read at home (Fig. 4.11). New latrines with water flush and hand washing basins were also constructed. Of the total cost of Birr 1,833,993, the contribution from the community was Birr 441,448 (25%); PiHA covered 75% (1,392,545 Birr) and provided an experienced construction consultant who drew up a cost-effective design. This school is now one of the best elementary schools in the *woreda* and because of its high academic performance, the annual school opening ceremony in September 2015 took place at this school in the presence of *woreda* officials.



Fig. 4.11. The new elementary school library: the exterior (top) and the reading room (bottom).

### ***Upgrading the general secondary school to a senior secondary/preparatory school***

Recently the education system in Ethiopia was vastly expanded. The pre-university education system consists of different tiers. Primary school education comprises two cycles, grades 1 to 4 and grades 5 to 8. Secondary schools have two cycles, grades 9 to 10 and grades 11 to 12. Grades 11 to 12 are often referred to as senior secondary or preparatory school for university.

As stated above, in 2006 the Azena community built a general secondary school (grades 9 and 10) to accommodate a growing student population that would otherwise have to travel to school in Gimjabet Town and thus face economic hardship. Even if Azena High School had been able to open grades 9 and 10 and served over 1,500 students, the students badly needed a preparatory school. In the past, the absence of a preparatory school resulted in the drop-out of an estimated 40 percent of students who could have attended preparatory school and beyond; they lacked the economic means to continue their education in another town. Students from Azena were required to find accommodations in Gimjabet and other towns, a task unaffordable for most families and one that presented additional socio-cultural barriers for girls. Families relying on subsistence farming also relied on the labor children provided in the household and on the farm after school hours.

I had gone through similar challenges to finish high school. I started school in 1975 at the Azena Elementary School and finished primary school before going to Gimjabet (12 km distant) on foot to complete grades 7-8 and Dangila (65 km distant) to attend high school. Of over 50 students who passed grade 8, only 30 (60 percent) were able to attend high school in Dangila Town. Most who did not get a high school education (both females and males) were academically prepared. They stopped their education simply because their parents were poor and could not afford meals, transportation, and room rent for their children to live away from home and could not afford for the students to not help on the farm and in the household chores. If there had been a



high school in Azena, most would have finished high school and advanced further.

Thus, after finishing grade 10, students had to go to Gimjabet or other towns to complete grades 11 and 12 or drop out like Aselef and many others:

*Aselef, 20, lost her father when she was young and was raised by her mother who makes a living working in different homes on a daily basis. Assisting her mother after school hours and over weekends, Aselef managed to pass the grade 10 national exam. However, because her mother could not afford paying 100 Birr a month for accommodation, providing her with meals, and losing her labor after school hours, Aselef had to stop her education in 2012. (Interview with Aselef)*

The Azena community decided to upgrade the general secondary school to a preparatory school so children from destitute families like Aselef could finish grade 12. The *woreda* and zonal education departments approved the project and agreed to assign teachers if and when the community could build, furnish, and equip the required facilities.

The immediate goals of the school project were, therefore, to upgrade the existing high school to the preparatory level and improve the quality of education, reduce dropout in grades 11 and 12 for economic reasons by enabling students from Azena Town and its surroundings to attend high school while living with their parents, and increase the proportion of students passing the national exam and joining public universities.

Once again, I had to look for partner charities while encouraging the community to raise funds to make a preparatory school possible. This time, PiHA again, together with Live to Give Charitable Trust, USA, agreed to support the project and work with the community and the local government. With the support from PiHA, the community built and furnished eight classrooms in two cement block buildings. Two

ICT (information, communication, technology) rooms/computer labs and one technical drawing room were also built and furnished (Figures 4.12 and 4.13). With support from Live to Give Charitable Trust, Azena community bought eight desktop computers and one laptop for the computer lab and 200 copies of reference, fiction, and self-help books (Figure 4.13). Most importantly, the community renovated eight classrooms as required by the zonal education department to permit the operation of the preparatory school.

The total cost of the construction was Birr 2,007,903, out of which Birr 602,371 (30%) was covered by the community and the remaining 70% (Birr 1,405,532) was covered by PiHA. Community participation in this project was *par excellence*. A community-based horse owners association contributed Birr 1,600; Azena Community Iddir gave Birr 35,000; the Church Association contributed Birr 40,000; the local Ethiopian Orthodox Church put in Birr 5,000; the Association of Soldiers or Militia contributed Birr 2,500; the Daily Labourers' Association gave Birr 3,000; and individuals and households contributed Birr 501,871. The Live to Give Charitable Trust donated \$US 13,000, which the community used to buy books and computers and renovate old or unfinished buildings.



Figure 4.12. Azena Preparatory School: Two new classroom blocks, IT lab, and technical drawing room.



Fig. 4.13. Officials visiting the IT room in the preparatory school.

***Benefits of a full-fledged high school***

All 27,299 students from 53 primary schools at all grade levels in Aneksha Gugsu *Woreda*, 1,567 grade 9 and 10 students attending Azena High School in 2013/14, and more than 365 students who had dropped out after completing grade 10 were direct beneficiaries of this project. Nearly 150,000 people from 16 peasant associations in Aneksha Gugsu *Woreda* and two urban *kebeles* (in Azena and Ayo), totaling almost half the population of the *woreda*, benefited indirectly. Parents who no longer incur accommodation and meal costs when their children finish preparatory school in Azena and who will have the labor of their children during out-of-school hours benefit the most from the high school (Figure 4.14).

In 2014/15, the high school served 243 11th graders (135 female and 105 male), including those who had previously dropped out of school like Aselef. Even though Aselef was older than is typical for grade 11 (she was 20 years old in 2014), she was among the first to register when the school opened in September 2014. In the two years she was not going to school, Aselef was engaged in embroidery work and had saved enough money for her school uniform and stationery. She is confident she can continue helping her mother and doing well at school.

On 5 October 2014, the completion of the preparatory school was celebrated; it was a special day for children, parents, and officials alike. Zonal, *woreda*, and *kebele* officials were present and expressed their appreciation in speeches. Students read poems, played music, and presented gymnastics (*techuando*). Parents, horsemen, and the clergy from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church expressed their happiness in different ways (figures 4.15 and 4.16). Community leaders thanked those who helped them make their dream a reality. The community gave a large reception and its leaders announced its next project, a new elementary school in Azena Town. This new school can divert students from the overcrowded Azena Elementary School, which had more than 2,400 students.



Figure 4.14. High school buildings renovated with support from Live to Give Charitable Trust.



Figure 4.15. Celebration of the completion of the preparatory school; people came from Azena and surrounding areas.



Figure 4.16. The celebration of the completion of the preparatory school was started with a ceremonial blessing.

In conclusion, because preparatory schools in Ethiopia are the gateway to university education, the construction of the Azena Preparatory School constitutes a major step forward to promoting high school education in the area. Preparatory schools play a key role in making a life-long impact on students and their families by improving student performance outcomes, increasing access to publicly-funded post-secondary education, increasing life-long earning potential, increasing access to quality education for girls, and increasing community involvement in and support for education for all. The opening of Azena Preparatory School will increase access to high school-level education for local young people, especially poor and female students, and reduce the economic burden and emotional stress on parents and children due to the departure of students to far-away schools.

One preparatory school student (12th grade) who attended a substandard elementary school (before renovation) and who is now attending preparatory school while with his parents had this to say:

*I attended junior and high school here in Azena and there were so many problems we had to endure in the past. We were affected by many communicable diseases because the school was untidy. We did not have a library or a laboratory. But today, we have fully equipped junior and high schools with libraries, books, laboratory facilities, and other necessary equipment. These are schools that are not just up to the standard but well and above that. The classrooms are modern, clean and really nice so they make learning all the more pleasant. When I was in elementary school, we did not have proper chairs to sit on, let alone everything else. And since we now have a preparatory school right here, we don't have to go far away to continue our education. Many students used to give up on their education because they cannot afford the cost of moving somewhere else to continue their education, but today we don't have to do that. Everyone will be able to finish their schooling here while living with their parents. So I can't thank the Canadian organization and Dr. Getnet enough. It means a lot to us.*

## **Implementation Structures and Arrangements of All Projects**

Except for the bridge project, all four projects described above had volunteer committees that mobilized resources and monitored progress. The different committees consisted of teachers, parents, people from the business community, religious leaders, *kebele* officials, and the *Iddir* chairman, who often chairs committees. The school administration facilitated the work of the contractor and inspected the construction works on a daily basis. For some of the projects, the Agew Awi Zone Administration Education Department assigned an engineer to supervise the construction work free of charge. PiHA supervised the technicalities of the construction work as needed through its own construction consultant. In collaboration with the Azena School Facility Upgrading/renovation Committees, PiHA's consultant verified payment

requests presented by contractors before making payments to the contractors.

During the implementation of all projects, the Azena community played a very active role in preparing the tender document; offering bids to potential contractors; evaluating contractors' offers; selecting contractors and signing agreements with them; participating in construction work, supervision, and evaluation; and preparing the opening ceremonies.

In collaboration with the community and the NGO, I was able to substantially contribute to the success of all four projects by playing a critical role in preparing project proposals, soliciting funds, and serving as a liaison between the community and the funding agencies. There were no NGOs working in the Azena area, largely because it is not classified as food insecure. Azena is also located off the highway and the highest concentration of charities are in major urban centers where there are good facilities. It is a predominantly Orthodox Christian community with no presence of Western faith-based NGOs. PiHA was the first in the area and I introduced this NGO to the Azena community. Although the community knows project money came from this and other outside organizations, it perceives all the projects as my solo contribution as if I had paid for them. The community recognized my parents during the opening ceremonies.

### **Challenges and Lessons Learned**

All four projects encountered many challenges but also excitement during planning and implementation. The bridge presented more challenges than the school projects. For instance, the community agreed to provide labor for seven days (20 people per day) for the bridge project. The community was not able to fulfill its commitment as farmers were busy with seasonal chores. As a result, the contractor called and threatened to quit the job. Immediately after receiving this call I had to travel to Mexico City to attend a conference and I didn't have time to go to Azena by car to sort things out. Instead, I took a



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plane to Bahir Dar, rented a car, and drove to Azena (150 km away from Bahir Dar). I was able to convince different officials and community leaders to mobilize the required labor. The bridge is outside of Azena Town and was not owned by the town community. There was only one government representative to mobilize the community and oversee the project. However, the completed bridge was much celebrated and appreciated by the community as it solved many of their long standing and serious problems.

Learning from the bridge project, we dropped the idea of requiring labor contribution from farmers who are busy almost year round. Instead we agreed the community would make its entire contribution in cash and deposit the same in PiHA's account before the opening of bids for subsequent projects. This arrangement was much more effective and there has not been any serious problem with subsequent projects. We also established a committee made up of community members to be in charge of each project as opposed to having one civil servant represent the community and the government during the construction of the bridge. This suggests that we should work *with* communities and not *for* the communities in order to ensure ownership, innovative approaches, and sustainability.

Because we applied these lessons to the high school project (library and laboratory buildings), implementation of this project was easier and construction was completed in a shorter period of time than the bridge.

The elementary school project, however, was difficult to implement. I even had to call parliamentarians from Agew Awi Zone who live in Addis Ababa and ask them to put pressure on local officials to mobilize part of the community contribution fund. Overall, each project had its unique challenges and was at times painful for me. Analogous to maternal labor, I complained a lot and sometimes vowed not to become involved in any more projects. But when a project was completed (like when a baby is delivered) and I saw happiness and jubilation from the community and I realized the impact of the work on the community's future, I forgot all the hardship and started another project.

The high cost of construction materials, due to the acute shortage of hard currency and inflation, delayed on-time completion of the budgeted project components. The Azena community contributed 25-40 percent of the project costs through cash, labor, and materials but mobilizing the community and securing its share of the project was not always easy. Further, some *woreda* officials lacked enthusiasm and cooperation and the contractor delayed completion of the elementary school project as he was juggling different projects and because of high inflation, which resulted in cost overruns. Nevertheless, with persistent reminders and follow-ups from the community, PiHA, and myself, and allowing for the expected delays of completing infrastructure projects in Ethiopia, all four projects were completed in a good manner and a reasonable time frame.

### **Ongoing School Project**

In November 2015, we were able to secure funding from the Francis G. Cosco Foundation (FGCF) for the construction of a new elementary school in Azena and we selected building contractors (Figure 4.17). This school will take pressure off the existing Azena Elementary School, which accommodated more than 2,400 students in 2015.

Azena Municipality has allocated the land for this school and I am eager to facilitate this project as well. The Live to Give Charitable Trust has also promised to support this project. After finishing the construction of buildings, FGCF will work to increase net enrollment and reduce delayed enrollment and improve attendance, participation, achievement, and grade progression as well as acquisition of self-directed and lifelong learning skills in this new school. FGCF will maintain a presence in Azena for three to five years and gauge (through research) whether such an approach can improve quality education. It holds school-based workshops on best teaching practices, does follow-up visits, and will give personal support to each teacher in the coming years. Azena Elementary School will serve as a professional development school for teachers and administrators of nearby schools. By helping create professional learner communities, this

school will help diffuse the best teaching practices to nearby schools that are not targeted by FGCF. The Foundation will also give workshops for lower and mid-level education department administrators and experts to enable them to provide active support to schools trying to embrace best teaching practices. FGCF follows an holistic approach and plans to work on school greening and water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) program as well. This project is estimated to cost close to Birr 3 million, of which the community and FGCF will cover 25% and 75%, respectively.<sup>1</sup> The Live to Give Charitable Trust has promised to donate \$5000 to this project.



Figure 4.17. Competitive selection of contractors for constructing the new elementary school in Azena in the presence of many community members and donors. David Cosco, founder and President of FGCF (right) and Getnet Tadele translating David's speech to the community members (left).

Making the case for the relevance of this new school, a woman from the community made the following comment during the construction bid opening event:

*A good quality primary education is key to our children's success in secondary and post-secondary education. Azena High School has a great library and equipped science laboratories. However, the Azena Elementary School is finding it increasingly difficult to adequately prepare its students for high school. Overcrowded classrooms coupled with the long distance some children walk to school is negatively impacting the motivation of students and the quality of education our children receive. Furthermore, the population of Azena continues to grow, in part due to migration from rural kebeles. Yet, the town has one elementary school struggling against all odds. A second elementary school was long overdue and we are all overjoyed to witness this dream becoming true today.*

## **Conclusion**

“We make a living by what we get. We make a life by what we give.” Sir Winston Churchill.

“Generosity does not come from great possessions but from humane intentions”. Ethiopian maxim.

I hope this chapter shows how lives, dreams, and opportunities of communities can be kept alive through the realization of the potential that exists amongst us as individuals and collectively. Specifically, this chapter is about how committed individuals, having a great sense of belongingness and mission to give back, can leverage resources and network. It is about how an underprivileged community, despite having myriad challenges, can still mobilize to muster significant resources to effect that long overdue critical change with multiple positive spin-offs. The chapter is also about the role of non-governmental and development agencies in enabling and unleashing these potentials.

This chapter clearly shows that engaging the community in planning and building infrastructure, prioritizing the needs of the community, and allowing its members to exercise control over day-to-day activities was a hallmark of the successful completion of all the projects described. Several examples show the active participation and ownership of the community. Once I went to see the bridge during the dry season and discovered that the bridge over the river was blocked so cattle could not cross it during the dry season. Farmers moved the cattle through the river rather than over the bridge in order to protect the bridge from wear and tear. This shows community ownership; the community is extremely concerned to preserve the long awaited bridge. Another time, the contractor of the elementary school renovation project did not maintain the proper ratio of sand and cement, prompting the school community to hire individuals to closely supervise the construction. In addition to their 30% contribution for the construction of the preparatory school, the community also took the initiative to contribute hides and skins following the new Ethiopian year celebration and prepared the opening ceremony in a very colorful way.

These examples show that active community participation is important for the success of community development projects. Besides having constructed school facilities and a bridge, it appears that the community and the local government also learned about the bidding process, how to select the best contractor, and how to identify cost effective construction methods. The projects also showed that with outside financial, motivational, and technical support, the community could accomplish major development projects without dependence on the government, instilling a sense of empowerment.

Further, I came from poor peasant parents and yet climbed the social ladder and contributed to community development. In addition to the bridge and school facilities that provide vital services for the Azena area, its surroundings, and beyond, I trust that my academic achievements and contribution to the community's development may inspire other young people to strive for similar accomplishments and give something back to their communities. These project activities

seem to have inspired the community at large to contribute their share to solving problems in the area. Immediately after the opening of the preparatory school in 2014, about 50 young people in Azena Town established an association and started to meet every month and make regular contributions for future projects, particularly to build a technical and vocational school in the future. They are depositing their contributions at Amahar Credit and Savings Institution.

Working with a transparent NGO (PiHA) that is able to effectively work with rural communities in an active participatory setting and genuinely strives to bring meaningful changes with ample experience in cost-effective and appropriate construction designs and in the bidding process was another factor in the success of all the projects. PiHA provided training to school teachers on student-centred teaching and other pedagogical issues. Teachers also received training on school greening and other environmental topics and provided sanitary pads to female students around Azena in order to curtail the number of students who stay at home because of menstruation. Librarians were also trained on how to handle the library and motivate students and teachers to make the best use of the library.

I learned from this experience that it is possible to accomplish much in Ethiopian communities through dedication and collaboration with committed communities and NGOs. As a full-time academic at the university, I have teaching, research, and consultancy commitments and travel extensively around the world. Despite these regular commitments, a high level of dedication to the Azena community, careful budgeting of my time, and hard work enabled me to accomplish all the above projects. It is therefore high time for academics/educated people, business men and women, and other better-off people to think seriously and act to improve the socioeconomic environment for our children. We need to internalize the famous quote from President John F. Kennedy: “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.” Giving to needy communities is highly gratifying and people who are able should commit to give and not always expect to receive. We need to give back to those who raised us

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and sent us to school even though the opportunities to attend school were limited.

It is not what is given that matters, but the fact that we give. Regardless of how we do it, giving back to our families and communities will touch many people's lives; even small support can ignite change and positively impact the community, providing a renewed sense of hope. To cite the immortal saying of Mahatma Gandhi, "Be the change you wish to see in the world" and we therefore need to be the change agents of transformation we wish to take place in our communities and the country as a whole. Let us all aspire to change the predicament of our country and take concrete steps to translate those dreams to reality. My experience suggests that selfless good dreams will come true sooner or later.

Although our accomplishments in Azena community are extremely small compared to the problems in other parts of Ethiopia, Ethiopia would become a better place if all of us who are better off would support our immediate families and the communities from which we come.

I conclude that if I had not had the opportunity to go to school, I would have ended up as a poor farmer like many of my friends. I always feel sad when I see the peers of my teenage years who dropped out of school at different levels and remained very poor farmers in the face of dwindling land sizes because of over population. I think this is to a large extent due to a lack of primary and secondary schools close to home. We can encourage more girls and boys to go to school when we work together and make available quality primary and secondary schools close to their homes. I will continue to work with the Azena and other communities with support from charitable organizations and other potential supporters toward this goal. As the saying goes, when there is a will or commitment, there is always a way. I hope I will be able to do more in the future.

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## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Amhara Regional State Administration has approved Azena community's request to be upgraded to *woreda* level as of July 2016.



<sup>2</sup> The exchange rate of the Birr gradually declined from about 9.50 Birr per 1 USD during the construction of the bridge in 2009 to about 21.00 Birr per USD in 2015.

## **Reference**

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