

Witnessing a relentless journey towards self-reliance

Report on a voluntary mission to visit
The Hunger Project Ethiopia
Mesqan Epicenter

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Picture: Panoramic view of the Mesqan Epicenter with me in the middle together with SACCo members and project officers.

Summary

The Hunger Project Ethiopia Mesqan epicenter was officially inaugurated in February 2006. The chain of events that created awareness within the community about the project had led to its official and hopeful start. The beautiful old trees and the false banana plantation in the backyards of the surrounding area have witnessed the collective decision made by the community to welcome the THP-Ethiopia as their development partner. The community mobilization activities were deep and took some time to take effect. Mesqan epicenter is composed of four Kebeles (Geminde for Switzerland) namely, 1. Dobi, 2. Degagot, 3. Goyban and 4. Lemech-Meqicho each approximately with 10,000 inhabitants. The whole idea is to create awareness, to provide trainings, loans and technologies that will ultimately lead to a self-reliant community. First, the direct involvement of the THP-Ethiopia led to the creation of awareness in the community that people can change their lives given the minimum support. Second, the THP has contributed to the construction of new school buildings, health centers and the renovation of and/or the rebuilding of old buildings. As a result, one school is promoted by the government to the first model secondary school in the area. With this important development, the number of kids attending the school has increased. Third, the epicenter uses the vegetables grown in the epicenter to provide a meal (balanced diet) each day for kids coming from up to 3kms away from the epicenter. What is left is sold in the nearby market. The income is used to buy kitchen consumables such as oil and salts. Fifth, loan provision of the epicenter has evolved from 300ETB to 10,000ETB. Savings were 3ETB when the project started. Now saving per month reached 130ETB. Women participation have evolved to being exclusively women dominated. I visited and talked to members of the community who were the beneficiaries of the trainings and loans provided by the THP. These people have changed their lives by starting their own business and that they are now self-reliant. Despite the commendable achievements recorded, the epicenter needs to beef up its efforts in strengthening its income generating activities. In general, I would say that what I saw at Mesqan epicenter and the surrounding villages was the product of the commitment by The Hunger Project, the encouraging support from the local government and the willingness and hard work of the community to get out of poverty and become self-reliant.

1. From awareness creation to creating a self-reliant community

I started my trip to *Mesqan* on a very bright Wednesday morning. I am a volunteer and on a voluntary mission on behalf of the THP-Switzerland. I was wearing a T-shirt symbolizing the Swiss flag to represent the THP-Switzerland. The objectives of my visit to the epicenter was to witness the fruits of the 8-year relentless journey to self-reliance that the THP Ethiopia instigated through the funding of the THP Switzerland. I knew that I am going to a place that I never been and so was eager to know what I will see in the next two days.

After passing through “*Tiya* UNESCO world heritage site”, that reminded me of the beautiful city of Bern, Switzerland which is a UNESCO world heritage city, we made it to *Mesqan*. The way to *Mesqan* epicenter is about 7kms away from the main road passing through the city of *Butajira*. The maize fields and backyards stacked with the tall and deep-green false banana tree give a majestic scene to the area. We arrived at the main gate of the epicenter and received a warm welcome from the project officer Mr Getachew and his colleagues. I was introduced to the committee members who were also waiting for us. As usual, my eyes started to wander around. The epicenter compound is covered with different plant species, demonstration plots and pots that are systematically arranged (Fig. 1). I was told that people visiting the epicenter could easily copy the technologies and try it out in their compound. I found it to be an effective tool of disseminating a useful technology to areas where access to improved way of doing things is limited.



Figure 1. Demonstration plots and pots in the *Mesqan* epicenter.

After a quick tour of the epicenter, we sat down so that I could ask the questions that the THP-Switzerland has forwarded to me. The meeting hall (Fig. 2) was constructed through the funding obtained from the THP-Switzerland. Eight years ago, such meetings including the many meetings that the THP-Ethiopia organized were conducted under trees. I summarized our discussions in the table below.



Figure 2. The meeting hall at *Mesqan* epicenter (left). This hall was constructed by the THP-Ethiopia through the financial support from the THP-Switzerland. I had the meeting with SACCo's members and the project officers here.

The question I asked	Name of the interviewee		
	Mr Girma Woldie Job: Purchaser	W/o Shitayie Mohamed Job: SACCo, Secretary	W/o Genet Mussa Job: SACCo, Head
Why they think the THP is better than another NGO's?	"thanks to the THP who provided support through loans and trainings I have changed my life and the lives of many in my community".	"THP gave special emphasis to women in my community in creating awareness and empowering them through continuous trainings. In short, it is THP who took the women in our community out of the kitchen corner to public spotlight, public service and development".	"Thanks to THP we now know what saving is and what we can do with our savings. The trainings provided by THP have created awareness in all walks of our lives including savings, health and education. I am fasting today, but travelled more than 8kms and came here to meet the THP staff and you because I love what THP is doing to our community".
It could be possible to observe some form of corruption in running projects like THP. Was there any corruption and what measures were taken against it?	"We never saw this problem here. The internal and external control as well as the strong leadership from our women colleagues is the main reason why corruption has no place in this epicenter".	"I never saw or heard of corruption here. THP is here to support us and there is no way we tolerate corruption".	"Corruption has no place here. The rules and regulations are tight. We have a strong control and auditing system. In addition, we are also audited by the government".
How happy are you with the THP staff? Are they doing the right thing?	"They are ours and they do what is best for us, we are happy with them".	"We are so happy with the THP staff. They are highly dedicated to help us change our lives".	

2. Changing your life with a loan: evidence from SACCo's experience

Looking at the strength of the loan and saving activities, I was interested to learn how these activities have stimulated the community towards self-reliance at household and neighborhood levels. The saving and credit cooperative was legally registered by the regional government in 2013 (Fig 2).



Figure 3. Official certificate of recognition of SACCo as a saving and credit cooperative in the *Mesqan* epicenter. The certificate is displayed on top of a metal cabinet inside SACCo's office.

To get answers to one of the questions that the THP-Switzerland had forwarded to me, we drove towards the heart of the village and met some members of the community impacted by the loan provided by the SACCo. First, we met Mrs Tseganesh. After a warm welcome to her house, I asked her if she have time for a short talk and if it is possible to videotape our conversation. Here is the translation of the conversation.

How have you benefited from the THP project?

"I have benefited from the project in many ways. First, I got 300ETB loan money from THP. I bought a small sheep. The sheep gave birth to two lambs. I raised and then sold the lambs and bought a calf. After a fattening period, I sold the calf with 2300ETB. With this money, I bought a cow. By selling the calves I built my house (Fig. 3). Who was I before? Mrs Tseganesh asked. Look how I have evolved and changed my life, look how happy I am. It is not only me but also the community. We never got loans like this. We thank the THP, we are changed a lot, we started our business.

I then asked Mrs Tseganesh what self-reliance is for her and for the community?

"self-reliance for me is to be able to give and get back. It is about sharing what changed my life with the others around me. Self-reliance is all about change, change in one's life, to run and take care of oneself and to work hard."

What do you want me to say to the Swiss people who financed the hunger project in this epicenter?

"Our lives have changed a lot now, we would like to say a big thank you. We honor your support, thanks to you thanks to the almighty God. We wish you plenty more. You did all you can to change our lives. The one thing that is missing is the water systems which is poor and if we can get some help would be great. The four kebede's of the epicenter have benefited and changed their lives in terms of education, health and business activities. I would like to say thank you to the THP-Ethiopia project officers Mr Getachew and Mr Mehari for their dedication and help."



Figure 3. The interview I made with Mrs Tseganesh Sarko. The house behind her is built by selling the livestock she bought and sold through the loan she got from the THP-Ethiopia. Mrs Tseganesh runs a small café in one quarter of her house where she sells local drinks, tea, coffee and some snacks.

Next I meet Mrs Huluager Badebo and below are the questions I asked her.

What is self-reliance for you and for the community?

“For me self-reliance is to change oneself by working. When I demonstrate the changes, I made in my life to the community and the community picks up from there and does the same, that is self-reliance at the community level for me.”

What do you want me to say to the Swiss people who financed the hunger project in this epicenter?

“A big thank you for them and for the THP-Ethiopia staff members who are at the forefront of the changes in our lives. There are countries with plenty of resources. But, only few are considerate enough to share their resources to others. Thank you for the Swiss donors for being supporting the THP-Ethiopia activities in our community.”



Figure 3. The interview I made with Mrs Huluager Badebo. The house behind her is built by selling the livestock she bought and sold through the loan she got from the THP-Ethiopia.

3. Agents of change in the quest for self-reliance: The Animators

The THP-Ethiopia follows an animator approach besides the project officers who are in constant contact with the community. The task of the Animators is to create awareness about the project and bring the community members to the epicenter where they could get different support including trainings and loan. I met one Animator in person and had the other on the phone as she was busy with family matters. Mr Berena Andale is an animator whom we meet while he was herding his livestock. I asked him **what does it bring to him personally to be an animator and to spread his knowledge in his community?**

“We were ignorant about so many things. As someone who is part of the society when I learned about the objectives of the THP-Ethiopia, I decided to play my part by creating awareness in the neighborhood to bring about changes in the community. Look, we never had a school, a health center. Thanks to the THP we have them both, so isn't this something important for the community? The THP is community oriented and its understanding of the real problems of the community is better than another NGO's. When I meet people, I tell them to visit the epicenter and get some advice and be part of the development opportunity. A lot of people were afraid of loans, but through the trainings given by the THP-Ethiopia and the efforts made by animators like me we were able to convince people that these are good plans and people could change their lives with.”



Figure 4. Interview with Mr Berena Andale an animator working for the THP-Ethiopia. Shortly after this interview, I had Mrs Zerfie Badebo on the phone. She basically reiterated what Mr Berena had said to me. She praised the work done by the THP.

How many hours per month do you work as an animator? What income generating activities do you have? Does it cover your needs? Any challenges?

“I couldn't say, it depends. But in general I can say twice per month. I was involved in loan taking activities from the THP. Ignorance was the biggest challenge in working as an animator. It takes a lot of convincing efforts to make people change their minds to try out the change opportunities brought by the THP. Once you tell/show them how you benefited from the project, it becomes easy to have their attention”.

4. THP-Ethiopia: when viewed through the glasses of the local government

To get some sense of how the THP-Ethiopia is performing in the region, I asked the project officers to take me to the local government bureau. I had the opportunity to talk to the head of the *wereda* government NGO desk, Mr Ejigu W/agegnehu. **I asked him what he thinks about the THP-Ethiopia as a development partner in the region. I also asked him how THP is helping the community and what makes THP different from other NGO's operating in the region.**

“Their physical and financial plans are spot on. Especially working in women, the government has gaps and the THP has made excellent works in filling that gap in education, water wells, library, natural resources conservation works including planting trees”.

“They are very transparent with their plans. Their stakeholder participation is excellent. They invite all and take comments from. When they make any changes to their plans, they discuss it with the stakeholder and this is the most effective approach”

“They educated our people, created awareness about how change comes through loans, savings. They changed the saving cultures of our people. Their trainings and demonstrations have impacted many lives in our community.”

Mr Ejigu didn't hide his worries about **the withdrawal of the THP-Ethiopia from the area**. He said,

“From our previous experience withdrawal of such projects should be smooth with the transition being handled carefully and should involve the involvement of the community, the local government and other stakeholders. This insures the sustainability of the excellent works done by the project. So, THP-Ethiopia should understand this and plan before withdrawing from these areas. As a suggestion, they can hand their work over to either the community or the local government to oversee it.

At last, I asked Mr Ejigu what are/were the problems that affected the THP-Ethiopia from running effectively in the area?

“There were some problems at the beginning for instance, getting land. This was a common problem but through time this was solved and the community and the government provided the piece of land that the project requested.”



Figure 5. Mr Ejigu W/agegnehu, the head of the *wereda* government NGO desk sitting in his office (left) and with his fellow officer (right) in the city of *Butajira*.

5. A glimpse of what had happened in Mesqan

Table 2. Contribution of the THP-Ethiopia over the last eight years by area of intervention. Data obtained from interviews of project officers on site (I didn't check the official records)

Location/Kebele	Areas of intervention			
	Education	Water wells	Health	Agriculture
<i>Dobi</i>	2 school buildings built and 1 renovated	1 water well	1 health center	
<i>Degagot</i>	1 library constructed and 1 school building renovated	2 water wells	1 health center	
<i>Goyban</i>	Renovation of a school building	1 water well	1 health center	
<i>Lemech Meqicho</i>	Primary school	1 water well	-	

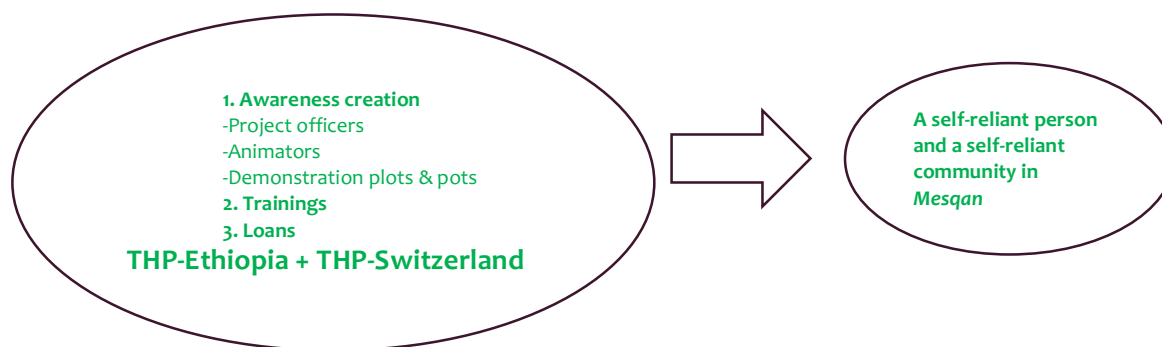


Table 3. Activities (including money generating activities) in *Mesqan* epicenter

Activity	Status
A small shop	Functional and provides items range from home supplements, confectionaries to small farm implements
Agricultural inputs	fertilizers
Poultry	In progress
Bakery	The machinery is installed but not yet functional
Perennial trees (coffee and <i>moringa</i>)	There is a plan to process, pack and sell the <i>Moringa</i> leaves in the near future.
Health centers	Vaccination, family planning and first aid



Figure 6. The school which is promoted by the government to the first model secondary school in the area. The THP financed the construction of the blocks (left side) of this school which is a stone throw far from the epicenter.

In summary, the approach the THP-Ethiopia followed is impressive. There were community and/or government built schools. The THP-Ethiopia contributions were manifold. Understanding of the society have improved from fear of NGO's to embracing their development agendas (self-reliance agenda) that the THP-Ethiopia brought to the community, more kids are going to school, health centers are visible, access to clean water have improved, women participation have increased from none to completely women dominated, people have access to loans and the saving culture in the community have changed. In short, in my short visit to the Mesqan epicenter, I have witnessed a genuine journey towards self-reliance that was made possible by the collective efforts made by the community, the THP, the local government and finally the financial assistance obtained from the THP-Switzerland. I thank both the THP-Ethiopia (Mrs Negust, Mr Mehari, Mr Daniel and Mr Getachew) and the THP-Switzerland (Mrs Alexandra and Mrs Anne-Céline) for giving me this opportunity!