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Clean Water Brings Generational Resilience and Productivity

Listening to Aster describing her plans for the future, speaking of diversifying her means of income with palpable ambition in her tone, it is almost challenging to visualize the deep-seated marginalization of women that was a norm in Belesa not very long ago. Aster Muchie, 45, is one of thousands of women benefiting from SWEEP, an initiative implemented by CARE with financial support from the Austrian Development Agency, which uses water resources as an entry point to engage with and empower women to effect lasting change in the community.

Aster lives in Kalay *kebele* in West Belesa *woreda*, one of the two intervention *woredas* for SWEEP, with her mother Mare Tassew and three children. When CARE first began intervention in West Belesa back in 2017, Kalay along with all the other *kebeles* within the *woreda* were hard hit with **lack of safe water supply** which contributed to the **chronic food insecurity** in the area. Both Aster and Mare remember this time as a time of desperation for their family. "I've seen it all! I raised Aster and her siblings eating barely one meal a day, if that. I would try to provide for them after their father passed shortly after they were born, but it was not yet the time for women to be bold breadwinners like it is now in Belesa," reminisces Mare.

When CARE began implementing SWEEP in West Belesa, one of the first courses of action was to install **clean water sources** within the *woreda* that would supply households in the area with significantly **less commute times**. The **installation of the water supply points** were done in collaboration with the community – this was done intentionally to foster a sense of **ownership** and ensure **sustainability**.

People who lived in West Belesa, including Aster and her three children, rallied resources and man-power to

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get the water sources in place. Years before CARE's intervention, Aster recalls a manual well pump installed by the local government some four and a half hours' commute from her house both ways, with a queue that could have her waiting for up to an hour. "Even after waiting for so long, the water was not filtered and so it would wreak havoc on our health!" says Aster, **"But now, I walk right outside my door, and fresh off the tap is drinkable, usable water."**

The sense of camaraderie and community within West Belesa while the water supply points were being installed was the perfect **platform to engage the community** in conversation **about** some of the **harmful practices** that were a norm in the area. The Social Analysis and Action (SAA) program under the SWEEP project, led by elected facilitators from within the community, created such a platform for the community to come together and have **open discussions**. Aster is a facilitator for her *kebele's* SAA group. She says the first item on the agenda is the marginalization of women; community members, both male and female, are taught of the benefits of fair division of labor in and outside the house, as well as other themes of women empowerment, and are encouraged to discuss their thoughts. "Previously, the line was clear. The woman singularly takes care of all the household chores including taking care of children, however many they may be," reflects Aster, "Now that both men and women have started talking about this, there is so much more **cooperation within the household**. When I visit my neighbors, I see the wife making food and the husband cleaning up the kids, or vice versa. This was unheard of just five years ago!" The **shift in perspective** regarding women has affected so much more than just their domestic life, women of Kalay kebele are now active participants in formal decision-making spaces, Aster says, "Forget meetings and social obligations, women would only see the gates of their church when they were christening their children ... **Now it's all different! We can go anywhere and just speak our minds!**"

Through Village Saving and Loans Association (VSLA), both Aster and the rest of the community have also learned about **savings** and received support on **income generation activities**. Aster serves as the secretary of her *kebele's* VSLA group which was established by CARE in 2018 along with many other VSLA groups to encourage savings and resilience.. "I have taken six loans thus far! The first was ETB 400 I used to buy cotton to weave and sell. I paid that back quickly, and started **diversifying my means of income**," added Aster. "I then started trying everything to make more money, saving was addictive to me! I took more loans to try brewing *tela*, baking bread, selling liquor ... it was all beneficial to me. And knowing that the interest I paid on the loan I took went to my own group's savings pool really made me feel like I was borrowing from myself." After compounding her savings, Aster was able to **purchase two sheep**, with a third one of the way, which she considers assets.

Aster's story is a testament to the success of SWEEP; not only was she lifted out of chronic food insecurity, Aster now has the resilience to withstand shocks like famine or drought thanks to her savings and diverse means of income. The close-knit community is now slowly learning to broaden its horizons and reassessing its traditions towards a more fruitful and cooperative Belesa.

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