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# From Poverty to Productivity

## Clean Water Brings Sustainability to Belesa

In West Belesa, Central Gondar Zone, a narrow road leads to Asmamaw Kasse's property in Kalay *kebele*. The property is hard to miss; all around and as far as the eye can see, all that's visible is an arid land except for Asmamaw's property, which is lined with lush eucalyptus and other wild trees. Past the woods is his modern hut which he shares with Berchiko Mengistu, his wife of 22 years, and their three children.

Their *kebele* falls within the implementation area of **SWEEP**, a project implemented by CARE with the financial support from the Austrian Development Agency. The objective of the project is to **improve the food security and resilience of chronically food insecure households** in both *woredas*. Berchiko and Asmamaw agree that their life today is far different than it was before SWEEP launched in 2017, so much so that they refer to the earlier years as "our younger days", laughing at what they now consider to be a backwards and obsolete way of life.

Before 2017, Asmamaw and Berchiko were leading a lifestyle common to villagers of Kalay *kebele*; they lived on the **income** they got **from a single harvest** each year with no other means of income. To make matters worse, there was no guarantee the harvest would be a good one. Belesa is known for **unpredictable rains**, at times being too scarce and other times flooding farmlands across the *woreda*. Things were dire and Asmamaw would sometimes fall into the temptation of borrowing money from a usurer with a steep interest rate. Though their children – 20, 16, and 12 years of age – are in school, back then they would often pull them out of class so they could help with the farming. Berchiko spent her days and nights taking care of the family and the household. Communication between Berchiko and Asmamaw was minimal; as Asmamaw says, **"it was a life lived separately but together"**. Asmamaw guiltily chuckles when he recalls a time, just barely four years ago, when, as the sole breadwinner, he would not share his income with Berchiko, not even to cover the basic expenses of running the household. "She would just take the money out of my pocket when I am not looking! I would think someone picked my pocket and **we would have the same argument each time!**" says Asmamaw, remembering conversations that feel like a lifetime ago.

In 2017, when SWEEP launched its implementation in Kalay, it began work by installing **solar-powered clean water supply posts**. Asmamaw did not hesitate to support the effort, "It was spring, planting season. So I would get up well before sunrise to break shale and sandstone for the construction of the water supply post. Throughout the construction, I made sure I did something to contribute to the water supply post before I headed out to my land," he adds. Once the construction was near complete, he was chosen by his community to become a **co-facilitator** of his *kebele*'s **Social Analysis and Action (SAA) group**. SAAs were designed by CARE to bring community members even closer together to create awareness about negative social norms and the impact of gender inequality, harmful traditional practices, and to **positively influence the attitude, norms and values, and community practices**.

When Asmamaw was trained on leading pertinent conversations in his SAA group by technical experts from CARE, he was intrigued by all the new information he was acquiring. He reached a **eureka moment** when he was asked by the training facilitators, on the last day of the training, what his long-, mid-, and long-term vision and goals are. "At that point, it all came together. Everything I had learned about savings, diversifying income, sharing the household chores with my wife, and creating means of security for our family... Making that a reality for my life became my vision," says Asmamaw, who has since more than realized his vision.

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A few weeks later, once Asmamaw formally began co-facilitating SAA groups with his fellow female coordinator, Tsega, he became a changed man. Not only was he consistently and persistently engaging especially the **men** in his SAA **regarding the harmful practices** rampant in the area such as polygamy, infidelity, and excessive drinking, he was also a man on a mission. He rented acres of farm land with the intent of maximizing on the newly installed clean water supply, and he **created an irrigation system** for his farm land. "I made nearly ETB 100,000 from the garlic I harvested that first season! I was no fool, the next season I harvested more from the regenerated crop and made nearly ETB 80,000!" says Asmamaw.

Asmamaw was not working hard only in the field, he became Berchiko's right hand in the household, "**It was all me previously, I would do it all and it was a lot.** After we both started attending SAA, I saw a **drastic change** in Asmamaw. Now, if I had other things to do or even if I wanted to run to my neighbor for a chat, **he'd make dinner or take care of the children,**" says Berchiko. Like many other women in Belesa, Berchiko's participation in social activities was minimal prior to attending SAA meetings. Since then, however, she has joined a village savings and loan association (VSLA) coordinated by CARE in collaboration with the *woreda's* Women and Children's Secretariat. She attends meetings, she saves money, and takes loans against her savings.

"**I have really enjoyed our new-found synergy;** both her and I save money in various VSLA groups and bank accounts. When we harvest the crops, we make sure we set some of it aside in silos in case of an emergency. **I feel like we are partners!**" says Asmamaw, who encourages Berchiko to also create means of income. She took her first loan from her VSLA to buy seedlings to plant in their backyard. "I was nervous to take the loan at first, it felt risky. But Asmamaw talked me into it," says Berchiko. "Now I am just excited! I had never considered doing anything other than taking care of the home, and now here I am, making money for my family!" Asmamaw and Berchiko have become exemplary members of their community but they are hardly exceptional. **SAA and VSLA groups**, championed by community members like Asmamaw, have become exceedingly effective in **leading the community in productive avenues of income generation** and intentional **correction of harmful practices**. All of the change in perspective has led to a tangible stride towards food security for the households in the area. Having a clean water source and know-how on managing their finances coupled with the empowerment of women has really put Belesa on the path of fruitful productivity.