

Economic Empowerment of Refugee Women through Small Business Development



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The Gambella and Dollo Ado regions of Ethiopia are endowed with vast water resources which are a rich supply of commercially-valuable fish, such as Nile perch, tilapia and catfish. Fish is popular locally and is in high demand. Both regions also host high numbers of refugees, many of whom have been refugees for more than 10 years. Many refugees engage in low-income livelihood and trading activities to supplement their food rations, including fish trading. Fish is also nutritionally valuable, packed with protein, vitamins and essential nutrients.

Fishing is dominated by the host communities who typically control access to fishing waters. People catch fish using traditional methods and sell it on the riverbank for additional income. While fishing is mostly undertaken by men, fish trading is mostly undertaken by women, with women from the refugee camps frequently travelling to the riverbanks to buy fish to take back to the camps to cook and sell. This is a reliable source of income for many refugee women.



A lost opportunity for women in refugee and host communities

Neither refugees nor host communities have access to a reliable energy source or refrigeration. Given the high temperatures of Gambella and Dollo Ado, fish has to be sold quickly or it spoils. Fish traders estimate 20% of their stock is routinely lost due to lack of cold storage, hindering the profitability of these small businesses.

Access to reliable energy is a significant barrier to business growth in these energy poor regions of Ethiopia. Without access to electricity, small businesses run by refugees and host community residents do not have the resources to store fresh fish and other food items, forcing them into risky day-trading activities and preventing them from fully accessing the true potential of the fish market. Some are also forced to use more expensive and dirty energy options, such as buying electricity from a diesel generator operator at a high price.



Key Challenges

- **Limited exposure to solar powered cold storage**

The adoption of solar energy to power freezers has been slow, principally because of the initial investment cost but also due to poor awareness of the solar-powered cold storage solutions available.

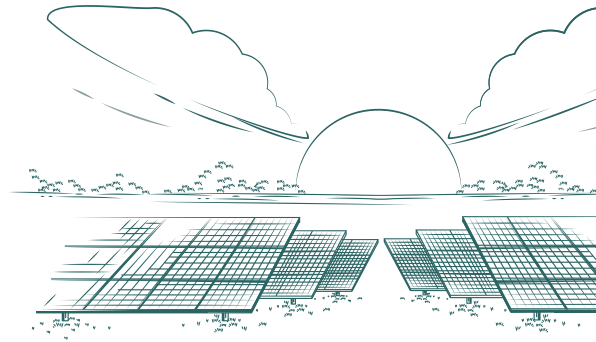
- **Limited access to affordable and flexible financing options**

The lack of an accessible PAY-GO payment modality for solar-powered freezers makes it unaffordable for refugees and most energy-poor consumers.



Recognising the potential for refugee businesses

Solar energy has several benefits that can improve the livelihood of refugees and of the host communities. Solar can improve business profitability while also being climate-friendly. Both Gambella and Dollo Ado have many sunny days that will enable solar-powered technology to run reliably. With solar energy, businesses can reduce their costs and their environmental footprint. They can also diversify their business and offer additional energy services that are in demand among their community, both inside refugee camps as well as in local host communities.



Empowering small business growth

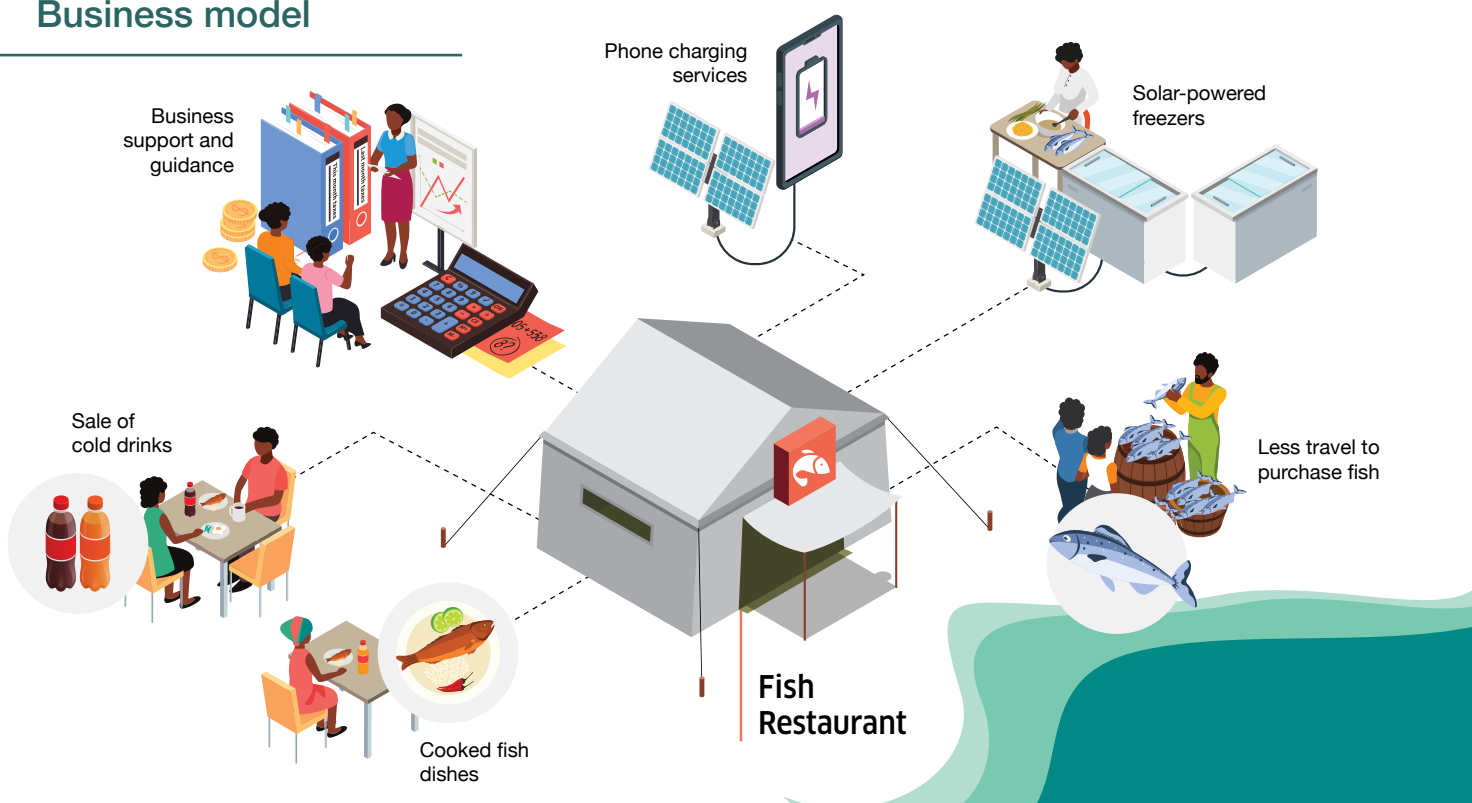
SHARPE saw an opportunity to support the economic empowerment of refugee women who engage in small-scale fish trading. The women travel on their own to the river to buy fish, incurring high transport costs, and then they have to cook and sell the fish on the same day. They have no capital to invest in their business and no possibility of securing a loan to help them upgrade.

With SHARPE's support, many of the refugee women came together to form six small cooperatives with a vision of running small fish restaurants inside the refugee camps. The women had to find a place for their restaurants and access to the necessary equipment. Under current Ethiopian regulations, refugees are unable to register a business. SHARPE helped them to open a bank account and secure an official support letter from the refugee camp authorities, in lieu of a business license. With the cooperatives in place, SHARPE then invested in six solar-powered freezers and installed them in the restaurants. These solar-powered freezers

were also equipped with a charging station to allow the women to diversify their business and offer phone charging services from their small restaurants. Once up and running, SHARPE provided some basic business support services to help them with record-keeping and to better track profit and loss.

Now that they are operating as groups, with access to refrigeration and solar power, the women's businesses are more profitable. They have managed to reduce their costs since they no longer have to travel every day to purchase fish and they no longer suffer high losses due to spoilage. With cold storage, they can also buy and sell more fish. They have additional income sources through the phone charging services and sale of cold drinks in their restaurants, as well as cooked fish. Their businesses are more viable and resilient to risks, and the women feel more confident to overcome the many challenges they face.

Business model



SHARPE and small business development with refugee women





Nuer 4 Cooperative is a refugee-run fish restaurant based in Tierkidi refugee camp, an hour's drive from Gambella town. The group was formed by six women, each of whom had been working individually on their own fish business for the past two years. Working on their own they would make an average of 200 birr a day but, with no refrigeration, they would also suffer a lot of wastage.

SHARPE saw an opportunity to improve their business and brought the six young women together, organising them into a cooperative. SHARPE also helped them to purchase a solar-powered fridge, giving them a reliable source of electricity, which has now allowed them to diversify and strengthen the business. With solar electricity the group is able to offer a mobile phone charging service and sell cold drinks year-round, giving them an additional income.



The fridge keeps the food fresh, and we take turns going to the market every two-three days, rather than every day, to buy fish so it saves on transport costs, and we can buy more fish. The solar electricity has helped us go from 200 birr a day to 400 birr a day. On food distribution days for refugees, when there are more customers, we can get up to 500 birr. We have upgraded the house and are saving money to do more with our business.

Cooperative member.



Refugee business owners cannot afford solar energy products and cannot get loans. Since there are no activities by other organisations on solar energy in the camp this will definitely help refugees to grow their business.

Gatbel Nhial Thiot, Chairperson, Refugee Central Committee.



Lessons learnt



Refugee women can increase their income by organising themselves in a group and registering as a business.



Access to reliable solar energy enables small businesses to increase their sales and revenues by offering different products and services.



The increase in sales and profitability for these small businesses demonstrates the potential for other businesses in and around refugee camps to use solar energy solutions for growth.



There is a need to work with energy solution providers and financial service providers in the region to develop suitable procurement options for small businesses. They can be specifically designed loan products for energy equipment or through a PAY-GO (paying instalments over time) model.