

“Turning Adversity into Opportunity: Seleshi Shegaw's Journey to Entrepreneurial Success”



Seleshi Shegaw, a 38-year-old Ethiopian man, recounts a life defined by persistence and determination in the face of numerous challenges. Born and raised in Majete town, Northern Shewa, Seleshi's life took a dramatic turn when he failed to pass his preparatory entrance exam in the 10th grade. This academic setback ruined his dreams of pursuing higher education and becoming a doctor, a profession he hoped would uplift his unprivileged family and community. Faced with despair and a sense of

hopelessness, Seleshi took the life-altering decision to embark on an irregular migration journey in 1998 E.C. (2005 G.C.), carrying only ETB 850 (\$95 at the time) and a heart full of dreams for a better life.

“My family was aware of my plans and they strongly advised me against it. They even suggested selling their land to fund my education at the Teachers Training Institute (TTI). However, I didn't envision my future in that path, and above all, I couldn't bear the thought of my parents selling their land.” Seleshi narrated.

Driven by a desire for a better life and motivated by stories of his neighbours' success overseas, Seleshi began a risky journey to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) passing through various difficult paths and test his physical endurance and mental strength. Leaving his hometown, Northern Shewa Majete town, he walked through many cities and villages, including Addis Ababa, Dire Dawa, Harari, and he finally reached to the border town of Hart Sheikh between Ethiopia and Somalia. However, at Hart Sheikh, he realised that he finished his ETB 850 he was carrying and could not afford to pass to Bosaso, Somalia by vehicle. Thus, holding onto his dream of a brighter future, he decided to walk to the port city of Bosaso with a few other Ethiopians who did not have money like him. With nothing but the clothes on their backs, Seleshi and his companion's set out on the long journey on foot, each step bringing them closer to their destination, yet further away from home. For over twenty-seven agonizing days, passing on dangerous environments and dealing with hunger, thirst, and exhaustion, he walked through the harsh landscapes of Somalia under the scorching heat.

Along the journey, Seleshi and his fellow travellers faced several challenges and failures, ranging from encountering bandits seeking money, who subjected them to brutal torture, exploitation and starvation for days. Many of the travellers died because of the torture and hunger, their dreams and aspirations perished on the road. Although Seleshi made it to the busy port city of Bosaso, he was greeted with the hard truth that without money, he could not cross the Red Sea to Yemen, leaving him at a crossroads with his aspirations of reaching Saudi Arabia hanging in limbo.

“During my journey to Bosaso, I endured seven days without a meal and two days without water. On the second day, I encountered a stagnant pond and, despite the risk, I drank from it in desperation to survive.”

While begging for food going door to door, a local baker offered him the opportunity to work as a lumberjack (woodcutter), a task that harkened back to his rural origins. With his newfound



employment, Seleshi was able to stave off hunger and homelessness, earning a modest income that allowed him to survive in the streets of Bossaso. Yet, the spectre of Yemen loomed large in his mind, a distant hope that promised salvation and a chance for a better life. After working as a lumberjack and day labourer for 7 months, Seleshi saved \$50 for a boat that would take him to Yemen. However, his dreams were dashed by a series of setbacks and catastrophes that combined to hinder his every attempt. Mechanical as well as compass issues on the boat hampered Seleshi's route to Yemen three times, leaving him stranded in Bossaso for four years with no clear path ahead.

"During my first trip to Yemen, the boat malfunctioned halfway through the Red Sea, and the owner insisted on turning back to prevent sinking. My primary concern at the time was not my safety, but rather the money I spent and the sufferings I had undergone over the past seven months. As we returned, I wept like a child thinking I had to work for another 7 months to a year to save another \$50."

After four years in Somalia, he wanted to try his luck one final time, so he paid \$100 and crossed the Red Sea to Yemen. However, upon his arrival, he was caught by the border police and imprisoned for two months. Then he paid \$300 and was freed and travelled to the capital city Senna, where with the help of the Ethiopian Embassy and the Ethiopian Community, he obtained his passport and his Iqama (a residency permit). Seleshi finally settled in Yemen, where he worked various jobs for 14 years, met his now beloved wife in a similar situation, and had a daughter.

"Despite the temptation of a higher salary and better living conditions in Saudi Arabia, I decided against going there due to the risks involved. With my wife and daughter to consider, I was concerned about the severe consequences of being caught by border police upon entering Saudi Arabia. As a result, I decided to settle in Yemen."

However, the beginning of the war in Yemen in 2015 pushed him into a new cycle of chaos and uncertainty, with growing violence and economic instability threatening to upend his life once more. Faced with rising dangers and dwindling economy, Seleshi made the difficult decision of returning his wife and daughter to Ethiopia and stay in Senna to see if conditions improved. However, he was unable to obtain work as easily as he used to, and police began detaining migrants regardless of their status, despite having Iqama, he was detained for three months. Following his release, he decided to return to his country.

Upon his return to Ethiopia, Seleshi hoped to rebuild his life and secure a better future for himself and his family. Accordingly, he built a modest house and opened a shop using the savings he had amassed during his 14 years in Yemen. For a while, it appeared that his efforts would pay off as his shop thrived. However, the house he built was considered unplanned and was demolished as part of a road development project of the government, leaving him and his family in a desperate situation once again. Devastated by the loss of everything they had worked so hard to build, Seleshi's wife made the difficult decision to seek opportunities in Dubai as a domestic worker, leaving behind her country once more in search of a brighter future for herself and her family.

A few months ago, Seleshi registered as a returnee in Woreda 12, Addis Ababa hearing there will be a life changing training, and they contacted him to notify him of the SIYB (Start and Improve Your Business) 15-day intensive programme for returnees that was organised by the International Labour Organization (ILO) through the Better Regional Migration (BRMM) Programme financed by the UK FCDO. He grasped the chance with unwavering dedication, seeing it as an oasis of hope. For him, the training was more than simply an opportunity to learn business skills; it offered a road to empowerment and economic independence. Driven by a strong sense of purpose, Seleshi enthusiastically accepted the 15-day course, seeing it as a catalyst for realising his aspirations and



providing a better future for himself and his family. Through the programme, he gained invaluable insights and skills that equipped him to navigate the challenges of entrepreneurship with confidence and resilience, laying the groundwork for a better future filled with possibility and promise.

"I am deeply grateful for the training I received, as it has equipped me with invaluable knowledge in entrepreneurship over the course of 15 days. I've gained insights I never imagined possible, allowing me to envision starting my own business on a small scale. The training illuminated the possibility of growth from humble beginnings, inspiring me to take proactive steps towards realizing my goals. Additionally, I've opened a bank account with Sinqqee Bank supported through the BRMM project and I'm optimistic of getting a loan to support my entrepreneurial endeavours."



After completing the SIYB training, Seleshi envisioned himself as an entrepreneur, determined to establish and grow his own business. Inspired by the insights and skills gained from the program, he set his sights on opening a pulse shop, offering a variety of pulses to the public. Recognising the widespread consumption of pulses in the country and the potential profitability of such a venture, Seleshi saw the training as a steppingstone towards financial stability and self-sufficiency. With a clear plan in mind and a newfound sense of confidence, he aimed to start small and gradually expand his business, leveraging the principles learned during the training to navigate challenges and seize opportunities along the way.

Seleshi's aspirations reflect his resilience and determination to transform his circumstances and build a better future for himself and his family through entrepreneurship.