



Disability-inclusive livelihoods in pastoralist settings: **Strengthening community resilience in Afar, Ethiopia**

CASE STUDY
Finnish Red Cross
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1. Introduction: Responding to a stark reality

The Ethiopian Red Cross Society aimed to strengthen inclusion in its community resilience-building programme, Towards Resilient Communities in Afar, implemented with the support of the Finnish Red Cross. A disability inclusion assessment was conducted, and the results showed that 95% of persons with disabilities lived in poverty, 89% had no access to financial services, 77% lacked access to income-generating activities, and virtually no functional organisations of persons with disabilities existed to represent their interests or provide assistance.

This reflects a stark reality: too often, people in the most vulnerable situations cannot participate in capacity development efforts or benefit from external assistance because of severe vulnerabilities.

In response to the assessment, the Finnish Red Cross and the Ethiopian Red Cross Society decided to allocate funding for the organisational strengthening of organisations of persons with disabilities. The funding was intended to support quarterly coordination meetings, capacity-building workshops and basic operational needs such as office equipment.

However, during inclusive consultations with leaders of a local organisation of persons with disabilities, the Semera Logia Bruh Tesfa Akal Gudategnoch Mahber, and the Afar Regional Bureau of Women and Social Affairs, a clear and consistent message emerged from the disability community itself: while institutional capacity was important, the most urgent need was direct support to launch or sustain income-generating activities.

Although this case study focuses primarily on urban and peri-urban areas - Semera, Logia and Dubti - these towns are embedded within a predominantly pastoralist region. As such, the livelihoods, vulnerabilities and coping strategies of persons with disabilities are closely shaped by pastoralist systems, including climate variability, mobility patterns, weak market linkages and limited access to services. This broader pastoralist context influences key aspects of the intervention, including the types of livelihood activities supported, reliance on local markets, the role of family and social networks, and challenges related to accessibility and service delivery. As a result, while the intervention was largely implemented in settled areas, it was deeply shaped by the realities of a pastoralist economy and social structure.

A shift towards livelihood support

Heeding this feedback, the Finnish Red Cross and the Ethiopian Red Cross Society decided to expand the programme's reach to include livelihood support, in addition to the existing institutional disability inclusion interventions. The inclusion of targeted support for income-generating activities was not an end in itself but rather a means to enhance household resilience, self-reliance, and the capacity to cope with shocks and stressors.

To support this shift, the Red Cross reallocated the entire financial component originally earmarked for administrative and coordination purposes towards direct cash-based livelihood grants for ultra-poor persons with disabilities and their caregivers.

This shift was not only a corrective measure, but also a proactive step toward fulfilling the principle of "leave no one behind" in humanitarian and development action.

This case study documents that transition and its outcomes. It draws on a mixed-methods approach combining desk review, qualitative interviews, and fieldwork.

Identification and selection of beneficiaries

The approach was inclusive from the planning to the identification of beneficiaries.

In the initial phase of the new livelihood support initiative for persons with disabilities, the Ethiopian Red Cross Society established a community-led committee in each kebele, a local, village-level administrative unit. These inclusive selection committees of seven members – religious leaders, women, youth, elders, and persons with disabilities – were formed to ensure transparency and local legitimacy in selecting beneficiaries.

These committees were given the authority to identify and select beneficiaries based on ultra-poverty status, caregiver responsibilities, degree of disability, vulnerability, gender, and intersectional identities. Including gender as a selection criterion ensured that women with disabilities, who often face intersecting barriers related to gender, disability, and poverty, were intentionally reached and supported.

In urban areas, organisations of persons with disabilities selected the participants, conducting door-to-door assessments to verify needs and ensure that persons with disabilities, especially the most marginalised individuals, were not overlooked.

2. Elements of disability-inclusive livelihood support for resilience

The livelihood support package for persons with disabilities in Afar combined financial, in-kind, capacity-building, and infrastructure-based interventions, adapted to the distinct realities of urban and rural contexts.

Cash support

Three phases of direct cash transfers were implemented to support 120 (72 women, 48 men) persons with disabilities in starting or strengthening their income-generating activities. Of these, seven were from rural kebeles (Guyah, Gulble, Shekoyta, Gega, Seha, and Nemelefen), and the rest from urban areas (Semera, Logia, and Dubti). These towns are located within a predominantly pastoralist region, and their populations remain closely connected to the surrounding pastoralist systems in terms of livelihoods, social structures, and economic dynamics.

With this support, several livelihood activities were launched. Beneficiaries established small businesses, including local kiosks, soap production, tailoring, livestock fattening, tea and coffee stalls, and traditional restaurants. The participants were free to choose or adapt livelihood activities based on their skills, experience, and market demand. This flexibility increased motivation, relevance, and the likelihood of success.



The most successful businesses required low start-up costs, used existing skills, and met local demand. Small retail outlets such as kiosks thrived in urban areas, while livestock and poultry activities succeeded in rural areas. Businesses centred on individual creativity and interest, as well as food-related activities such as cooking and vending, were also successful.

The livelihood support enabled beneficiaries to generate regular income. As a result, many persons with disabilities were able to meet daily household needs, cover health-related expenses, and reduce dependence on external support or charity. Increased income also allowed some beneficiaries to reinvest in their businesses, diversify livelihood activities, and improve their overall economic resilience. Women with disabilities reported a greater say in household financial decisions, children's education, and health-related choices, contributing to improved household resilience and gender equity.

Beyond income, the programme restored self-worth, social participation, and community respect. Some participants expressed that, with money, one can integrate into society more easily and without hesitation.

"This support has enabled me to be confident and active. I had an existing business before the support, making and selling fly whisks, but the market was inconsistent, and the profit was small. Now, however, I have completely shifted my business to butchery," one person with a physical impairment said.

Businesses run by persons with disabilities themselves demonstrated stronger ownership, higher self-esteem, and greater prospects for long-term sustainability. In contrast, in caregiver-led businesses, persons with disabilities relied largely on information provided by their caregivers and remained indirect beneficiaries of the support.

Complementary support

Complementary support strengthened beneficiaries' livelihoods by combining business skills development with practical measures to reduce daily barriers and risks.

To equip beneficiaries with basic business skills, they received two to three days of business and financial literacy training. This covered business planning, market analysis, bookkeeping, profit and loss calculations, separation of household and business finances, pricing strategies based on supply and demand dynamics, and, where relevant, involving literate family members in record-keeping.

Basic service and infrastructure-based improvements included positioning water tanks closer to the homes of persons with disabilities, reducing women's previous 16-hour journeys, and enrolling beneficiaries in Ethiopia's community-based health insurance scheme to enhance resilience to health shocks.

Monitoring and feedback mechanisms

Monitoring was conducted through a participatory and community-led approach. Inclusive community committees – comprising persons with disabilities, women, elders, and religious leaders – played a key role in beneficiary selection, verification, and follow-up, ensuring transparency and local ownership.

The Ethiopian Red Cross Society project team conducted regular monitoring visits every two to three months in urban areas (Semera, Logia, and Dubti), combining field observations with progress reviews to assess business performance and well-being outcomes.

This approach, combining community leadership with regular project follow-up, strengthened transparency, ownership, and adaptive implementation.

"I used to struggle to cover my daily expenses, including the medication I need to buy regularly. I relied entirely on my husband's income, which was very small. Now, I have a consistent income that covers my daily needs, and I have even opened my own shop to diversify my business".



3. Challenges and barriers to building sustainable resilience for persons with disabilities

Despite strong intentions, the livelihood support initiative faced significant systemic, contextual, and operational barriers that limited its reach, effectiveness, and sustainability.

Communication and accessibility gaps

Across the project areas, multiple accessibility barriers, including physical barriers such as distance, terrain, and limited infrastructure, as well as communication challenges and attitudinal biases, negatively affected livelihoods and increased the burden on persons with disabilities.

Communication barriers further contributed to the exclusion of persons with hearing impairments in rural kebeles. As formal sign language training is not available in the region, persons with hearing impairments do not use standardised sign language. Instead, communication takes place through informal, locally developed gestures that families use to communicate with their relatives with hearing impairments. This highlights the need for adapted and inclusive communication strategies to ensure meaningful participation.

Weak market linkages, inflation and inadequate capital

Beneficiaries reported limited business growth due to weak market linkages, small cash grants, inaccessible marketplaces, lack of proper workspaces, inadequate capital, and inflationary pressures. These factors often led beneficiaries to prioritise immediate household needs over reinvesting in their businesses. The practice of extending informal credit often resulted in delayed or defaulted repayments, eroding cash flow and depleting inventory.



Moreover, beneficiaries often lacked basic business planning elements, such as budget breakdowns and market assessments before receiving support. Some beneficiaries struggled to balance running a business with meeting urgent daily needs such as food, medicine, and children's school fees.

Absence of organisations of persons with disabilities in rural areas

In much of rural Afar, formal organisations of persons with disabilities do not exist. This absence has direct consequences for livelihood programming: without collective representation, persons with disabilities lack a platform to articulate their economic needs, influence programme design, or advocate for accessible support, thereby limiting both participation and the effectiveness of interventions.

Monitoring challenges in pastoralist contexts

While participatory monitoring approaches were effective in urban areas, the highly mobile nature of agro-pastoralist communities in rural areas made follow-up extremely difficult. As one stakeholder described, monitoring a single household could require a full day of travel by camel.

These challenges highlight that while the project generated important momentum, deeper structural, cultural, and operational shifts are needed to ensure more inclusive and resilient livelihood pathways for persons with disabilities in Afar.

Getnet – A tailor's aspiration for dignity and growth

Getnet is a 45-year-old wheelchair user, married, and a father of six children. He has worked as a tailor in his community for 15 years. "In all these years, my life hadn't changed much," he says. "I worked hard, but I lacked the opportunity to grow."

In July or August 2024, Getnet received livelihood support through the Red Cross initiative. With this support and his own savings, he purchased a more advanced sewing machine. The new equipment has significantly increased his efficiency and the quality of his tailoring, opening doors to more clients and higher-value services.

He says that it is rare for non-governmental organisations to come and meet local persons with disabilities, sit down, listen and plan together. "This kind of partnership, where we advocate together, is what makes a livelihood project truly successful." For Getnet, this support represents a step toward dignity, visibility and collective empowerment.

"Now, I can serve my community better — and show other men and women with disabilities that we, too, can build sustainable businesses."

4. Key lessons and recommendations

The Towards Resilient Communities in Afar Project demonstrates that disability-inclusive livelihood programming is both feasible and impactful, while highlighting important lessons for strengthening resilience and sustainability.

Based on these experiences and lessons learned, the following recommendations may be considered when designing and implementing disability-inclusive resilience programmes, including livelihood interventions.

1. Persons with disabilities as key actors

- Involve persons with disabilities and their organisations in programme design to ensure relevance, equity and strong community grounding, with special attention to women with disabilities.
- Build accessibility into all stages through adaptive communication, accessible workspaces, mobility support, and community disability awareness.
- Allow people to select livelihood activities matching their skills, interests, and local markets, emphasising autonomy and sustainability.

2. Resilience through livelihood strengthening

- Consider livelihood strengthening as a pathway to stronger community engagement, social inclusion and community resilience, particularly for people in the most vulnerable situations.
- Provide phased or dual-purpose grants that cover both survival and business needs, complemented by basic service improvements to reduce daily burdens.
- Strengthen market linkages, business planning, and ongoing technical support to improve the sustainability and growth of livelihoods in fragile economic contexts.

3. Multi-stakeholder and community involvement

- Collaborate with government bodies, families, and social networks to align efforts, improve service delivery, and overcome literacy or mobility barriers.
- Establish mixed community committees – including persons with disabilities, women, and local leaders – to ensure transparent selection and accountable follow-up.
- Adapt programme design and monitoring approaches to mobile and remote contexts, including flexible follow-up mechanisms, alignment with mobility patterns, and the use of community-based or remote monitoring approaches.

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Photos: Ethiopian Red Cross Society



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