



Photo: Mercy Corps, Ethiopia/Yosef Tiruneh, 2023

BUILDING RESILIENCE THROUGH ACCESSIBLE ANIMAL HEALTH SERVICES

The Journey of Hiwot Private Veterinary Pharmacy in Somali Region of Ethiopia

A stream of bleating goats and their owners surround Hiwot Private Veterinary Pharmacy (PVP) as the midday heat halts activity in the small town of Bila. Located within the remote Sitti zone of Ethiopia's Somali region, the open doors of Girma Negusse's veterinary pharmacy have attracted a small crowd who gather outside. Among them, Hindaya Ahmed, a 25-year-old mother of two daughters, has come to get her goat vaccinated. Fami, Girma's assistant, administers vaccinations to goat after goat, as a preventative measure against the rise in animal diseases because of the recent drought.

Hindaya and the other women who have gathered are a testament to the success of the pharmacy and its importance for nearby households. The Ethiopian lowlands are highly susceptible to shocks and stresses that impact the livelihoods of communities living in the regions. Hindaya is one of many who has suffered due to the constant challenges these shocks pose.

Unpredictable rainfall, increased animal disease outbreaks and lack of access to animal health services (AHS) are key factors that cause families like Hindaya's to periodically lose their livestock and thus their source of income. For this reason, the establishment of Hiwot PVP around the corner from Hindaya's home has been transformative.

Hindaya recalls previously having to travel two hours to Erer town at a cost of 300 Ethiopian birr (almost 6 USD), in addition to medical fees. "Sometimes you wouldn't even get the medicine you need," Hindaya notes, "and the animal would die anyway."

Hindaya describes how the frequent droughts bring widespread animal disease outbreaks and previously her only means of coping was to try and find food and water to keep her livestock strong. Despite these efforts, during periods of drought, she struggled to save her livestock.



Girma Negusse (right) and Hindaya Ahmed (left). Photo: Mercy Corps, Ethiopia/Yosef Tiruneh, 2023

Girma's busy pharmacy is therefore critical for local livestock producers like Hindaya, who have come to seek vaccinations and veterinary care for their animals. Girma's business is important as it brings quality veterinary commodities close to the pastoralists who need them; a safe, affordable, and accessible service that makes the crucial difference in enabling animals to survive droughts and disease outbreaks.

Mercy Corps' **'Resilience in Pastoral Areas - North' (RIPA-North) program** aims to improve access to essential animal health services by strengthening supply chains through facilitating the expansion of PVP networks across the regions, including last-mile agent networks serving remote and mobile pastoralist communities. By investing in private sector enterprises and building robust systems, RIPA-North aims to catalyze sustainable services and access for households that will benefit livestock producers long after RIPA-North has ended. Hindaya is one of Girma's many loyal customers and provides an example of the way that interventions in the private sector are benefiting pastoralist communities and building resilience.

Girma is dedicated to supporting the population of pastoralists around Erer by providing vital animal health services and veterinary drugs: "I have found a way to help and there will always be work in this industry because a lot of people rely on livestock".

Girma's Motivation

Having grown up in the area himself, Girma witnessed frequent livestock disease outbreaks and decided to work within animal healthcare to support livestock producers. However, whilst working for

the government after completing his studies, he noticed that producers were rarely able to get the drugs they needed from government and that there was a lack of knowledge around animal healthcare. “They would even use human drugs to try and cure their livestock,” Girma reflects.

Having identified this gap, Girma sought a new way to support these communities; “I discussed with people who work in similar fields in Dire Dawa [a nearby city] about how to support livestock producers, and I figured out how to make a profit.”

Girma, smiling with pride, recalls seeing his project come to fruition as he set up his first PVP in the town of Erer 10 years ago with a 10,000 ETB investment (about 180 USD); “I did it on my own”. He called it Hiwot, meaning life, as he sought to change the life of pastoralists in the area.

Hiwot PVP Expansion

As Hiwot PVP expanded its services in and around Erer town, Girma recognized the unmet demand in more rural areas of Sitti zone, but a lack of financial capital prevented him from expanding his business. Two years ago, after successfully applying for a cost-share partnership with RIPA-North, Girma was able to set up his second PVP branch in the small town of Bila.

The success of Hiwot PVP’s second branch in Bila has exceeded Girma's expectations. Girma estimates he has sold veterinary drugs and provided vet services to more than 22,500 customers in the last 2 years. Key to his success, has been a new business model Girma introduced as part of the partnership with RIPA-North, which has seen him invest time and resources in building a network of sales agents through local community animal health workers (CAHWs). As Girma points out, his new network of 14 community animal health workers (CAHWs) are “key to maintaining his business,” as they allow him to reach a much bigger population and customers living further away. His CAHWs help preserve business relationships even if customers decide to move in times of crisis, with each CAHW reaching an average of 60 households monthly.

“Even if the drought forces people to move [with their animals], they still call me and we organize for one of my CAHWs to visit their community and we agree on a price,” he explained. The business relationship between Girma and CAHWs is commission-based, motivating the CAHWs to reach those in need of such services.

Recognizing the long-term profit that derives from establishing trust with customers, Girma (with the support of RIPA) has provided key training to his network of CAHWs to ensure correct medical administration and ability to recognize symptoms; “this helps Hiwot maintain strong relationships with our customers”. Furthermore, Mercy Corps’ resilience program provided Girma with business skills and market linkage training to help maintain successful relationships with his customers and suppliers of veterinary drugs. RIPA’s support in strengthening Girma's linkages with national veterinary drug wholesalers is crucial to ensure a stable and high-quality supply of veterinary drugs for pastoralist communities.

Through the relationships Girma has formed and partnerships facilitated by RIPA, his access to information has also increased. This was supported by a training he attended in the region's capital, Jijjiga, which allowed him to become a member of the Lersha platform that provides agro-climate advisory information services using technology. Lersha allows Girma to receive climate information and be made aware of disease outbreaks almost immediately, alert communities and act quickly, reinforcing the system of trust he has established with his customers.

With a growing customer base of about 834 monthly customers, Girma noted that he feels more resilient to potential shocks and stresses. He attributes this to the massive demand for the provision of AHS and his loyal customers “who will need his services as long as they have livestock.” With this focus on maintaining trust-based relationships with customers and suppliers, Girma increases his chances of sustainability.



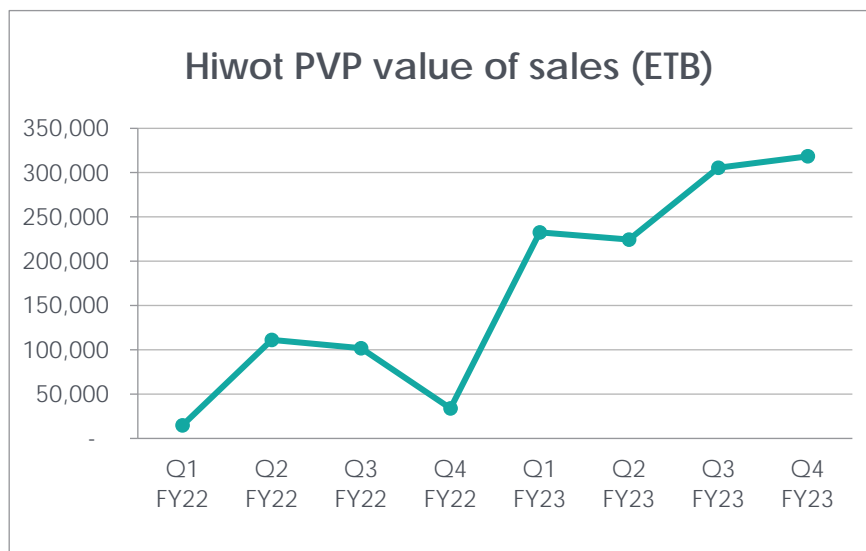
Photo: Mercy Corps, Ethiopia/Olivia Chapman, 2023

Sustainability

The busy scene outside the pharmacy is a sign of the success of Girma's new business in Bila. The total sales value from the new Bila PVP reached 1,400,000 Ethiopian birr (just under 26,000 USD) over the last two years, and Girma has steadily been expanding his customer base. In the last three quarters in particular his business performance has been excellent, averaging more than \$5,000 every three months. Crucially, Girma has been able to bounce back after the impact of shocks, including the worst drought in 40 years which undermined the ability of producers to purchase drugs. Girma is confident he will be able to withstand future shocks and continue to serve the communities of Erer woreda. He now has plans to open a third branch independently, asserting that the growth of his business will better enable him to reach more customers in remote locations with the support of his CAHWs.

RIPA-North has partnered with 18 PVPs similar to Hiwot PVP across the three target lowland regions, and, except for one, all have experienced similarly impressive growth in sales and numbers of customers served. Most striking is the success of the last-mile agent model, with 240 agents (CAHWs and also fresh veterinary graduates) active and serving communities.

Nearby to Hiwot PVP, a new PVP has recently opened, and the owners speak of how the Hiwot PVP success was a key factor in their decision to invest in their own business. This is an example of 'crowding-in', in which businesses replicate new models without program support, is an excellent sign of a dynamic market and systemic change. To-date, RIPA-North has identified ten new PVPs that have opened branches through 'crowding-in'.



Girma, wearing his white lab coat and a welcoming smile, is standing behind the counter in his PVP talking to a customer. Considering what the woman is explaining and after asking questions, he turns to grab a box from the stack of veterinary drugs behind him. The woman hands over some cash and thanks him, before leaving. This simple interaction shows the way the services he provides has become a solution to livestock producers in the area, who now not only have access to safe veterinary drugs but also reliable advice and support. Once the woman has left, Girma explains that he feels confident in the future of his business, “its Hiwot (meaning life) after all”.



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Resilience in Pastoral Areas – North (RIPA-North) is a five-year, \$38 million USAID-funded program operating in lowland areas of Somali, Oromia and Afar regions of Ethiopia (2020 – 2025). RIPA-North aims to improve the resilience capacities of households, markets, and governance institutions, collectively contributing to enhanced food security and inclusive economic growth.