

Women economic empowerment along the plastic value chain in Addis Ababa

Increasing women's access to resources



Watch the video on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/djXta6TPfI0>

In short:

In Ethiopia's capital Addis Ababa two GIZ projects, the Natural Resources Stewardship Programme (NatuReS) and Private Sector Development in Ethiopia (PSD-E) joined forces to diversify and increase the income of female waste collectors, while advancing the circular economy of plastics. 100 women received technical trainings on entrepreneurship skills, and on upcycling recycled plastic into items such as baskets. Read our story below and kindly leave a vote if you like it.

The issue:

Ethiopia is the second largest importer of plastic raw material in central and eastern Africa and the fastest growing plastics industry in the continent. Large parts of plastic waste are dumped at landfills or burnt. Despite being illegal and having negative impacts on the environment, this is common practice in both urban and rural communities.



Picture 1) waste dumping in streams in Addis Ababa, Picture 2) waste segregation on a landfill, Picture 3) Female waste workers aggregating PET plastics. All Copyright: GIZ/NatuReS

Women, while playing an integral role in the waste value chain, are also its most vulnerable part. As part of the small and medium enterprises (SME) along the plastic value chain, mostly women and youth are carrying out the labour-intensive parts of the work, by collecting waste from households, skimming landfills for valuable elements of waste, or picking up waste from the streets. Many SMEs in the plastic value chain were also heavily affected by the effects of recent crises. During the Covid-19 pandemic borders were closed and recycled plastic could not be exported. Additionally, recent price fluctuations due to rising inflation have led to diminishing profit margins which have hit women the hardest. Further, women have little access to decision-making, both at the entrepreneurial level of recycling SMEs, and at policy level. They have less access to information and formation and are faced with high risks for their health and income stability along the plastic value chain.

The approach:

The multi-stakeholder “Partnership for Circular Value Chains in Addis Ababa”, facilitated by the NatuReS Project, works to advance the circular economy in Ethiopia, starting with plastics. Partners in this partnership come from the private sector, governmental institutions, other donors, and civil society organisations. One specific aim of the partnership is to improve women’s income opportunities along the plastic value chain. Together with the PSD-E Project, that supports crises affected (M)SMEs (esp. women and youth) to improve their resilience as well as income and employment opportunities, **female waste workers were enabled to upcycle recycled plastic into new products**. This diversifies their income opportunities, increases their bargaining power with other actors along the value chain, and improves their livelihoods.

So far, 100 female waste workers, organized in micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs), were trained, mentored, and provided with start capital for creating new business opportunities through upcycling plastic waste into e.g. baskets. The women are from diverse age groups, ethnic backgrounds and religions.

Firstly, during three-day trainings around March 2023, the women were supported in developing necessary business skills to run and grow their businesses. This included sessions on bookkeeping, understanding and developing market linkages, potential customer identification, as well as the preliminary development of sound business plans.



Women economic empowerment trainings. Copyright: GIZ/Eskinder Fasil

Secondly, during practical sessions in smaller groups, the women were trained in the production of basketry out of locally recycled plastic (PET) straps. They learnt different weaving techniques and had the opportunity to practice under the guidance of an experienced trainer team. The practical sessions also provided a good opportunity for the women to get to know each other, help one another out and create linkages for further collaboration after the training.

The women were also provided with an initial package of plastic straps as starting capital for their new, additional businesses.



Upcycling basket weaving trainings with total of 100 women. Copyright: GIZ/Eskinder Fasil

The project aims at creating market linkages between companies and the female waste workers. A strategic link is underway to establish a direct connection between *EKT Trade and Investment PLC*, a recycled plastic strap manufacturer, and female waste workers. This connection will enable the women to reinvest their profits in purchasing the raw recycled plastic straps, ensuring the sustainability of their businesses, making them more independent from price volatilities and external shocks when selling their collected plastic to recycling centres across the city.

The local NGO “PETCO Recycling Community Organization”¹ has contributed to the training with technical support, providing insights into the recycling sector in Addis Ababa, linking the women up with further initiatives, and following-up with the trained women on the successes and challenges they face.

Lastly, refresher trainings have taken place to qualify the women as **multipliers** for these skills within their peer-networks and enterprises. These trainings deepened the women’s newly gained skills and ensure that they can get their new business opportunities to take off. Further support for the training was provided by the Addis Ababa Cleansing Management Agency, who is mandated with the waste management in the city and aims at supporting multi-sectoral collaborations between collectors, enterprises, and NGOs to tackle the pollution problem. The Agency assigned a focal person from each selected sub-city in which female waste collectors were trained to support in facilitating all activities.

Results:

The women mostly sell the upcycled baskets at local exhibition areas, or directly to households. A local supermarket chain (Safeway) has also offered the women to sell the baskets at their stores. Seven months after completing the training, 40 of the women that have so far been interviewed reported substantial increases in their monthly earnings by selling the baskets, rising from an average of 3000 ETB (approximately 51 Euro) to 3650 ETB (62 Euro). This represents a **rise of 21.6% in their monthly income** so far, translating into tangible improvements in their lives. The women reported that the increased income allows them to invest more in their families, children’s education, and healthcare. They stated that the project helped foster greater social cohesion among the women, promoting mutual respect, trust, and solidarity within their MSMEs. Moreover, selling the baskets provides them with an additional income opportunity that is independent of their work in the plastic value chain, which provides them with stability in times of crises.

¹ Supported through a local subsidy worth 20.500€ by GIZ

PETCO plans to replicate this activity in other Ethiopian cities (e.g. Hawassa). The Cleansing Management Agency is disseminating the gained experience and information by promoting the benefits of recycled plastic, facilitating market linkages with potential buyers, integrating them into their existing training programs and inviting them to showcase their success stories.



Women selling baskets made from upcycled plastics during a bazar/exhibition in Addis Ababa. Copyright: GIZ/Hanno Führen

Lessons Learned:

- Cross-sectoral **collaboration** leverages different capacities and resources, which is fundamental when targeting complex challenges like improving the economic situation of women along the plastic recycling value chain. Only if NGOs, companies and the public sector cooperate, can lasting solutions be developed and maintained.
- **Follow-up** is fundamental to ensure success of the activity. Problems only become visible after a while, which is why capacity building support should always be followed by refresher trainings, further mentorship support, and checks on the effectiveness of the newly acquired skills.