

# Social entrepreneur who saves lives in Ethiopia aims to win minds in Europe

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Kibret Abebe Tuffa sold his only home to launch Tebita. Today, the Ethiopian social enterprise has 11 ambulances, 63 employees and has provided ambulance services to more than 40,000 clients. Photograph: Tebita Ambulance Pre-Hospital Emergency Medical Service



Tebita founder Kibret Abebe Tuffa

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In a country with some of the world's deadliest roads, the absence of critical life-saving support was for him a daily tragedy. He asked his colleagues: "How can we wait for a victim to come to us without any life saving measure rather than going out to assist him or her?"

So in 2008, Kibret sold his house to acquire three old ambulances, the necessary license and launched Tebita Ambulance. He did so against the advice of nearly all of his peers and relatives who questioned the impact he could deliver and argued that ambulance service was the responsibility of government or the Red Cross. His response was, "I prefer to start challenging this problem rather than sit and complain about it."

From the outset, Kibret wanted Tebita to generate income so that it would be financially self-sustainable, not aid dependent, but it took time to find the right formula. "When we started, we knew nothing about any practical business model," says Kibret, who credits a one year training programme on business strategy offered by SIDA, Sweden's international development agency, with helping him to develop a successful social enterprise.

He has since developed a business model based on cross-subsidisation. Tebita offers high quality, ISO-certified ambulance service, remote medical assistance and emergency aid training to multinationals, diplomatic missions, foreign NGOs and expatriates. Surplus income from those activities to subsidises the cost of a local 24/7 ambulance service in Addis Ababa and in surrounding provinces. As a result, Tebita can offer ambulance service to the public for an average of \$15-20 (£10-£13), even though the actual cost is \$51 (£35).

Kibret began with a team of two employees and for the first five years he continued working as a hospital anaesthetist to help pay his staff. Today, Tebita has 11 ambulances and 63 employees and has opened Ethiopia's first emergency and paramedical training centre. It has launched a motorcycle service to send first aid responders quickly through Addis Ababa's snarled traffic to provide support before its ambulance can arrive. And it has provided ambulance services to more than 40,000 clients and emergency training to more than 25,000 trainees.

In addition, Tebita provides emergency medical services to Ethiopia's national football team and Kibret himself travels with the squad offering his services pro bono.

In 2014, Tebita received a grant and technical assistance from USAID and DfID through their joint Health Enterprise Fund which, says Kibret, helped Tebita to scale up and enhance its strategic planning and financial forecasting. In 2015, he also became an [Acumen Fellow](#) which offered him the opportunity to participate in a one-year leadership programme. Tebita faces a number of challenges, chief among which is access to finance. They generate a healthy financial surplus, but local banks are hesitant to provide loans, citing a lack of collateral. A US impact investor has conducted due diligence and would like to offer financing to Tebita, but current investment regulations in Ethiopia prevent foreign investors from participating directly in the emergency medical services sector.

Another challenge is Tebita's fragile supply chain. Their current business license only allows them to import ambulances, not medical supplies, which are not available locally. So Kibret wants to apply for an import license and start manufacturing emergency medical supplies locally.

Despite these hurdles, Kibret says, "We are very committed individuals who have a very clear vision to change the emergency medical service system of our country and even East Africa."

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For Kibret, launching Tebita Ambulance was about more than saving lives. It was also about changing mindsets. Tebita is an Amharic word meaning "drop" and Kibret chose it to inspire others to consider their own "drop" of contribution to humanity. He believes that by encouraging people, especially the young, to reflect on how they can become active agents of change, he can inspire them to develop solutions to the problems they face. This is one of the messages Kibret will bring to the [European Development Days](#), Europe's leading forum on international development, where he will be on a panel alongside speakers from the British Council, World Bank and European Commission, that will examine the role that social enterprises, social investment and responsible business can play in achieving progress on the [Sustainable Development Goals](#).

Another message he will deliver is that, "without responsible private sector involvement, tackling social problems is like clapping with one hand."

*The debate "Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals: How can we make business more social?" will be hosted by the British Council in partnership with the World Bank as part of the European Development Days 2016. The debate will be held in Brussels on 16 June.*

*Kibret has also been invited to share insights during a Roundtable on Social Enterprise in Africa held by the European Parliament.*

<http://www.theguardian.com/british-council-partner-zone/2016/jun/08/social-entrepreneur-who-saves-lives-in-ethiopia-aims-to-win-minds-in-europe-european-development-days>