



PAAV Perspectives

December 2020

From Dr. Frew Tegene

My dear friends, how are you? Your kindness and generosity has greatly helped the people of Sendafa. What you do is beyond words and I can never thank you enough. You have been very kind and compassionate to these poor people who have none of the privileges that we enjoy, whether big or small.

We have all passed through a very difficult year due to COVID-19, but the year has been especially harder on those who live in poverty and those living with HIV/AIDS. The coronavirus infection and associated health implications have severely impacted the economic status of the poor in Ethiopia, including those in Sendafa. Even before COVID-19, life was hard for most residents. Many people have no means of getting a regular, stable income since there are almost no jobs in the town. Many men spend their days sitting outside their homes chatting or drinking liquor. While most women are housewives, many sell liquor in their homes and work as commercial sex workers ("CSWs" or prostitutes).

I once asked one of these women her reason for working as a prostitute even though she knows that she is at risk of getting infected by HIV. To my shock, her response as she wept was, "The only thing I can do is sex work. My parents never sent me to school. My mom was also a CSW. I have no skills and no money. What do you expect me to do? How can I sustain my life and the lives of my children? If I stop prostitution, I will die of hunger in a few days but if I contract HIV at least I can live for a few more years, and can take care of my children".

Starvation will kill these women and their families immediately, while HIV may eventually kill them. That's the set of choices and calculations they weigh each and every day.

When I hear such stories I consider myself to be a very lucky person. I was raised by parents with a good income, who gave great value to education, and who encouraged me to become a physician one day. Most of these ladies have lived in poverty since birth and never went to school. They would have become doctors, engineers, lawyers, accountants or teachers if they had received similar opportunities. I would have had a terrible outcome if I was born in the same situation as one of these ladies.

I believe most of us are lucky. We help others because, in some sense, we are better off than the people we help. We all know that we could have had similar lives. I think we should count it a blessing to have the ability and resources to help others, rather than being dependent for our livelihoods on others. It is a blessing to be able to be kind to others and share what we have with them.

My dear friends, all of the people we help, the HIV patients, the people living in poverty, the students, the mothers, children and infants, the health workers are all exposed to COVID-19. It is evident that my team and I are also at risk of contracting the virus as we go home to home to provide food and medication to our beneficiaries. And if we are at risk, our family members are at risk too. My wife and Ageritu's daughter, Saron, provide medical care to COVID-19 patients on a daily basis.

I am hypertensive and asthmatic. My wife and elder son also have asthma. And I daily live with the fear of transmitting the disease to my family if I ever get infected. Many days I have argued with myself whether what we are doing is worth taking risks for. It is a question that I still struggle with daily. But how can we stop helping these people? If we are to help people in their hardships, we have to carry part of that hardship. I do not know of any real relief work that does not involve sharing the burden.

We willingly choose to still go to Sendafa as we always did, and we have not abandoned the people there. We have remained faithful to those who need us, just as you have remained faithful to us. My friends, that is why we ask you to continue being alongside us in helping the poor people of Sendafa. Your prayers, contributions, kindness, and help mean a lot and are worth it.

Thank you for serving alongside of us in making our work possible to date, as well as for your continued support of our efforts.

Dr. Frew