

**"The more people understand the impact, the more helpful they will be to make sure that all communities across the country can be served with this opportunity": Follow-up conversation with Etsegent Arega, of Last Mile Health, about a distribution event in Dire Dawa.**

Rollo Romig

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**Rollo Romig: Could you just start by introducing yourself? Tell me what your title is, but also what your role is in this program.**

**Etsegent Arega:** My name is Dr. Etsegent Arega. I am a Senior Program Manager at Last Mile Health. I am leading the program related to the eyeglass project.

**Rollo Romig: You've been working on this for a while now. You had a pilot, you're now rolling out the program with the goal of distributing 100,000 glasses by next month. So far, what have you observed has been the impact of the program so far?**

**Etsegent Arega:** I've observed different impacts in different places, depending on what the community is using it for. We've had the experience of health extension workers themselves who needed glasses but weren't able to receive them. We've heard testimonies where after receiving the glasses, they were able to read properly and to do their work more efficiently and had better handwriting. I believe that has been a very big impact, starting from the health workers themselves. I've seen different testimonies in multiple sites.

For example, one woman was telling us that she has a shop. It's been hard for her to pay and send money on her mobile phone. She had sent, accidentally, 900 birr when she wanted to send

only 90 birr to someone else. Because she wasn't able to see clearly, that was a challenge to go through her day-to-day life. She was very excited to know that she won't have that problem again, and she can actually shop and transfer money herself and wouldn't have to ask other people. These are the kind of stories that have shown us the impact of the work that we're doing.

**Rollo Romig: Just yesterday, we saw these distributions in Dire Dawa. What was your feeling about how it went yesterday? What were your impressions?**



**Etsegent Arega:** It can get overwhelming at some points because the demand is very high. We see a lot of patients coming to the health post all at once. In some places the health extension workers wouldn't expect it to be that way. Crowd management is one thing they need to start working on. That, for me, was actually rewarding, to see how much the demand is in the community and how satisfied they were receiving their glasses. It's very satisfying to see that the work we're doing is having this amount of impact.

**Rollo Romig: Was there anything that especially surprised you that you saw yesterday out in the field?**

**Etsegent Arega:** I was surprised with the testimonies I was getting. I expect that many people are struggling with near vision, but even knowing what I know, it still surprises me to hear stories of how much it has changed their lives. Another example is a teacher that we found out was having a hard time grading his students and was just skipping [answers] because he could not read them. Religious leaders weren't able to teach their children at home, and they were affected by that. It's always surprising and interesting to see how much the glasses affect their lives. Throughout this week, the acceptance, the excitement of the community members and the city administration, and the amount of work they put in to make sure the community members get the glasses was fascinating for me.

**Rollo Romig: Why do you think that these leaders and different stakeholders are so invested in it?**


**Etsegent Arega:** The stakeholders, they're the closest to the community. They know the challenge better than us who are living far away from the community members. The health extension workers are part of the community. They live very close to the people. They know the challenges they have, they know they cannot afford this kind of glasses, but they know how much it affects them as well. The closer you are to the community, the more you understand the amount of work it takes to actually make sure your community receives this kind of service.

**Rollo Romig: If there's one thing that you would tweak or change in terms of the operations for the next time out, what would you do differently?**


**Etsegent Arega:** We've done different things starting from the pilot. We've learned a lot. I see this as a learning process, and there's a lot more I want to learn to improve. We've changed the way of screening and distribution, we've tried to put in some hours dedicated for health extension workers to practice their skills.


If you're asking me specifically about yesterday, I would want to find a way to manage the crowd better and have a better system where they can get screened and where they feel like this is not going away, that we're there for some amount of time, or that this would be integrated in their routine work so they can come any day when they have a problem and get the service. I know this is going to take a long time, but I hope this process is going to get us there.

**Rollo Romig: Since the pilot, what do you think is the biggest thing that you've learned that has helped to adjust how you approach things?**

 **Etsegent Arega:** I believe it's the data we have that has helped us. We have been collecting data from the pilots. We've done validation, we've collected a lot of data. Seeing how much demand there is and, for example, understanding what diopter is more in demand has helped us allocate which diopter for which area. It's a learning process. Every time we're trying to improve, but the data is the most important part to help us learn and share the activities we do, the things we have changed, and how much need there is in the community.

**Rollo Romig: You have so many government partners. Give me some examples of who those partners are and how you have convinced them to get engaged with this.**

 **Etsegent Arega:** Our main partner is the Ministry of Health. The Ministry of Health initially had some doubts on how this would go when we were doing the pilots. We tried to find ways where we could do a quality check and make sure that the right glasses are going to the right community member. The main thing that helped us was the validation we did. Right after the distribution, we had a validation where we selected random houses and professionals who were going house to house and checking if the community member had received the glasses, if they were the right diopter, if they were using it for the right purpose, how many hours they use it. That's one of the things that convinced the Ministry of Health. We also had them on site to see how the field work is going, to hear the testimonies of community members.

 Even now, during scale up, the other stakeholders that have helped us are, for example, the custom office, which were very much helpful during the custom clearance. We had screening and distribution on World Sight Day at the custom office. We had a lot of employees who themselves had a near vision problem. They were very helpful to facilitate the clearance after that, understanding the need and understanding the impact they would have on their work. We also did screening at the Ministry of Health, screening at the Ministry of Justice. The more people understand the impact, the more helpful they will be to make sure that all communities across the country can be served with this opportunity.

**Rollo Romig: Thanks so much.**

## ICON LEGEND



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Supply



Demand generation



Partnerships



Technology



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Media campaigns and marketing



Screening

*Rollo Romig is the manager of Solutions Insights Lab. He is the author of I Am on the Hit List: A Journalist's Murder and the Rise of Autocracy in India, which was named a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in General Nonfiction.*

*\* This interview has been edited and condensed.*