

## Kibret Abebe's Biography, Acumen 2015 fellow.



Sirens blaring. Lights flashing. Medics racing. For most people living in a city, ambulances are omnipresent, the sights and sounds always humming in the background. But in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's capital and home to nearly 4 million people, that wasn't always the case. Until Kibret Abebe, that is.

Today, Acumen Fellow Kibret is the Founder and CEO of Tebita, Ethiopia's first private ambulance company. But 10 years ago, Kibret was a trained anesthetist working at the city's largest public hospital. Nearly every day, car accident victims were rushed in.

"They'd be bleeding tremendously and not breathing," said Kibret. "They'd be taken from the scene of the accident without any professional support."

Car crashes are quite common in Addis—in 2016 alone, there were 463 fatal crashes, or about 13.8 deaths per 100,000 people. (<http://addisstandard.com/news-amidst-increasing-fatal-accidents-addis-abeba-releases-first-ever-status-report-on-road-safety/>) Quite often, the few ambulances provided by the government can't or don't make it to the scene of a crash in time, leaving people to find their own way to the hospital.

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"Only four percent of victims come to the hospital with ambulances," said Kibret. "They arrive without any life-saving measures. People think, 'If we just take this person to the hospital, they will do whatever they need to save his life.' But often, the patient isn't properly handled."

Kibret witnessed life and life lost because people didn't have access to urgent care. He believed these deaths could've been prevented if only emergency services could reach accident victims and provide them with proper

treatment on the spot. The government's ambulance service—even with the help of the Red Cross—couldn't meet the city's growing demand for emergency care. Kibret felt more needed to be done, but he didn't know how to bring the hospital's life-saving services to the streets of Addis.

That all changed when Kibret found himself helping a British citizen who came to the hospital with a cardiac and respiratory problem. The patient needed to be medically evacuated to London, and Kibret was called upon to provide oxygen and manage the patient's pain during his travels.

"I saw with my naked eye what emergency medical services really look like," said Kibret. "A single person was given the resources of a whole country. The system in London totally blew my mind."

It was just the catalyst Kibret needed. He returned to Ethiopia and resigned from his hospital position. "I couldn't wait for suffering people to come to the hospital when we couldn't do anything," he said. It was time to establish his own service.

### **Building Tebita**

Establishing emergency medical care anywhere is expensive, but especially in a country where there's no standards in place. Kibret was determined to create Ethiopia's first privately owned ambulance service, but first he had to convince the government.

It took six months of lobbying, but eventually Kibret gained the first license in Ethiopia to open a private ambulance service. "I told them, 'If you don't do this now, who else will do it?'"

The second step was funding. Kibret needed to raise the money to get his ambulances up and running but finding investors to back a socially driven business wasn't easy. The banks didn't see Kibret's idea as a viable business. "No bank listened to my pitch for more than three minutes," he said. "They said, 'You are wonderful. You're saving lives, we're happy. But where is the money?'"

"I couldn't convince them that an Ethiopian who dies bleeding on the road, whether educated or uneducated, rich or poor, was worth funding," Kibret said.

Without financing, Kibret would have to give up his dream. So he turned to his only other option—his home. At the time, he and his wife had recently welcomed a baby boy so, understandably, she wasn't thrilled about the idea. "I tried to lobby her almost daily," he said. Eventually he wore her down. One day, she turned and said, "Just sell the house."

Before his wife could change her mind, Kibret charged ahead. He sold his house and, with the profits, traveled to Dubai, where he transformed three ordinary vehicles into ambulances to bring back to Ethiopia.

Kibret named his company Tebita. In the Ethiopian language of Amharic, "tebita" means "a drop." To Kibret, it's his approach to problem-solving and changing the world around him.



Kibret on CNN

“If everybody thinks of their ‘drop’ as a contribution to a problem they see, a drop can be an ocean,” he said. “I’m trying to not only challenge the emergency care in this country, but the mindset of everyone, especially young people. They need to think about their drop, their contribution.”

Many people doubted Kibret could take on this problem, but that didn’t stop him from trying. “I had no experience in this field, but it is part of me to try and understand how we can fill the gap,” he said. “When you tell me the problem, I immediately try to look at the potential solution. The gap I saw was the scene of the accident. People were being mishandled in worst-case scenarios and bystanders were causing further damage by bringing someone into the hospital.”

## Tebita today

Since Tebita was founded in 2008, the company has treated more than 65,000 people and trained another 45,000 in emergency first response. For Kibret, one of the most exciting parts of running Tebita today is not only saving lives, but also providing his fellow Ethiopians with employment.

“I say that we save lives two times,” he said. “When our ambulance goes to a place, we save a life. When we create employment, we are also saving a life because I see that those people who are employed with us, working hard with us, being paid a relatively modest salary, are happy.”

Kibret, of course, isn’t satisfied with the status quo. He has ambitions to expand his fleet of ambulances and increase the size of his team from 50 to 500. Eventually, he’d like to expand beyond Addis to other areas of the country and even introduce an air ambulance system. He also wants to see life-saving techniques introduced in elementary and high schools and the workplace. In January 2018 Kibret open the first Paramedic college in Ethiopia and taken 16 students from the lower economic level of the community who can’t afford private college education. These students will be trained for 18 months and those who successfully accomplish the course will be employed in Tebita Ambulance. The cost of the training will be covered by a Norwegian NGO called Partnership for Change (PFC) that supports social entrepreneurs around the globe.

“Any person, if somebody collapses beside them, has no clue about saving a life,” he said. “An ambulance isn’t an ambulance because it has sirens and lights. They’re ambulances when they have a trained person who knows what he’s doing in that chaotic and critical situation.”

For anyone else, these might be grand ambitions. But for Kibret, these aren’t just goals. They’re his destiny. “Mark Twain said there are two important days in your life. The first is the day you are born. The second one is the day that you know why you are on this planet. I’m very clear that I’m on this planet to change the emergency service system of my country.”



The first Tebita Paramedic college students with PFC, CEO Anne – Karin Nygard and Tebita founder Kibret Abebe