Tena Kebena began nine years ago as an effort to restore the health of the Kebena river, which was being used as a garbage dump by most of the 40,000 residents near Addis Ababa’s Central Square., Tena Kebena is a community-based organization which now works to expand urban agriculture and gardening, build awareness of HIV and health issues, and generally support an improved environment in this densely populated urban community, which doesn't even have a designated government health center.

Upon the suggestion of Ato Negash Teklu, PHE Ethiopia Executive Director, we two public health professors visited this area in early July 2012, and were able to observe first-hand that Tena Kebena’s strength is how it works with the youth of the community, providing activities that give them a sense of duty and responsibility for the environment and their own health, as well as hope for their own future. The Elementary Nature Club gets children involved in organic container farming, cleaning the rivers that are still sometimes used as a dump by residents of the high-rises that surround the community, and planting trees. Donations of computers and books allow children and youth to gain exposure to technology and languages that can open doors for their education and employment. On our visit, we were joyfully greeted by the children performing an Amharic song that described the need to take care of the environment, and all the things that the youth could do to help. We were able to see the urban gardens, where bio-intensive and sustainable approaches were being used to grow seasonal vegetables and fruits that supplement the community’s food consumption with nutritious options. Bees were kept in hives near the garden, to help with pollination and produce honey. Artemesia was being grown and sold for profit, mostly to be used in teas for HIV+ patients. Chickens were kept for their eggs. Just before a rainy season deluge, we were able to plant 3 trees, all local indigenous varieties, in the open hillside area that is being re-forested in an effort to keep it from being used as a dump and taken over by the encroaching development, to try keep that space for the health and recreation of the Tena Kebena community.

These diverse activities are being led by the two co-founders, extremely dedicated individuals, largely on a volunteer basis, and without sufficient project resources. Tena Kebena is the kind of grass-roots, community-led organization that makes a difference in community members’ lives, but often without the fanfare or the resources common to other development projects. The project was recognized by UNEP in 2009, when Tena Kebena received the “Champion of the Earth Award”, and UNEP produced an excellent documentary video about the project called “Gardens from Dust”. The reach of this organization’s impact may be limited, but the depth of the difference it is making for this one urban community’s population, health and environment is unmistakable.

Sincerely,
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