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SOMALIA

FIRST PERSON

From Mechanic to Civic Leader

One man's active leadership brings better energy options to an entire region



Photo: Jim Shanor, ADRA

Respected entrepreneurs like Shariif Butaan, left, must be encouraged to take on active leadership roles if meaningful rehabilitation and development will occur.

Shariif Butaan is an enterprising man. As a diesel mechanic in Berbera, Somalia, he rebuilt engines, patching together Russian engines with mismatched generators and German leftovers with British parts. He used a reconditioned generator to supply electricity to his home and to his neighbors, who he charged by the bulb. He became managing director of the Berbera Electrical Enterprise, which supplies almost all the electricity for this port city, and head of the Berbera Fishing Cooperative. He owns commercial carpentry and mechanical workshops and is chairman of an umbrella group of all private electricity companies in Hargeisa. But he has not always been so affluent or influential.

Shariif was raised with little formal education, and after the civil war against former dictator Siad Barre ended, he became frustrated with the limited sources of available power. He eventually came into contact with USAID, which is supporting an economic diversification project that promotes alternative and renewable energy technologies.

USAID helped Shariif engage other energy providers in Burao and Hargeisa to form an electricity cooperative. The providers invested in wind generators to supplement the patchwork system, and they now fulfill much of Hargeisa's electricity needs. To complement this system, Shariif is working to raise the standards for safety and efficiency in electric wiring across northern Somalia. Shariif also spearheads a USAID training program in solar cookery, a method that uses substantially less charcoal than traditional cooking techniques and, therefore, conserves scarce trees. The program uses a standard model of a solar cooker that Shariif himself made improvements to.

Converting Shariif Butaan from a conventional energy magnate to a proponent of renewable energy has been one of the project's greatest achievements. While Somalis have creatively devised formal and informal economic systems to adapt to their state's collapse, the country remains extremely poor and underdeveloped. Respected entrepreneurs like Shariif must be encouraged to take on active leadership roles if meaningful rehabilitation and development will occur. His intelligence and high standing in the community have helped lay a foundation for future progress across the region.

Telling Our Story
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