

Run-to-Win

Harnessing the talent of young Eritreans and ethiopians in Switzerland



For young refugees and migrants to become successful and productive citizens in Switzerland. That is one of the main goals of SINGApreneur Solomon Mengistu's project, Run-to-Win. In an interview with Rossana A. Ammann, Solomon speaks about how he has wanted to start an association that trains young refugees in long-distance running ever since coming to Switzerland as a refugee himself almost 8 years ago.

Alongside developing this project, Solomon works as an interpreter for young migrants and refugees from Eritrea and Ethiopia at [Caritas Lucerne](#) and FABIA (Fachstelle für die Beratung und Integration).

He observed from 2015 onwards that many young Eritreans were arriving as asylum seekers and he wanted to support them. "The youth will learn to be active again," he says. He sees sports as a way to connect young people from different backgrounds and countries; sports as a way to help them develop discipline and structure in their lives; sports as a way to create a winning mindset.

Rossana: Were you a keen sportsman in your homeland?

Solomon: When I was in high-school I was a runner (laughs). I would compete with runners from other schools, but I've never run a marathon or anything like that. But as a hobby I can totally relate to it! Running is a tradition and passion in Eritrea and Ethiopia.

What previous experience do you have in working with the youth?

Solomon: I am a teacher by profession. I studied Biology in Eritrea and I have around 15 years' experience of teaching in Secondary Schools. My experience as a

teacher means that I can work with young people and I understand their behavior and also see their talents and potential.

Solomon radiates warmth, energy and respect when talking about his previous work experience in his native land. He is a self-learner and he proved it by studying German at home during the first two years after his arrival. He also completed a Master's Degree in Health Science from the University of Lucerne in January 2018.

At an Eritrean Diaspora Event in May 2018, he got the chance to openly discuss his project idea for the first time, and it was Valentina from [Capacity](#), a partner of SINGA, that connected him to the [SINGA Factory](#) startup program, where he is now focusing on developing and later launching his association.

Tell us more about your project.

Solomon: It is about athletics and long distance running. Did you know that Eritrea and Ethiopia are two of the foremost countries that produce endurance athletes in this discipline? It is with this understanding, and with the fact that young people want to go further in sports, that I decided to do more. But how? My goal is to empower refugees (especially from Eritrea and Ethiopia), asylum seekers, migrants and Swiss youth, to train with the goal of one day winning a marathon, a championship, or even an Olympic medal. We will start by offering trainings every Saturday at the Allmend Stadium in Lucerne.

How do you think sports can have impact on the participants' lives?

Solomon: Many young refugees have talent and potential on their own, but they have to discover it and become active in that field. If they are, they will develop the discipline required to go further. Solid structure and discipline through sports will help them to connect with other migrants and Swiss communities, improve their way of communicating, their integration and finally enable them to become winners and productive citizens in Switzerland!

In July 2018, Solomon began contacting his target group and about 11 participants have registered for his trainings so far. In October 2018, the first open training took place on the track field at the Allmend Stadium in Lucerne, and even though it was raining and cold, the runners were enthusiastic and are already looking forward to the next training sessions.

As a matter of fact, one of the runners that participated in that first training came 5th in the 10km at the Swiss City Marathon in Lucerne 28th October 2018. "All of that without enough and proper training!" confesses Solomon amidst laughter.

Can beginners participate?

Solomon: It is open for beginners and people who are competitive runners! What's important is: perseverance and having an interest in being active. It's a great opportunity for runners who don't want to do it alone. The focus is on young runners, let's say, from 15 to 30 years old more or less.



Who is supporting you in the trainings?

Solomon: Nesereab Mesfin is an Eritrean runner and will be in charge of the trainings. A young Swiss, Lukas Metziger, who is completing his degree as a sports teacher, is also very interested in the project and will support in the coaching of the participants, giving some nutrition tips etc.

What is your main goal in the upcoming years?

Solomon: Our first goal is to have 5 runners participating in the Swiss City Marathon in Lucerne in 2019. In the next 5 years, we would like to have 5 runners ranking in the top 10 in long-distance running in Switzerland. In 2024, maybe we even have runners competing at the Olympics (laughs)! We know that we have to work hard for that and to make it happen we need a strong team.

The participants decide together with trainers how often the trainings will take place as well as the type of activities they will develop together. Trainings will take

place at Lucerne Allmend in fair weather and Solomon is currently looking for an indoor space to train in bad weather or during the winter months.

Tadesse Abraham, a Swiss-Eritrean runner living in Geneva, European half-marathon champion, who is best known for breaking the Swiss marathon record and taking 7th place in the Rio Olympic Games in 2016, has met with Solomon and is also willing to support him with the project.



What was it like to meet Tadesse and to know that he is interested in your project?

Solomon: It was very nice! He told me that he has been getting involved in similar and personal projects and that you have to work very hard with young runners to hopefully win one day. The idea is that he will come to one of our trainings one day. What an inspiration it would be for the participants to meet him!

“Sports will bring structure and discipline to young refugees’ lives. It will help the youth connect with other migrants and Swiss communities. Sports will improve their communication, their integration process and help them develop a winning mindset. They will be productive citizens in Switzerland.”

With your project, what is your contribution to Switzerland as an entrepreneur?

Solomon: With the association, we will contribute with active and productive citizens with a winning mindset. The youth will have a platform to be properly connected and integrated with Swiss communities and other migrants. We will help them develop a discipline. What's more, participating in sports helps to keep the youth away from bad habits, contributes to the health of communities and facilitates social integration. Through the association, it is also our goal that refugees will have access to psychological therapy to help them deal with the trauma of leaving their homeland.



Until now, what do you find to be the most useful guidance inside the SINGA Factory?

Solomon: I have been learning a lot since I joined! About how can you develop your project and plan your financial model. You also gain insight into what is available in Switzerland, how it works in the country and how it affects your project, how to expand your network and so on.

What would you advise people who would like to start their own social project or business but think they don't have the time, energy or 'perfect moment' to do it?

Solomon: Everybody may have some ideas to implement! It is very important to come to such programs like SINGA, where you learn about how to turn an idea into reality, how to find money, how to connect with others. After some months you will have a plan and a structure. You will meet many people. Here we help and support each other.

What is your daily motto?

Solomon: Learn something new everyday and be open to everything!

This interview was held in English by Venezuelan journalist, storyteller and SINGA volunteer Rossana A. Ammann, who is passionate about multiculturalism, people's stories and organizational development. You can find her work and more about her via [LinkedIn](#)

Rossana Ammann, 2018, October 26th