

# Revolutionising Food Waste Management in Ethiopia: The Lem Chaka

**Geremew Tigabu**

In the bustling city of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, a forward-thinking food waste management company known as Lem Chaka emerged in May 2021. Lem Chaka is on a mission to transform food waste management. Making significant advances quickly, Lem Chaka's journey has shown an early impact on the local environment, educational initiatives, and changes in perceptions about food waste in Addis Ababa. The story began with a modest start. The company launched its operations by gathering food waste from the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Addis Ababa. An ambitious vision backed this humble beginning.

Food waste management has far-reaching implications for climate change and sustainability. Sehinie Negede, the co-founder and general manager at Lem Chaka, highlights the role of waste management in building resilience against climate change and environmental shocks. A resilient environment reduces internal displacement, conflicts over dwindling resources, and enhances overall security. Lem Chaka started with the goal of transforming food waste into highly nutritious compost. This organic compost is rich in nutrients and has the potential to rejuvenate soil, promoting more sustainable agriculture and food production.

Lem Chaka's food waste management process begins as the collected food waste is mixed with grasses and coffee parchment, which are left to decompose on the ground for fifteen days, followed by re-mixing and turning. This process is repeated, and after a month and a half, the compost is carefully sorted for the final product. The resulting compost is odour-free and packed with soil-benefiting nutrients, ready for use. The compost is available for sale in 10 kg sizes for pick up or delivery.<sup>1</sup>

After partnering with the Hyatt Regency Hotel, Lem Chaka expanded its scope, forging partnerships with renowned establishments such as the Hilton Hotel, Aifa Foods, and local restaurants. The company expanded its efforts to include fruit and vegetable markets within the city, showcasing its commitment to tackling food waste across various sectors. These partnerships expanded the scale of their organic composting.

While rapidly expanding its partnerships, Lem Chaka was encountering resistance from local authorities. When the company began its operations on rented land, local authorities became concerned when they noticed what appeared to be waste being brought to the area. Both the neighbourhood and the authorities were worried that this waste could cause bad smells and lead to the location turning into a trash dumping ground.

These challenges created a realisation. Bridging the gap and collaborating with local communities was crucial to creating a more harmonious and

<sup>1</sup> Lem Chaka's compost can be purchased at Tryst Olympia or Effoi Atlas. Delivery options are available through Zmall.

sustainable waste management system. Yayehyirad Gezu, co-founder and production manager at the company, emphasises using indigenous knowledge to change perceptions about farming and land use. An example of Lem Chaka's approach was its partnership with Udet NGO and Rotary International to work with the community along the Merkato Shanqila River. Sharing farming techniques and their compost, they worked with the community to produce compost and vegetables on the riverside. Within weeks, the participants could grow vegetables, improving their livelihoods and contributing to a healthier environment.

The public's perspective on waste management was another challenge. Lem Chaka had to use trial and error and employ creative approaches to change mindsets and behaviours. The company expanded its partnerships with schools. They were seeing the importance of taking an active role in educating the youth about sustainable living and waste management. Their educational engagement aims to give young people the knowledge and skills to make informed waste management and environmental conservation decisions. This proactive approach aims for the next generation to be well-prepared to address environmental challenges.

Finally, they knew they needed to bring policymakers along. Lem Chaka acknowledges the importance of supporting policy changes to create a more sustainable waste management ecosystem. They noted a need for more legislation and effective enforcement of existing waste management laws and regulations. By making composting a legal requirement, a significant step can be taken towards a more secure and sustainable future. It's a vision that Lem Chaka is championing in Ethiopia's policy discourse.

Starting as a small composting outfit, Lem Chaka has transformed into a leader in the transition toward food waste recycling in Ethiopia. The company's commitment to turning food waste into nutrient-rich compost, educating the youth, advocating for policy changes, and using creative approaches to engage communities is already showing replicable results on the local environment, education, and the security landscape. With ambitious long-term goals and a dedication to indigenous knowledge, Lem Chaka is well-poised to lead Ethiopia in recycling its food waste and shifting towards sustainable living. Their vision is not just about managing waste; it's about building resilience, healing the land, and contributing to a healthier and more secure future.

## **Photographer Information & Contact**

Geremew Tigabu is an accomplished photographer based in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. With over nine years of experience in the field, he has built a reputation in documentary photography. Geremew began his career as a freelance photographer before joining the leading newspaper Fortune (circulated in Ethiopia) as a photojournalist. After several years of practicing photojournalism, he co-founded Stops Creative Communication Plc and worked as an Art Director. Today, he continues to work as a freelance photographer, bringing his unique perspective to a wide range of projects. Geremew's work has been recognised both locally and internationally. He exhibited his works at the prestigious Addis Foto Fest in 2016, He was also part of the Young African Photographers exhibition at the Alliance Ethio Francaise in 2018, Capture Addis at the City Hall in 2019, and at Lagos Photo-Home Museum in 2020. In addition to his artistic achievements, Geremew is a member of the African Photojournalism Database (APJD) and was one of the winners of the 'Celebrate Africa Photography Competition' in 2017, organised by PicFair and Canon, He was short-listed for the Ugandan Press Photo 2021 and His project 'Eye of the Storm' was shortlisted for the CAP Prize 2023. His works have been featured in prominent print and online platforms including The Guardian, Wired, CNN, and the World Press Photo. Geremew's passion for photography is evident in his thought-provoking images, which capture the essence of the human experience. Through his lens, he tells stories that are both powerful and poignant, showcasing the beauty and complexity of life in Ethiopia and beyond.



**Degfie unloading the collected food w  
at the farm.**



**waste from Hyatt Regency and Hilton Hotels**



**Degfie and his friends unloading the  
and Hilton Hotels at the farm.**



collected food waste from Hyatt Regency





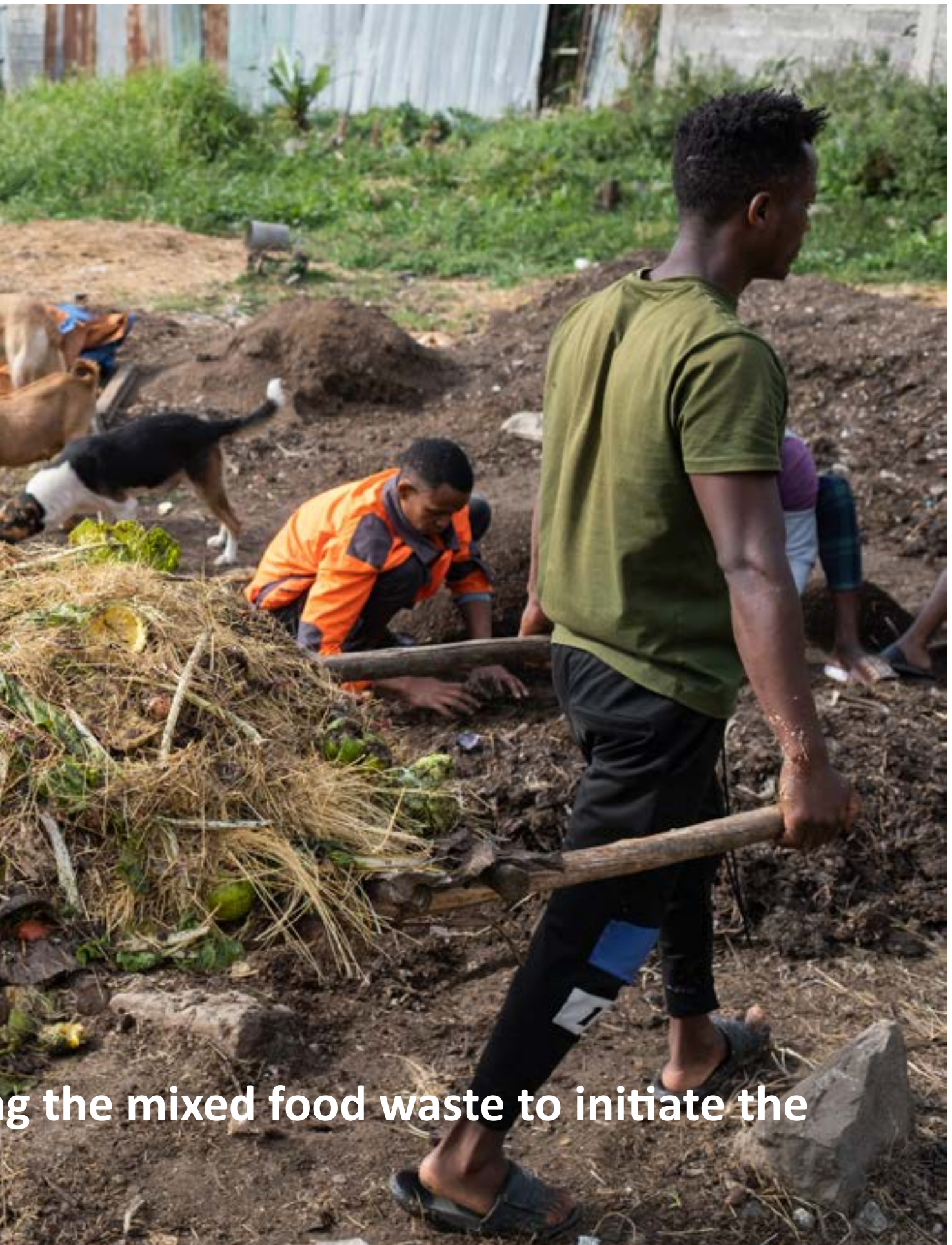
Degfie, Temamen, and Eskindir b



blending the food waste for composting.



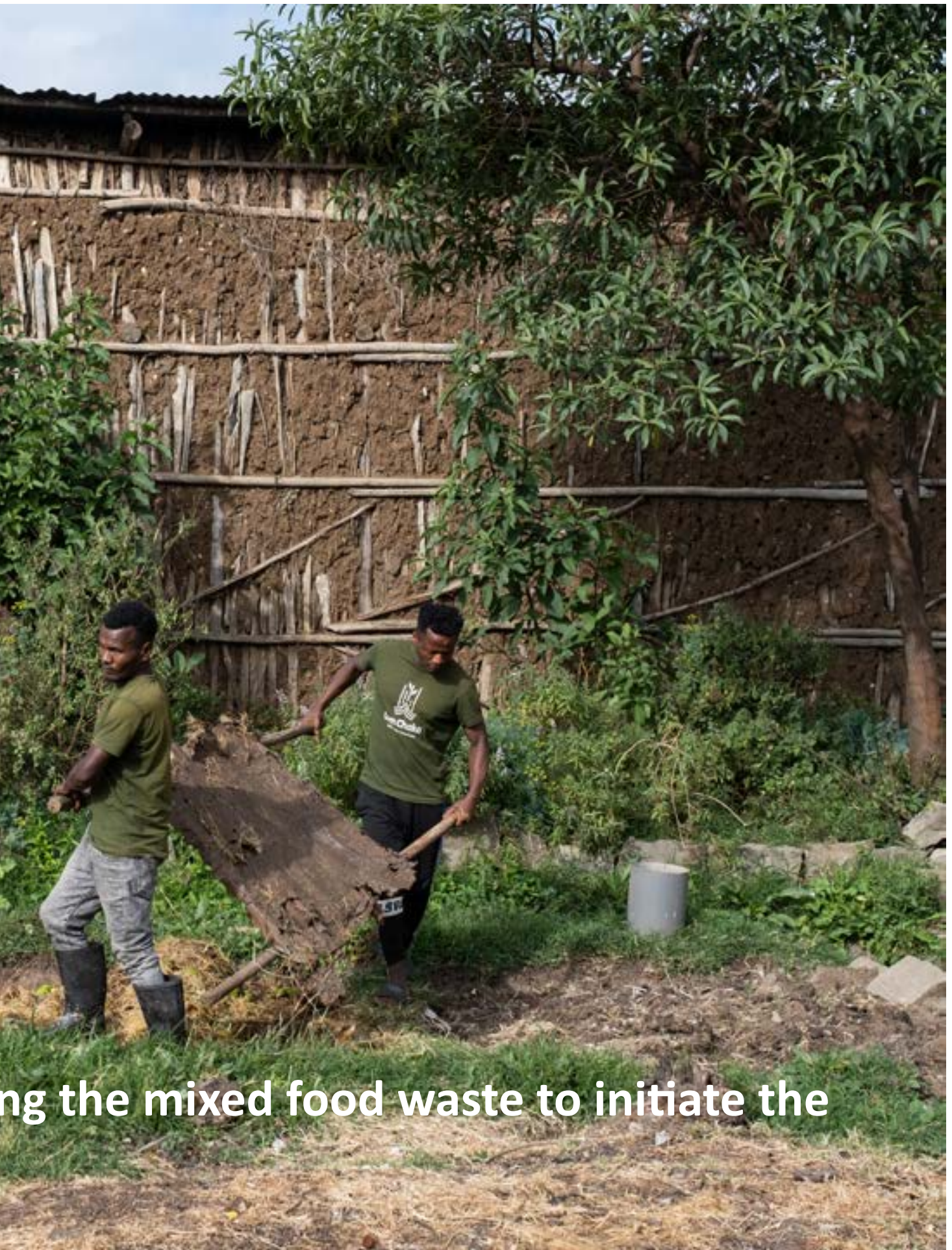
**Degfie and Temamen transferring composting process.**



g the mixed food waste to initiate the



**Degfie and Temamen transferring  
composting process.**



ng the mixed food waste to initiate the



**Mixing the blended food waste with**



...dried teff grasses for optimal composting.





**A glimpse of the mixed food waste that  
ends up on the ground.**



**at has undergone weeks of transformation**



**Degfie takes a moment for a portrait within the farm.**



**Temamen in a reflective moment within the farm.**



The team carefully selecting unwarmed



nted elements from the dried compost.



**The team carefully selecting unwa**



**anted elements from the dried compost.**





**The team fills fifty-kilogram b**



ags with the nutrient-rich compost.



**The team fills fifty-kilogram b**



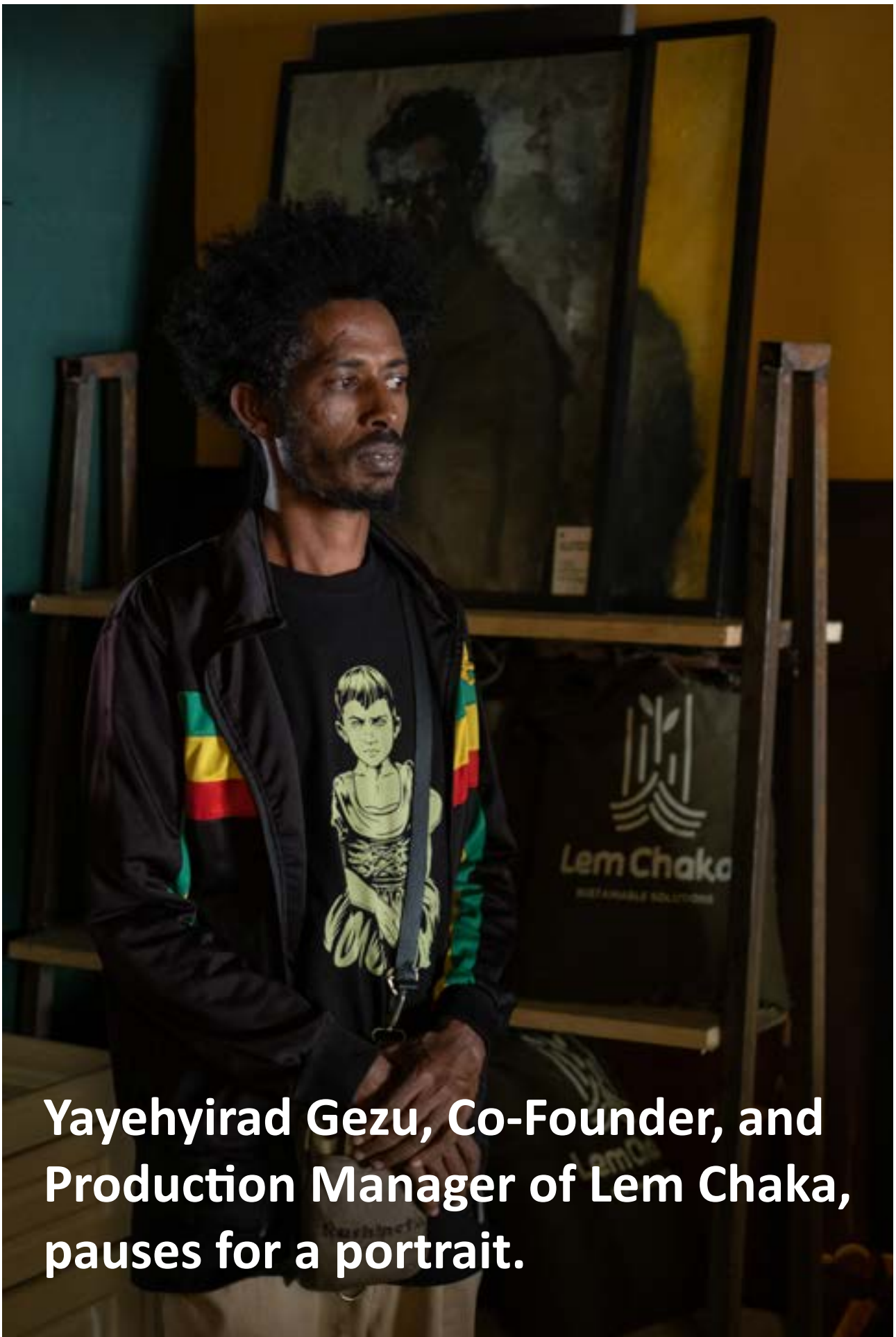
ags with the nutrient-rich compost.



**From left to right; Temamen, Natnael, Deg for a portrait.**



gffie, Eskindir, and Mengistu take a moment



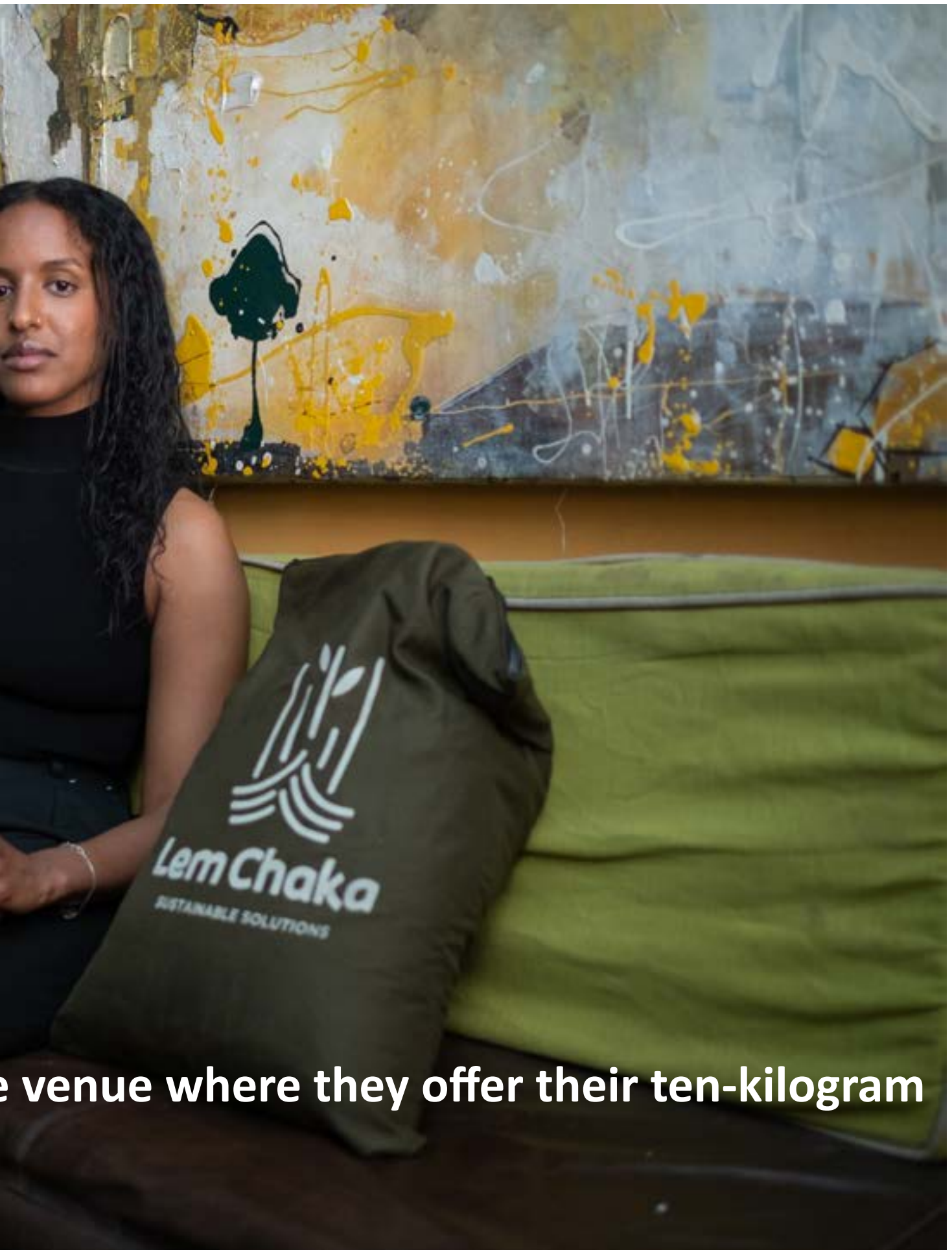


**Sihine Negede, Co-Founder, and General Manager of Lem Chaka takes a moment for a portrait.**





**Yayehyirad and Sihine at Tryst Addis, the compost for sale.**



the venue where they offer their ten-kilogram

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