

The Effect of Social Ties on Engagement & Cohesion among Ethiopian Students



A randomized evaluation showed that connecting students with representatives of civil society and interested peers caused a lasting increase in civic participation. This low-cost intervention provides a great model for promoting youth engagement.

In an impact evaluation of youth engagement workshops in Ethiopia, called Tolerant Engagement Forums (TEF), our study found that connecting university students with representatives of civil society and interested peers was a fast, cost-effective way to increase participation with civil society groups. Importantly, this was true for both men and women and for students from different ethnic backgrounds. Our findings indicate that participation in a TEF had a significant and positive impact on increasing students' civic engagement with non-government institutions and organizations. However, we also found that the TEF had only minimal effects on increasing political engagement with government and political parties and no impact on political and ethnic tolerance or social cohesion.

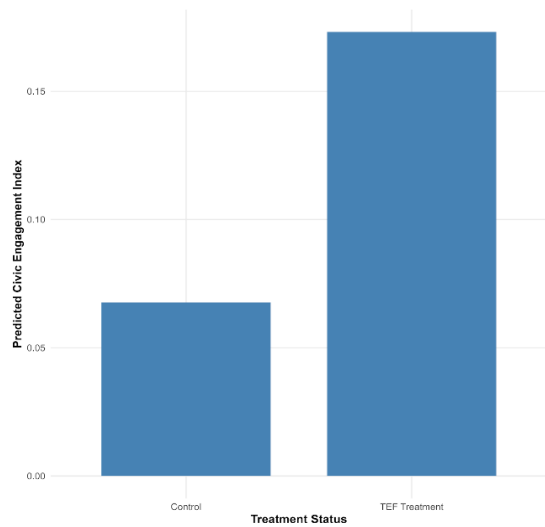
Our project focused on engagement and social cohesion amongst students at Addis Ababa University. Ethiopia's youth have played a central role in the massive political changes the country has undergone in recent years. Yet overall, Ethiopian youth are less civically and politically engaged, meaning they vote, attend community meetings, and join civic organizations at much lower rates than older citizens (Sabu, 2020a). At the same time, the country is experiencing a significant youth bulge, the second largest in Africa, with roughly 30% of the population aged 15-29 (Desta et al 2018). Improving youth participation in civic and political life is thus crucial for fostering inclusion amongst a large share of the Ethiopian population.

Can a 1-day workshop boost engagement and reduce intolerance?

To answer this question, our research team partnered with Initiative for Peace and Development, an Ethiopian non-governmental organization, to implement and rigorously evaluate the impact of tolerant engagement forums (TEF) designed to promote youth engagement while mitigating the potential for political and social conflict. The TEF consisted of both large group sessions where ~100 students (per workshop) connected with representatives from civil society and

government organizations, as well as smaller group sessions of ~10 students from diverse backgrounds engaging in a structured inter-ethnic contact and political dialogue. We used a randomized control trial (RCT) to evaluate the causal impact of the TEF workshop on students' engagement and attitudes towards members of other political and ethnic groups. Our RCT estimated the impact of the intervention by comparing outcomes for students who were invited to the TEFs (~350) against outcomes for "counterfactual" students that were randomly selected to not participate in the TEFs (~470). We measured outcomes using an endline survey of students conducted 4 months after the TEF workshops were held.

TEFs Increase Civic Engagement in the 4 Months after Attendance



Results from our endline survey show that participation in the TEF had a significant and positive impact on increasing students' civic engagement. Figure 1 shows a large increase in civic engagement for the treatment group. Additionally, the effect was particularly large among attendees that formed new social ties as a result of their participation in the workshop. This increase in civic engagement was also significant for both women and ethnic minority students, suggesting that the TEF is an effective tool for boosting participation amongst students from both dominant and marginalized groups. However, we also found that the TEF had only minimal effects on political engagement and social cohesion.

Figure 1 Civic Engagement by Treatment/Control

Scaling the TEF for Civic Engagement Across Ethiopia

The TEF model offers a fast, cost-effective intervention that can be scaled-up to increase youth civic engagement around the country. By working with an Ethiopian organization to implement the TEF, we found a local solution to the problem of low youth engagement. Our results suggest that local organizations around the country could replicate this model at Ethiopia's other universities to enhance the civic engagement of students. Furthermore, these organizations could work with local researchers to experiment with different levels of focus and intensity in the TEF workshop in order to strengthen its effects on reducing social and political conflict and intolerance.

Project Information

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