

Increasing Youth Civic Engagement Through Tolerant Engagement Forums: Lessons from a Randomized Control Trial

I. Introduction

This brief summarizes the findings of a youth engagement and tolerance intervention in Ethiopia and provides recommendations for policy makers, practitioners, and donors seeking to replicate and expand on similar programming. Ethiopia's youth played a central role in the massive political changes the country has undergone in recent years since 2015. In the face of brutal state repression, youth groups orchestrated sustained, cross-ethnic protests, ultimately securing a transition of power and extensive liberalization, including the release of thousands of political prisoners and the repeal of the 2009 CSO Law that decimated civil society.¹ These successes belie the reality that the political mobilization of Ethiopia's youth has been uneven and has not translated into government policies targeted at addressing youth related issues. In Ethiopia, like many other countries, youth tend to vote, attend community meetings, and join civic organizations at much lower rates than older citizens (Sabu, 2020). Yet, 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). Youth bulges have been shown to increase the risk of civil conflict when they coincide with a lack of youth engagement and opportunity (Barakat & Urdal 2009). Thus, increasing youth participation in civic and political life is crucial for fostering policies that better serve the youth population.

Key points

- A Tolerant Engagement Forum (TEF) is a one day event in which ~100 student attendees connect with representatives from civil society and government organizations and participate in a structured inter-ethnic dialogue with 10-12 students from diverse backgrounds.
- Through a randomized control trial (RCT) we found that TEFs increased *civic* engagement, including among students from both dominant and marginalized groups.
- Our research found that the TEF was most effective at increasing both political and civic engagement among attendees that formed new social ties in the event.
- Tolerant Engagement Forums are a fast and cost-effective way to increase civic engagement amongst university students.

To help address this challenge, this policy brief provides an overview of the design and results of an impact evaluation of a youth engagement workshop, called a Tolerant Engagement Forum (TEF), funded by USAID via [LASER PULSE²](https://laserpulse.org/). We find that **tolerant engagement forums (TEF) are a cost-effective way to increase civic engagement amongst university students**. We discuss our project and findings, then we present several recommendations based on this work for policymakers and practitioners interested in improving youth engagement.

¹ Ethiopia: Abiy's First Year as Prime Minister, Review of Freedom of Association', April 4, 2019. [Human Rights Watch](https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/04/04/ethiopia-abiy-s-first-year-as-prime-minister).

² <https://laserpulse.org/>



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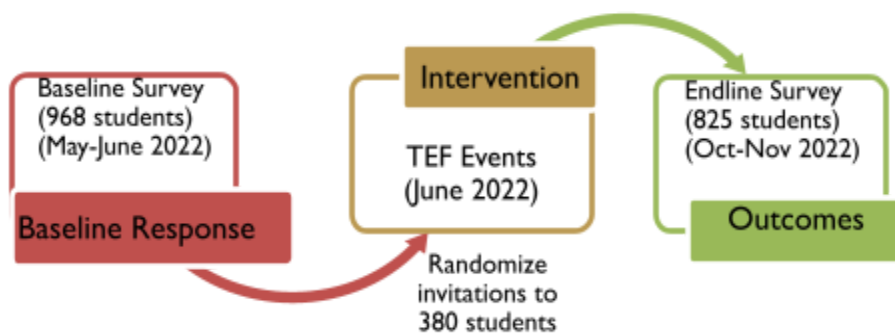
2. Tolerant Engagement Forums

Cognizant of the Ethiopian context, our project rigorously evaluated the impact of structured dialogue forums (TEF) designed to promote youth civic engagement while mitigating the potential for political and social conflict. The TEF consisted of two important parts. The first part involved large group sessions where around 100 student attendees were connected with representatives from civil society and government organizations with the aim of providing all youth participants with information about specific opportunities. The second part consisted of smaller group sessions of 10-12 students from diverse backgrounds engaging in a structured inter-ethnic contact and political dialogue. The overall goals of the TEF design was to 1) increase youth engagement in both civic and political life via these actionable opportunities, while also 2) improving social and political tolerance amongst the attendees.

3. Methods

Randomized Controlled Trial: We used a randomized control trial (RCT) to evaluate the causal impact of the TEF workshop. RCTs estimate the impact of an intervention by comparing outcomes for people who participate in an intervention (called a treatment group) against outcomes for people who did not participate in the intervention (called a control group). This technique provides a straightforward way to understand program effects and how outcomes would be different if the intervention had not taken place. The random assignment of treatment and control groups is the most scientifically rigorous way to establish the impacts of an intervention and is considered the “gold standard” in program evaluation. Our study randomly invited individual students to attend the TEF. Figure 1 provides an overview of the research process, including the timing of data collection and the TEF intervention.

Figure 1: The Intervention and Research Process



Responses for the baseline survey were collected in May-June, 2022. We randomly selected participants by drawing on a listing of all enrolled undergraduate students at Addis Ababa University, with a criteria of excluding students that would graduate during the RCT. We captured responses from a total of 968 students at baseline. Of these baseline respondents, 909 were at least somewhat interested in receiving an invitation to the TEF event. We then randomly invited 380 students³ to attend a one day TEF event, while the other 529 baseline respondents remained in a control group that did not attend an event. The

³ To ensure that a sufficiently diverse group of students were invited to the event, we block-randomized the invitations on the gender and ethnic minority status of potential participants.

TEF events were hosted and facilitated by Initiative for Peace and Development, an Ethiopian non-governmental organization. A total of 257 invited students were able to attend one of the workshops over the course of three days in June 2022. The endline survey was conducted approximately four months later in October-November, 2022.⁴

4. Major Findings

Our study measured the impact of the TEF on both political and civic engagement, defining political engagement as engagement with government institutions and political parties and civic engagement as engagement with non-government institutions and organizations. Overall, our analysis indicates that the TEF had a significant and positive impact on **increasing civic engagement**, though it did not increase overall *political* engagement in a statistically significant way. The TEF attendees had much higher levels of overall civic engagement in the 4 months after the workshop than did respondents in our control group. This increase in civic engagement is 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**. Additional analysis suggests that the TEF was most effective for both political and civic engagement among attendees that formed **new social ties** as a result of their participation in the workshop. Finally, the TEF appears to have also increased sectarian forms of engagement, such as joining an ethnic or religious organization, and did not change political and ethnic tolerance or attitudes regarding social cohesion. Importantly, it did not increase intolerance or



conflict amongst participants on average, which is encouraging since students often discussed sensitive topics regarding the country's political and security situations during the TEF events.

Overall, the results suggest that the TEF provides a cost-effective way to increase civic engagement amongst

university students, by building social ties between participants and connecting them to civil society organizations. Given the prevalence of the youth-engagement gap across many countries and contexts, and the increasing importance of aligning government policy with youth interests as youth populations surge in many regions, this is an exciting finding. However, concerns about increased engagement contributing to ethnic tensions remain since we do not see improvements in tolerance in our study. In the final section, we return to these considerations and make recommendations for how to increase civic engagement while mitigating the risk of conflict and polarization..

⁴ The endline surveys were conducted online via Qualtrics by contacting all baseline survey recipients. Our endline survey did not suffer from significant attrition (~91% follow-up rate). The attrition that did occur was also balanced between treatment and control groups in the experiment (totalling 353 students from the treatment group and 472 students from the control group).

5. Policy Recommendations

Drawing on our results, our team would make the following recommendations for policymakers and practitioners, particularly those interested in increasing youth civic engagement:

Recommendation 1:

Scale TEF Workshops to Increase Student Engagement

First, we recommend that the Tolerant Engagement Forum be expanded to include other universities around Ethiopia in an effort to increase student engagement in civil society. Our recommendation is based on our finding that the TEF increased civic engagement without increasing levels of intolerance or social conflict. Further, it has a positive effect on political engagement when social ties can be established between TEF attendees. Not only can youth make a positive impact on the strength and diversity of civil society in the current time period, many students will go on to hold important positions in the future. The practice of the TEF workshops should be expanded into other universities, including those outside of Addis Ababa, to aid in increasing engagement.

Recommendation 2:

Invest Additional Resources to Increase Intensity of Workshops

While the broader literature on social contact suggests that inter-group contact and dialogue can improve tolerance and cohesion, we do not find such effects in our study. We posit that one potential source for this lack of change was the limited scope of our intervention, which entailed only one day of contact between student participants. Additional days of organized dialogue would help to encourage stronger social ties between students of different identities and would potentially provide a stronger basis for enhancing social and political tolerance. Furthermore, designing additional sessions that focus on improving tolerance and forming persistent connections between students from different ethnic and political backgrounds would help to guard against potentially increasing sectarian and conflictual forms of engagement. Dedicating at least an entire day of the intervention to reducing partisan conflict and polarization has been shown to be effective in the United States (Barron et al, 2022), though it may take longer to achieve such effects in contexts where divisions are based on different types of identities (e.g. Lowe 2021) and in countries with ongoing or recently concluded violent civil conflicts (e.g. Mousa 2020).

Recommendation 3:

Expand TEF Workshops to Non-Student Youth Participants

While university students are an important group to target for civic and political engagement, they are also relatively privileged compared to youth with lower levels of access to education. Yet, less educated youth would also benefit, perhaps even more than student populations, from structured opportunities to become involved in civic and political activities since these kinds of opportunities are typically not available to them in most contexts.



6. References

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