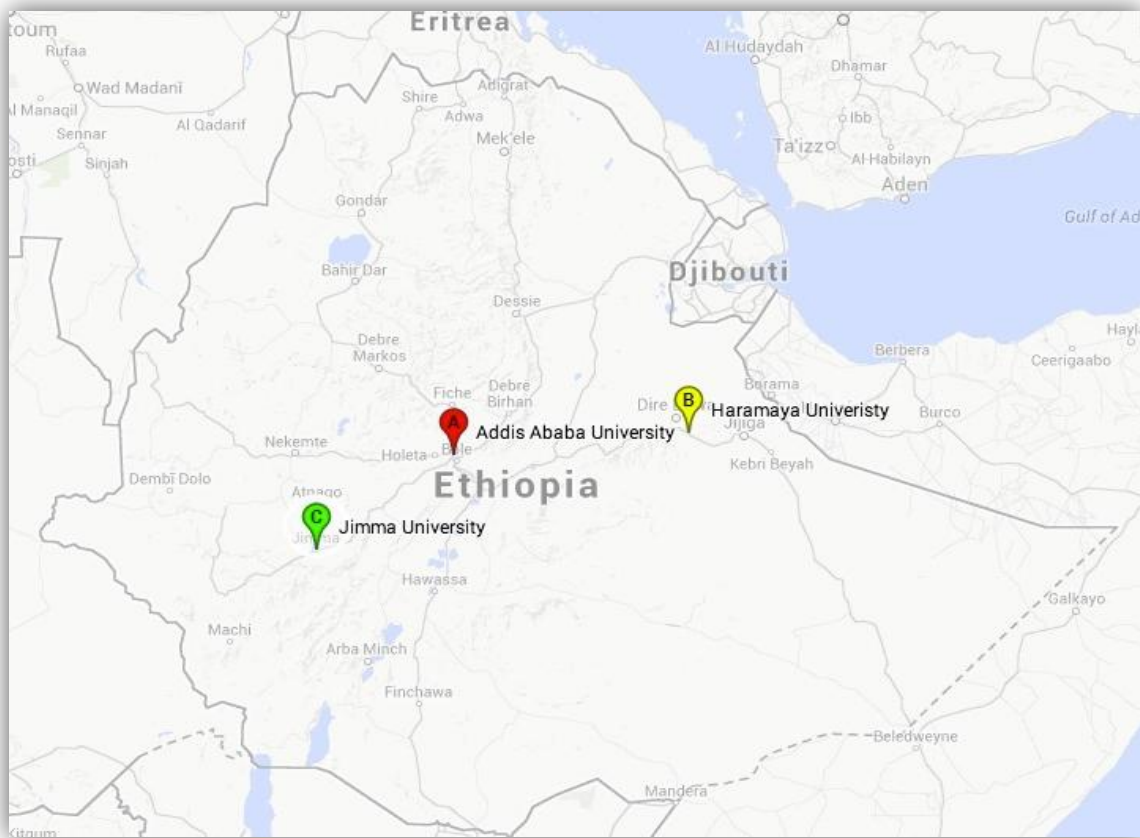# Six years of Sustained Dialogue at Ethiopian Universities

The Ethiopia Programme of the Life & Peace Institute

The Life & Peace Institute (LPI) is an international and ecumenical centre that supports and promotes non-violent approaches to conflict transformation through a combination of research and action that entails the strengthening of existing local capacities and enhancing preconditions for building peace.

LPI Ethiopia Programme
www.life-peace.org/where-we-work/ethiopia/

The importance of the university campus in Ethiopia

Universities and conflict

Conflicts in Ethiopia are fomented by structural as well as historical factors; both of which are driven by cultural dimensions. With internal dimensions and external triggers, ethnic and religious identity serves as a key mobilizing ground for conflict in Ethiopia.[1] Where the two overlap, the division between identity groups is magnified and ethnic-based and religious-based grievances are compounded. University campuses are the primary locations for the coming together of the composite groups of Ethiopian societies, as students from different groups live in close proximity, often for the first time, to others. Nevermore is this true than on university campuses in the capital city Addis Ababa where students from all regions and ethnic and religious backgrounds come together in a central location. Indeed, Addis Ababa University (AAU) has been particularly prone to violent inter-ethnic clashes in the last decade.

Modern history has brought into stark relief the critical role of the university campus in setting the tone for peace and conflict in the country. This pertains not only to student mobilization and demonstrations that lead to violent clashes, but also to the less obvious impact of the cascading effects of the divisions and zero sum attitudes solidified in university students as they bring home hardened views towards other groups. University students become leaders of movements in their communities; and communities generally have less potential for engagement with other groups to deconstruct the pernicious effects of 'othering', as students might on campus.

How to work for peace in Ethiopia

LPI has supported peace work in Ethiopia since 1991. Through partnerships with traditional leaders, NGOs and church-based institutions, LPI has supported several locally driven initiatives over the years. In 2009, the operational space for peace work in Ethiopia was limited by the Charities and Societies Proclamation (CSP). Control was placed on most nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) engaged in work related to human rights, conflict resolution and governance. Yet, in spite of the challenge, opportunities remained for civil society to engage on peace issues within a legal framework—one that would engage with government and affect change within the system. There were four main institutional channels for such engagement: higher education, religious entities, informal civil society actors such as elders, and CSP exempted local civil society organizations (CSOs).

After the CSP, LPI chose to focus on its work with academic partners, Addis Ababa University (AAU) in particular. Cooperation with the University was formalized through a MoU, tasking LPI to support capacity building in conflict transformation theory and practice of Ethiopian academia and students clubs, working to enhance the University's role in promoting tolerance and dialogue.

Choosing Sustained Dialogue

Timeline of LPI support of Sustained Dialogue in Ethiopia	
2009	LPI introduced Sustained Dialogue to Addis Ababa University
2009/10	SD project began in earnest at Addis Ababa University's Sidist Kilo campus.
2010/11	LPI standardized its methodology for SD, working with the AAU Peace Club to design, implement and evaluate a dialogue project on campus aimed at improving relations between students from different ethnic backgrounds.
2010/11	LPI collaborated with researchers to design an assessment to understand better the effects of dialogue.
2011/12	The AAU Peace Club became self-sufficient and managed the whole cycle of dialogue by itself.
2012/13	The AAU administration begins funding the SD project and expands to other AAU campuses
2013	LPI expands the Sustained Dialogue program to Haramaya University and Jimma University in Oromiya region -- in partnership with the Peace and Development Centre (PDC)
2014	LPI and PDC revisits SD curriculum to accommodate student feedback on the importance of inter-faith dialogue & gender, adding to previous inter-ethnic focus.

LPI believes sustainable peace requires cultivating a culture of trust, of mutual interdependence and engagement in good faith with a focus on changes in relationships as the primary results. On university campuses, this means students of diverse backgrounds need a space of interaction with others in ways that are constructive, which can break down barriers and the need for violent reactions to triggers.

Sustained Dialogue[ii] programs on campuses are meant to fill a need for a place to express feelings students may have in a safe and controlled space.

Sustained Dialogue operates under a theory of change that posits, If students from different backgrounds come together on a regular basis and discuss issues of difference that affect them, then, over time, because of that prolonged interaction with each other, they will build trust, break down barriers and move people who would not normally interact to constructive and collaborative action.

LPI also believes SD on campuses can influence peace in larger contexts. First, young educated elites serve as key constituencies that various groups seek to mobilize for peace and conflict; SD programme could help ensure they are critical about mobilization to inter-group conflict. Secondly, SD programmes and training can develop the future leaders of society with a belief in the power of dialogue. Third, and importantly, universities are trend-setters in the socio-political context of the country, acting as catalysts for both peace and conflict. Through SD and its impact, campuses can model peaceful co-existence. As AAU university president, Dr Admasu Tsegaye, said at the Peace Club's closing ceremony, 12 December 2012:

"AAU has always had a multiplier effect in the country – whatever takes root at AAU is bound to transmit to society – and it is key to be able to dialogue and debate and have different opinions without resorting to violent conflict – if AAU gets it right, so can Ethiopia."

The reach of Sustained Dialogue at Addis Ababa University

Over the three years that LPI supported SD at AAU through its partnership with the AAU Peace Club (2009-2011), over 650 students were engaged in bi-weekly dialogues on the issue of inter-ethnic intolerance on campus. As seen in Table 1, the level of participation grew substantially over the period. This expansion was due to the rapid improvement of the Peace Club's ability to manage the dialogue groups. Gender balance with the participants and moderators also improved due to an increasing awareness of the necessity and benefit from including female perspectives on campus conflicts. This had been in a challenge from the outset as conflict related issues are seen as political and engaging in politics is commonly understood as a dangerous and exclusive undertaking and largely reserved for men in the Ethiopian context. Key to sustaining the gender balance were lessons learnt on how best to attract and retain female student moderators who could serve as role models for female students who would otherwise fear to engage. By 2011/2012, the Peace Club found that religious and ethnic diversity of participants was visibly improved, as the number of students with Islam background and from ethnic minorities (from "peripheral areas" of the country) increased.

Sustained Dialogue Overview	Academic Year				
	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14
Number of dialogue groups	15	17	22	-	52
Number of participants	169	204	280	450	600
Percentage of moderators who are female	20-30%	20-30%	50%	-	30%

Table 1. Scale of Sustained Dialogue over time

The 2009/10 academic year started with 15 groups of about 10 students each and 30 moderators (2 moderators per group) who met every two weeks and held dialogue sessions over issues of pertinence. A total of 180 students underwent the program. In the 2010/11 academic year, the SD project continued with the same number of participants and moderators; that means 180 additional students were part of the project at the same campus. During the third year (2011/12) the number of SD participants rose to 240 (200 and 40 moderators) still at Sidist Kilo campus. In the 2012/13 academic year SD expanded to other two campuses of AAU-Arat kilo and Debre Zeit campuses-and a total of 500 students were involved in the project that year in all the three campuses. In 2013-14, the number of students dialoguing reached 600.

Sustainability achieved at AAU

LPI's capacity support plan was from its inception geared towards gradually handing over the SD project to the AAU Peace Club, making it a student-led process thereby ensuring its sustainability. By the third round of SD (2011/12), the Peace Club became self-sufficient and managed the whole cycle of dialogue by itself, including providing three types of trainings to fellow students (dialogue moderation, peer-led training facilitation and general dialogue skills). The Peace Club was able to do so while also managing more and increasingly diverse groups of dialogue participants. After LPI's handover, the student dialogues have continued. In the 2012/13 academic year, the Peace Club expanded their SD program to two other campuses of AAU---Arat kilo and Debre Zeit campuses---and a total of 500 students were involved in the project that year in all the three campuses.

The SD program is ongoing to date with financial support from the university administration and no major external support. Thanks to the Club's effort at establishing strong collaboration with the University administration, the University Administration acknowledged the benefit of the dialogue program for the larger university community and agreed to fund the program from its own underfunded budget. In 2012/13, the AAU administration allocated approximately Br. 42,000 (~2,130 USD) annually for SD. Convinced by the results and utility of SD, the administration has increased by more than four-fold its budgetary support to the program by allocating 182,000 Br (~9,230 USD) for 2013/14 academic year.

In 2014, the Sustained Dialogue programs exist on 3 campuses of AAU,* 600 students are participating in SD .

Between 2009-2014, the SD program in AAU run by the Peace Club has involved **1,700** students.

* Campuses include: Sidist Kilo, Arat Kilo & Debre Zeit

Expansion of the Sustained Dialogue programme

Collaborating with the Peace and Development Center

In partnership with the Peace and Development Centre (PDC) – a CSP exempted local NGO – LPI has introduced the SD project in two additional federal universities, Haramaya University and Jimma University, both of which are located in Oromia Region. PDC, with whom LPI had engaged prior to the 2009 CSP, is a strategic choice of partner for the SD program: by building the capacity of PDC with skills for dialogue, LPI increases the chance that SD could spread further throughout the country as PDC is one of few organizations mandated to work on peace throughout the country. This also ensures that civil society in Ethiopia is equipped with skills for nonviolent conflict transformation.

Launching SD

Building on the foundational SD model developed by Harold Saunders, the experiences from the work with the AAU Peace Club, LPI and PDC have refined the mode of launching SD on campuses.

- First, PDC and LPI undertake a survey to identify pressing issues in the campus that trigger violent conflicts as well as the actors that should be involved in the SD project.

- Next, PDC and LPI train selected student leaders in leadership to equip them with the skills necessary to take the lead of the SD project implementation.

- After the training, the leaders select potential moderators who will be trained in skills needed to moderate the SD sessions.

- Dialogue participants are then selected by the leaders and PDC from the overall group of interested applicants, and sometimes recruitments, and a kick-off is organized to begin the SD process.

- PDC and LPI conduct a baseline self-assessment survey during the kick off with participants; this tool is used to compare levels of trust, respect and relationships among participants over time, and is triangulated with other qualitative data collected.

- Finally, dialogue sessions begin and progress in established phases, culminating in collaborative actions is evaluated.

Since April 2013, PDC has been implementing the SD project in Haramaya University (HU) in collaboration with the university administration and the university Peer Mediation for Peace and Security Club. The SD project involves 25 groups of 10 students each and 50 moderators---a total of 300 participants. Sustained dialogue at Jimma University began in November 2013, and though it is in the initial phases, it is projected to involve 300 participants. The AAU Peace Club will also expand its SD work to yet another campus, Salale, in the 2014/15 academic year. Thus in 2014/15, SD will be on going at a minimum of six of the major campuses in the country.

Baseline survey questionnaire being filled in by students at Haramaya University (Dec 2013)

Measuring the impact of Sustained Dialogue

An experience with testing the model, evidence from a randomized control trial

The first round of SD at AAU was conducted in tandem with an impact assessment project, utilising randomised intervention methodology. The main aim was to measure the impact of dialogue, specifically, the attitudinal and behavioural changes in participants after a year of intense inter-ethnic dialogue.

The study was conducted with 745 students (SD participants and a "control group") and the major findings generally validated the assumptions of dialogue.

- SD-participation increased trust. The study found that 27 per cent of SD-participants felt that people can generally be trusted versus 17 per cent of non-participants.

- SD-participation also increased the perception of accommodation of "the other". Results showed 67 per cent of SD-participants perceive themselves as accommodative in interaction with other ethnic groups versus 59 per cent of non-participants.

The study also found unexpected changes in participants in relation to the importance they placed on ethnic identity.

- SD-participation heightened the sense of importance of ethnic belonging. In the study, 40 per cent of SD-participants vs. 20 per cent non-SD participants deemed ethnicity "very important".
- SD-participation also increased the perception of being discriminated against, with 34 per cent of SD vs. 24 per cent of non-SD participants stating they felt others discriminated against them.

This finding suggests that the SD fora provided the participants with an unprecedented amount of space to reflect upon one's identity.

The study also concluded that SD had no visible effects on "laboratory behaviour", as measured by an experimental trust game related to monetary interactions in the confines of an experiment. The method of measuring the behavioural aspect of trust can be questioned. The researchers themselves concede that the self-reporting attitudinal surveys measured a broader, more general form of trust, while the experiment with trust games was more focused on monetary aspects of trust. Thus, this type of trust game might be less suited for measuring inter-ethnic trust, as it did not have any ethnic dimensions, whereas the attitudinal survey posed direct questions related to ethnicity.

The differences between participants and non-participants may have not been as dramatic as expected. It can be partly attributed to the fact that the impact assessment was done on the first round of SD when the capacity of the Peace Club to implement a dialogue project was still nascent. Also, the final stage of the dialogue, collaborative campus action, which has the potential for great impact on behaviour, was not strongly developed in the first round of SD and continues to be a challenge in the implementation of SD to date.

A range of self-reported outcomes of Sustained Dialogue
In addition to the study above, there have been many positive outcomes from the SD project in the university recorded by the AAU Peace Club in the student survey and in regular meetings with student moderators. SD participants reported a range of changes at the individual and inter-personal level:

- **Dialogue increased students' communication skills**. Students have reported that participation in SD developed their communication skills, and this helped them in their interaction with people in and outside of their campus. For example, after students went through the dialogue sessions, they reported they were better able to communicate with other students regardless of their ethnic or religious backgrounds. They also can now make friends with students from different ethnic and religious background.

- Some students reported that their **views about other ethnic groups changed** significantly, and they could relate with other groups easily even after graduation when they enter the employment world.

- Students reported having developed confidence to reflect on their ideas and are more active listeners after participating in dialogue sessions.

- Participants reported **increased confidence in taking action with greater personal responsibility** for challenging their peers on derogatory comments made about other groups and for participating in collaborative actions to address discrimination and social issues.

There were also changes recorded in how participation in the SD program influenced peer relationships on campus. Moderators and student leaders from AAU reported that:

- Students who used to make friends only from their ethnic or religious group have now begun making friends from other ethnic groups. This has had a rippling effect in that the new friends were also introduced to their circle that other friends began to be more tolerant of that friendship.
- It is now becoming common to see students dating from different ethnic groups and their number is growing. Many students attribute this to SD's contribution.

- There are students who are influencing their peers to engage peacefully with others when differences/ disagreements arise during different events and they promote peaceful coexistence in the campus.

Changes in the university context

Acknowledgment by the university and its support for dialogue as an effective response to contentious issues has increased. The above mentioned direct support from the university budget best demonstrates the change from initial reluctance to permit SD on campus in 2009 to open support. In addition, when the Ministry of Federal Affairs (the government authority mandated to work on conflict and peace issues in Ethiopia) restructured all university Peace Clubs in 2011, AAU's was the only one to remain intact, largely due to the AAU administration's ardent support of the Club and what it deemed to be meaningful work. Not only did the Peace Club remain intact, but it was hailed as a good model by the Ministry of Federal Affairs (MoFA) and was subsequently asked to share its experiences with the Ministry, so that its mode of work might be multiplied around campuses around the country. In 2011-2012, SD as a process garnered the attention of the AAU College of Education, as they were interested in how SD and other tolerance-promoting methodologies could be included in the teachers' curriculum.

University administration support, commitment from student group, and commendation from the Ministry of Federal Affairs all lend weight to the contention that the results from the SD project proved to the student community, the university administration and relevant authorities that politically sensitive issues can and should be raised and aired in safe pockets even in volatile contexts.

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Potential cascading effects to larger communities

Many SD participants have expressed increased motivation to be actively engaged in their communities by influencing positive change by working to correct social and economic inequalities. Participants also said they have been more involved in civic engagements than before in and outside the campus.

Yet, questions remain about the extent to which SD programs at universities influence national dynamics. It is not clear how SD on university campuses have influence or will influence macro conflict dynamics in Ethiopia.

In a 2011 mid-term evaluation of LPI's engagement in Ethiopia, it was clear conflict transformation capacity built at Universities did not directly translate into academia having a voice and role in practical peacebuilding on grassroots and societal level.

This was due to operational obstacles to partnerships with civil society and through such partnerships, reaching local populations.

The important lessons learned by LPI to date

Behaviour change needs dialogue "plus" and requires stronger ways of measuring. In SD, as practiced here, the relationship between attitudinal and behavioural change is not direct (shifting attitudes do not directly translate to shifting behaviour) and the causal relationship is not clear. Participation in dialogue programmes has proven to have a positive impact on trust and cooperation related attitudes, but the impact research was not able to ascertain that the behaviour of participants had also changed in a positive direction. A part of this effect may be linked to the method of measurement. As mentioned earlier, the first round of SD did not place sufficient emphasis on collaborative campus action, which motivates the conclusion that dialogue alone appears as insufficient to effect behaviour change. For programming of future dialogue initiatives, this means that:
- Collaborative action needs to be emphasised in the design and implementation of dialogue programmes.
- Monitoring and evaluation methodologies need to be better adapted to the complexity of behaviour changes and use strong, contextually adapted indicators.

Heightened awareness of one's own identity is not necessarily countering more accommodative and inclusionary attitudes. One of the key findings in the impact assessment was that the SD enhanced awareness of one's own identity. Though it may seem counterintuitive for an inter-ethnic dialogue project, it may in fact be evidence of a successful dialogue. The fact that participants dared to share their feelings of victimhood and grievances prove that the dialogue was able to create a safe space where such sentiments could be safely aired, especially in a society where it is seen as a taboo.

Nonetheless, this lesson also points to the fact that it might be wise to monitor that the right balance is struck in the dialogues, so that it can transcend narrations of victimhood and moves towards a new way of understanding oneself and the "other". "Healthy" heightened ethnic identification might shift to a more "unhealthy" and destructive (chauvinistic) type, if the dialogues are not managed well.

Randomised comparison groups are not appropriate for every intervention. Randomised comparison groups offer one approach to measuring higher-level peacebuilding results or impacts in a rigorous way. It does not depend on before-after comparison. Due to randomization, the bias to work with "already converted" is avoided. Also, the potentially negative effect of selecting participants and control group was managed by having subsequent dialogue rounds and was done in a transparent way. In fact, some method of selection of participants would have been needed anyway, as the program was not able to work with all students at one time. At the same time, for programs that intend to target certain individuals and groups for strategic peacebuilding work, this method imposes a rigid selection scheme, countering targeting efforts. Another concern is that due

to the rigour needed to produce valid results, the actual research process consumed a considerable amount of energy, and in hindsight it is worth reflecting whether the findings and conclusions actually justify the effort. Some of the learning may have occurred more easily by relying on other, less rigorous measurements.

The major challenge to date is the collaborative action part of the SD process. The action component is the most-costly part of SD, and when external funding ceases, this aspect of SD is not prioritised. During the time when LPI was supporting the project at AAU, the SD participants were able to produce a documentary film that illustrated what they were doing and what results they gained from it. The documentary film was uploaded on YouTube and many people have seen it and that somehow created a wider awareness of the SD intervention. Apart from that, however, there have never been actions designed and implemented by the students for lack of money and technical support. Key to the theory of sustained dialogue is the action that brings people out of the classroom and into the world, taking ownership of a project across identity and potentially conflict lines. To increase the sustainability of SD projects on university campuses, LPI and partners will consider linking with other social entrepreneurship approaches to bring in outside and project-specific funding for action component.

Since 2009, dialogue sessions in the programs mainly focused on issues of ethnic differences within campus environs. In the 2013/14 academic year, students at all campuses included religious differences as one of the pressing issues triggering violent conflicts in the

Opportunities for more learning

Practitioners in the developing field of intergroup dialogue seek to address critical social issues of prejudice and intergroup conflict. The states goals of such dialogue work include relationship building, civic participation/engagement, and social change.

Evaluation of the short- and long-term outcomes of this work is necessary to further understand the processes and effectiveness of dialogue practices for change at the individual, group and national levels.

Evaluation will also be key to giving key lessons that will help improve on the work being done. Although it has been six years since the SD program was first introduced and that many students have gone through the process, no empirical study has been conducted on how SD affected students' behaviours, relationships and civic engagement after graduation except for the aforementioned randomized field testing on the students while they were still in the University, and after only one year of dialogue. At this juncture, LPI and partners believes it is crucial to develop an evaluation plan to capture long-term effects of participation on individuals and implications on the university campus, and its roles in society.

Endnotes

[i] Feyissa, Dereje 2013. *Religious Conflict in Ethiopia*. Unpublished Study, 16

[ii] See Saunders, Harold H. *A Public Peace Process: Sustained Dialogue to Transform Racial and Ethnic Conflicts.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999.