

# BUILDING A HEALTHY FUTURE FOR ETHIOPIA'S YOUTH

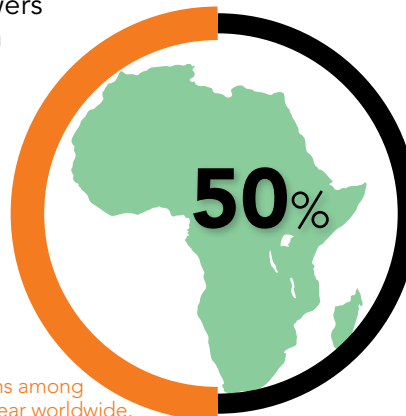
Ipas Ethiopia works with young people to promote sexual and reproductive health and rights



Abortion is legal for a broad range of indications in Ethiopia, and safe services are increasingly available for young women—in part because the nation's abortion law specifically lists young age as a legal indication for accessing the service. However, the nation's young people have long faced a lack of reproductive health information and contraceptives, resulting in high rates of unintended pregnancy and unsafe abortion. Among sexually active, never-married women ages 15–19 in Ethiopia, 37 percent have an unmet need for contraception, and 28 percent of recent births were unplanned, according to the Guttmacher Institute.

Religious and cultural beliefs about abortion and youth sexuality—combined with limited opportunities for youth to discuss sexual and reproductive health issues—can prevent young people from accessing necessary health information and services. Consequently, young women who decide to terminate a pregnancy often find no alternative than to resort to unsafe abortion.

Ipas Ethiopia responds to these challenges with a comprehensive approach to addressing the sexual and reproductive health and rights of young people. Equipping young people with accurate information on sexual and reproductive health empowers them to make and act on their own health decisions, prevent unwanted pregnancy and access safe abortion care when needed. In addition, training young people on sexual and reproductive health and rights enables them to become leaders in their schools and communities, educating their peers and advocating for their own rights.



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## Ipas Ethiopia

Of the 3.2 million unsafe abortions among young women ages 15–19 each year worldwide, almost 50 percent are in the Africa region—the highest proportion of any region in the world, according to a 2013 study in *Reproductive Health Matters*. In Ethiopia, unsafe abortion is a leading cause of maternal death and injury. Despite recent progress, the country still has the fifth-highest maternal mortality ratio in Africa.

Ipas began working in Ethiopia in 1999 to reduce deaths and injuries from unsafe abortion. Since abortion became legal in 2005, Ipas Ethiopia has worked in collaboration with the Federal Ministry of Health, regional health bureaus and other partners to expand women's access to high-quality, safe abortion services and contraception. Community programs disseminate information on sexual and reproductive health, including a focus on informing young women where they can access safe abortion care.

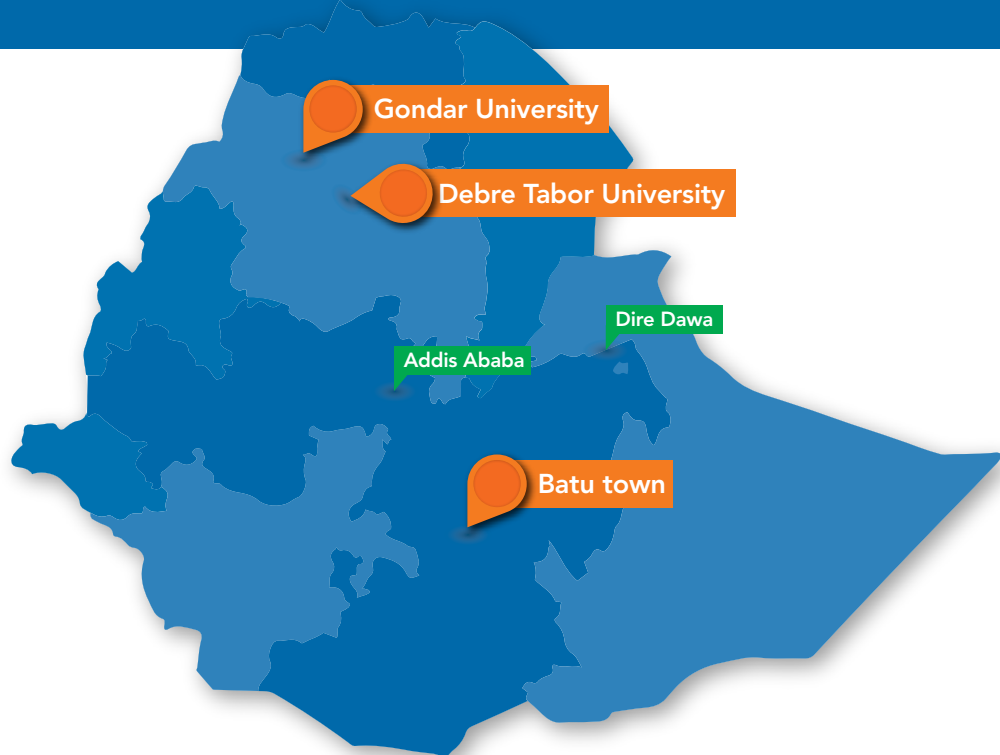
# SPOTLIGHT ON youth-focused projects

## University interventions

- Help Point at Debre Tabor University, implemented by Amhara Development Association
- Help Point at Gondar University, implemented by Mahibere Hiwot Reproductive and Health Social Development Organization

## Community intervention

- RH Corner integrated into the youth center in Batu town, Oromia region, implemented by Tamira Reproductive Health and Development Organization



## Reaching youth on campuses and in communities

To specifically address young people's sexual and reproductive health needs, Ipas supports university-based "Help Points" and community-based Reproductive Health Corners ("RH Corners") that provide youth-appropriate information and counseling on sexual and reproductive health, with a focus on contraception, unwanted pregnancy and safe abortion. To date, six universities and four government-run youth centers have benefitted from these interventions. This brief describes a few of these projects in detail.

## Innovative 'Help Point' system connects students with peer educators and sexual and reproductive health services

Ipas-initiated Help Points at Debre Tabor University and Gondar University were staffed by project officers with clinical backgrounds who provided information, counseling services, short-term contraceptives and referrals to local health clinics for additional services. Peer educators—recruited and trained by university-initiated reproductive health clubs—conducted awareness-raising and outreach activities including group learning sessions such as "coffee ceremonies" and mass "edutainment" activities including trivia sessions, drama and poetry to engage young people on their sexual and reproductive health needs and rights and to refer students to the Help Points for services.

Partnerships with community organizations have been vital to implementing successful projects. At Debre Tabor University, Ipas partnered with Amhara Development Association to establish a Help Point. The project aimed not only to increase students' sexual and reproductive health



knowledge and access to services, but also to improve university management's awareness of and responsiveness to students' health needs.

"Personally, I didn't have any knowledge about reproductive health and safer abortion before this service has been started here. I have learned a lot from the group discussions."

—Female student, Debre Tabor University

At Gondar University's Maraki and Tewodros campuses, Ipas partnered with Mahibere Hiwot Reproductive Health and Social Development Organization to establish Help Points. This project sought to prevent unwanted pregnancy and unsafe abortion by providing sexual and reproductive health information and counseling, and by informing students where to access contraception and safe abortion services both on campus and through referrals. The project included a six-month phase-out strategy to support the university in taking over the Help Points after the project period ended.

"When we started, first we used to keep condoms in the clinic's gate and no one would come and take them. If one student came in, he would say that he is taking it for his friend who is shy. Gradually the females started to come and tell us that they have a date with their boyfriend and they ask us to give them condoms as a precaution. This is a change of attitude that the project brought about."

—Project director, Gondar University

## Community 'RH Corner' welcomes youth to learn about reproductive health

In Batu town in Ethiopia's Oromia region, Ipas partnered with Tamira Reproductive Health and Development Organization to



establish a Reproductive Health Corner (“RH Corner”) in the government-run Batu youth center. The RH Corner provides a friendly, welcoming space where young people can access sexual and reproductive health information, counseling, and referrals, as well as peer-learning sessions, indoor and outdoor games, and mass “edutainment” activities—such as music and drama performances and poetry contests—that convey youth-friendly health information. The project also includes peer outreach to youth who live in nearby villages and who work at a local flower plantation to connect them with information and services.

“After I have attended educational sessions in my village, I have developed confidence and self-esteem. I know pills, condom, and injectables are family planning methods.”

—Young person, Batu town, Oromia region

## Peer educators are project cornerstones

Peer educators are vital to Ipas Ethiopia’s youth-focused university and community interventions. Ipas supports staff at universities and community-based organizations to recruit young people (both men and women) who are willing and motivated to deliver information and guide discussions on sexual and reproductive health and rights topics, including safe abortion. Project organizers train peer educators on topics including reproductive anatomy, puberty, menstruation, pregnancy prevention, contraception and safe abortion. They also provide training on methodologies for behavioral communication—such as youth dialogue sessions, group “edutainment” activities, community dialogues and home visits—and on ways to promote the programs to students or community members. Ipas provides teaching aids to ensure high-quality, consistent information across all trainings.

Peer educators use various methods to initiate discussion of reproductive health issues with other youth. For university

students, educators often use current campus issues and drama to initiate conversations, and they also embed abortion issues within larger discussions about campus life, safe sex and contraception for young people. Educators working with youth who are not in school discuss abortion through the lens of family planning and often use a pictorial flipbook to guide the discussion. In addition, peer educators in all settings refer youth to campus health centers or local clinics for necessary services—and they also help train new program volunteers.

## Engaging stakeholders boosts project success

For both campus and community settings, stakeholder support is critical to project success. At the beginning of a project, Ipas and its partners typically convene a sensitization workshop that provides an opportunity for implementers, stakeholders and participants to reach a common understanding about the project’s goals, objectives, activities and desired outcomes. To foster collaboration with potential university partners, Ipas engages the university gender offices and top management to discuss the project scope and objectives and to hear university administration’s suggestions for activities. Universities identify the physical space for projects, along with resources and materials. In turn, Ipas provides information and education materials and room furnishings and assists with trainings as needed.

Ipas Ethiopia’s project in Batu town is an example of the successes that stakeholder engagement can yield. Ipas established a community support team when it launched the RH Corner in the Batu youth center—and team engagement continued throughout the duration of the project. Major stakeholders involved from the beginning included staff from the youth center, the Women and Youth Affairs office and the health office. These stakeholders showed a strong commitment to the project and assisted in practical ways: supporting educational events; improving the referral system; providing physical spaces for activities; offering trainings to peer educators; and providing technical support to the youth center.



## Lessons learned

Ipas Ethiopia's youth-focused interventions have yielded a number of lessons that will be useful for future youth-oriented programs:

**Youth-led dialogue works.** In both university and community settings, youth-led dialogue has proven to be a creative and non-threatening way for young people to engage other young people on the sensitive and often taboo subjects of sexual activity, contraception, unsafe abortion and options for safe abortion. Usually done in small groups, youth-led dialogues help break the silence around these subjects and build a culture of more open discussion.

**Longer, more sustained project periods are best.** With youth-led dialogue, project organizers have found that young people need to have multiple small-group learning sessions to gradually build trust and support (with each other and with discussion leaders) and to build knowledge on sexual and reproductive health. Overall, while changes in knowledge about abortion can occur relatively quickly, achieving a more systematic shift in attitudes and norms around abortion on a campus or within a community requires longer project periods of three to five years.

**Integrating a project into the setting where youth gather is effective.** Whether in a dedicated room on campus or in a community youth center where young people come to learn and play, location is crucial. A project to educate youth on sexual and reproductive health and rights should be located in a place where young people are comfortable—and where they can obtain referrals to clinical services if needed.

**Peer educators' skills directly affect the number of youth reached and the quality of information.** Peer educator selection and training should be rigorous to ensure that motivated youth are recruited and given a variety of tools and methods.

## Making and sustaining an impact

Ipas Ethiopia is increasing young people's knowledge of sexual and reproductive health and rights through strong partnerships with youth, universities and community-based organizations. As knowledge builds, young people are empowered to make their own health decisions and to become peer educators and leaders on their campuses and in their communities. In turn, youth are able to communicate about once-taboo subjects such as sexuality, contraception and abortion—and in doing so, they reduce the stigma surrounding these subjects, allowing young people to more easily access the health information and services they need. In addition to education and awareness-raising, these projects prove the value of peer educators and Health Points in providing referrals to health services, including safe abortion and contraception.

Ipas Ethiopia continues to implement university Help Points and community RH Corners in close collaboration with our partners. Building on the lessons learned outlined in this brief, Ipas Ethiopia continuously works to improve project outcomes and reach more young people. Looking forward, Ipas Ethiopia aims to expand these successful youth-focused interventions to additional campuses and communities across Ethiopia, and to work with stakeholders who can lead and grow effective projects. Findings from Ipas Ethiopia's youth-focused projects clearly demonstrate that young people can—and must—be meaningfully engaged in every step of project implementation in order for projects to be effective, far-reaching and to empower youth to advance their own sexual and reproductive health and rights.



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