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Research Report

Improving employment and social cohesion among refugee and host communities through TVET: evidence from an impact assessment in Ethiopia

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Improving Employment and Social Cohesion among Refugee and Host Communities through TVET

Evidence from an Impact Assessment in Ethiopia

Abis Getachew, Lisa Höckel, Jana Kuhnt, Abdirahman A. Muhumad & Armin von Schiller

Summary

In pursuit of employment opportunities and increased productivity, governments and donors have the highest ambitions for technical and vocational education and training (TVET) systems. Most prominently, TVET is expected to facilitate access to employment and a qualified workforce by offering its graduates skills that the labour market demands. Beyond its employment impacts, TVET supporters also anticipate that it will improve societal outcomes such as inclusion, gender equality and social cohesion.

Access to the labour market plays an essential role in allowing displaced populations to sustain their livelihoods and to foster socio-economic integration. Long-term displacement situations and a decline in resettlement opportunities have spurred the quest for local integration in countries of first asylum. It is in this context that TVET has gained additional salience in the past decade.

Does TVET live up to these promises? Overall, systematic empirical evidence on the impact of TVET is limited and often inconsistent. In terms of employment and income, evidence suggests that there is a small positive effect, but time plays an important factor. Often, impacts are only seen in the medium- to long-term, and in general, programmes tend to work better for the long-term unemployed. Evidence of societal effects is even more limited; there is a large gap of knowledge on the potential social cohesion impacts of TVET. Given the amount of funding and the high expectations found in the policy discourse, it is essential to better understand if and how TVET measures contribute to achieving their self-declared goals.

In this brief, we present the results of an accompanying research study of an inclusive TVET programme implemented by the German development cooperation organisation Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale

Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) in Ethiopia. In this programme, host and refugee participants are jointly trained, with the explicit goals of fostering social cohesion and improving employment opportunities.

The results indicate that while the social cohesion effect seems remarkable on several dimensions, the income and employment effect is at best weak and materialises only for specific groups of individuals. Qualitative and quantitative evidence supports the validity of the approach to achieve social cohesion. More than design or implementation problems, the lack of stronger employment effects appears to be driven by structural context conditions like limited labour market absorption capacity, legal work permission constraints, gender barriers and similar hindering factors.

We derive the following main recommendations from the analysis:

- TVET measures need a careful context analysis (including labour market capacities, legal work barriers) to ensure that the necessary conditions for TVET to succeed are in place. This is particularly relevant in terms of employment effects, which appear to be elusive.
- Inclusive TVET measures seem to be an effective tool to improve social cohesion. However, if social cohesion effects are valued not just as an “add-on” to employment effects but as primary goals, the question arises if alternative interventions might be more efficient. This question is particularly salient given the modest evidence regarding employment and income effects.
- The evidence base of the impact of (inclusive) TVET programmes needs to be expanded. Knowledge gaps that need to be closed include TVET’s impact on displaced populations, its potential societal effects, differential gender effects, and medium- to long-term employment and income effects.

Introduction: TVET programmes in situations of displacement – promises vs evidence

The number of displaced people surpassed the mark of 100 million at the end of 2022 (UNHCR, 2023a). The majority of internationally displaced people, including refugees and asylum seekers, are hosted in neighbouring countries that are characterised by challenging economic situations and sometimes political instability. In these settings, large parts of the local population are economically vulnerable and, thus, often not better off than the newcomers who, unfortunately, are then not uncommonly perceived as an “additional burden” and as competitors in the labour market. Many fear that this leads to competition over already scarce resources, such as employment, housing, and social services. Some observers claim that eventually this dynamic sharpens social and political tensions in host countries.

National and international policy and development actors react to these challenges and fears by increasing, where budget allows, their activities in programmes that aim to foster the socio-economic integration of refugees into host societies. Here, TVET programmes have become prominent tools in displacement contexts. Supporters of TVET measures claim their importance for improving the employability of participants and, therewith, improved labour market outcomes and overall productivity, competitiveness and economic efficiency (World Bank, UNESCO & ILO, 2023). Particularly since the World Development Report on Jobs (World Bank, 2012) made the connection between jobs and social cohesion explicit and prominent, the claim that TVET programmes should affect core social outcomes, such as inclusion, gender equality and social cohesion, has become essential in motivating and legitimising these measures.

Although TVET programmes have been high on the international development agenda and have received renewed attention in the context of displacement in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), evidence supporting their effectiveness in terms of labour market outcomes is inconsistent

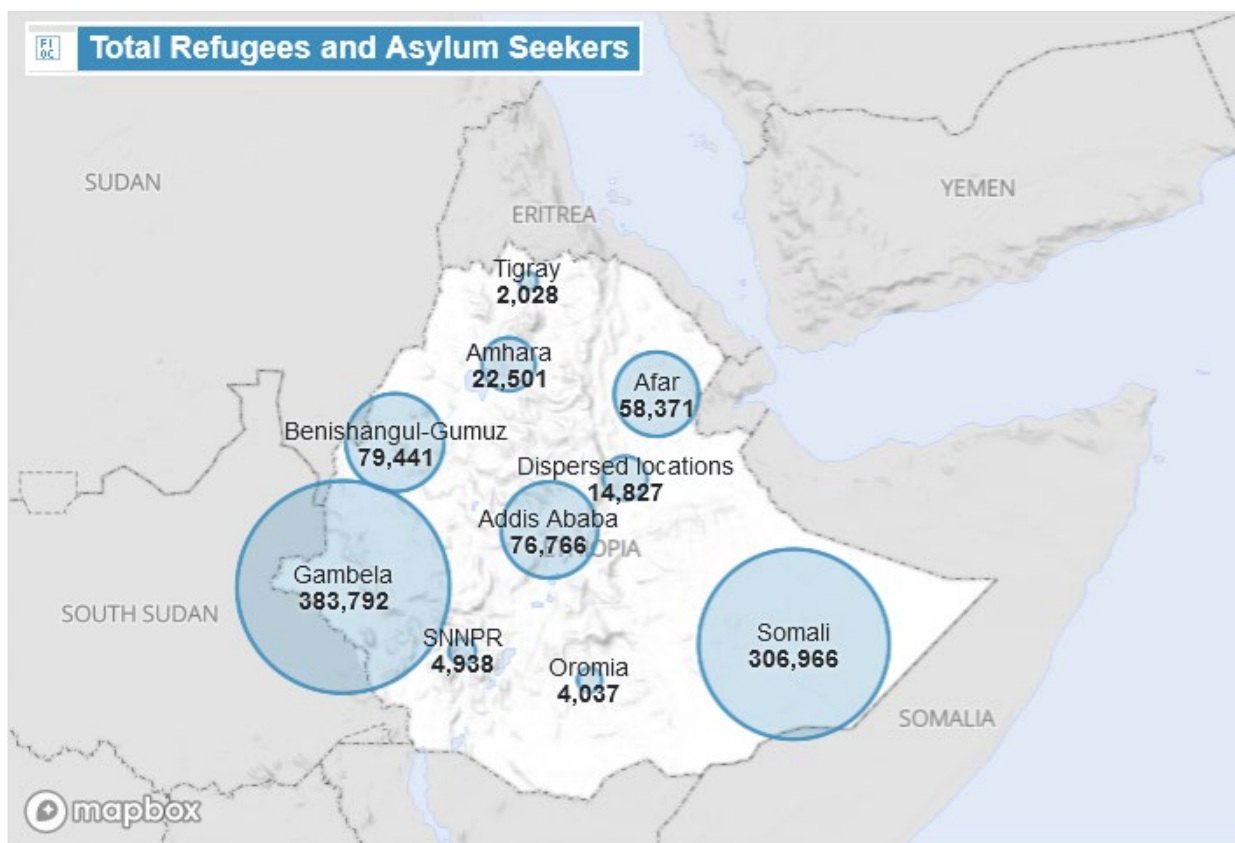
(e.g., Card, Kluve, & Weber, 2010). While studies provide evidence of a small positive impact, materialising mostly in the medium- and long-term of TVET training in terms of skill acquisition, this does not always translate to opportunities for employment and economic growth. TVET programmes have had some success with addressing youth unemployment particularly in rural areas and with empowering women (Kluve et al., 2019). A lack of formal employment opportunities has been shown to lead to underemployment of TVET graduates, particularly in contexts with large informal economies (Stöterau, Kemper, & Ghisletta, 2022).

The evidence base with respect to the diverse societal outcomes is very limited, even less can be found on refugee contexts that come with their socio-cultural, economic and legal particularities. We have not come across a study that investigates the impact of TVET on social cohesion as a comprehensive concept. There are several observational studies and a very limited number of experimental studies that provide evidence that interaction and contact through joint learning and training or joint sport can successfully reduce tensions between groups. However, the focus has largely been on ethnic diversity within countries with little to no evidence on refugee-host relations. Also, very few studies have been conducted on programmes in LMICs (Paluck, Green, & Green, 2019).

Refugee policy and the case of inclusive TVET programmes in Ethiopia

Today, Ethiopia is the third-largest host for refugees in Africa with more than 900,000 refugees mainly from its neighbouring countries. Most of the refugees in Ethiopia are living in long-lasting, protracted displacement situations in refugee camps located in Ethiopia’s peripheral regions that economically tend to lag behind. Since the out-of-camp policy applicable to Eritrean refugees was enacted in 2010, a large number of Eritrean refugees has self-settled in urban areas, mainly in Addis Ababa (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Refugee statistics and main settlement regions in Ethiopia



The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations

Source: UNHCR, 2023b

Following the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants adopted in 2016 by the UN General Assembly, Ethiopia committed to several steps to promote the self-reliance of and improve the lives of refugees hosted within the country. These so-called Nine Pledges included commitments to provide work permits to refugees, expand the out-of-camp policy that was limited to Eritreans (i.e., approximately 10 per cent of the refugee population), and include refugees into national service systems (such as tertiary education). Furthermore, Ethiopia became a pilot country to implement the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF), which aims to foster sustainable refugee integration with large financial support from the international community. In 2019 many of the CRRF commitments were converted into national law (among others, the right to work and freedom of movement). However, up to this point it is unclear to what extent refugees can claim these rights.

Like many LMICs in the world, high levels of unemployment, limited resources and budget constraints are among the key challenges faced by the Ethiopian government (Brown, Mackie, Dickenson, & Gebre-Egziabher, 2018). As a result, humanitarian and development partners have supported Ethiopia in implementing the CRRF for refugees and host communities. The Qualifications and Employment Perspective for refugees and host communities in Ethiopia (QEP) programme implemented by the GIZ builds on Ethiopia’s commitment to include refugees into the national service structures, while extending the service to the host communities. In collaboration with Ethiopian public colleges, inclusive TVET programmes in a variety of occupational fields are offered jointly to refugees and hosts. Herewith, the programme not only aims to improve the employability of the participants but also to foster and strengthen social cohesion between the groups. In collaboration with the Ethiopian Federal Ministry of

Labour and Skills, QEP is being implemented in Addis Ababa, Benishangul Gumuz, the Somali Region, Gambella and Tigray (activities in Tigray are currently interrupted due to the war).

Research focus and basic research design

Our study focusses on the TVET implementation in two colleges – one in Addis Ababa and one in Assosa (Benishangul Gumuz). With that, we include an urban refugee setting in the Ethiopian capital with mainly Eritrean refugees participating in the training, whereas Assosa (Benishangul Gumuz) is characterised by an active encampment policy (i.e., restrictions on movement) with refugees mainly from Sudan and South Sudan.

Box 1: Impact-oriented accompanying research

This research was implemented in the form of an “impact-oriented accompanying research project” (Funk, Groß, Leininger, & von Schiller, 2018). This format, developed at IDOS, represents a particularly close and intense form of cooperation between research and practice that stresses long-term cooperation, an emphasis on learning, use of a mixed methods approach, regular exchanges, and co-creation of knowledge. This has considerable benefits for the quality, significance and use of the research.

Five different batches (each batch consisting of several training programmes, such as auto mechanics, food preparation, garments and textiles, hotel management) attended inclusive trainings in Addis Ababa, and two batches attended in Assosa. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected from participants before, during and after the TVET measure as well as from non-participants (control group) from 2021 to 2023 at three different points in time (waves). In this brief, the TVET training is defined as including the technical and soft skill trainings at the colleges as well as the period of subsidised firm placement that some of the participants were granted.

It is important to note that participants’ overall assessment of the programme was very positive in both Addis Ababa and Assosa. Teaching and learning facilities, joint classes (refugees and hosts) as well as the staff in both TVET colleges were positively assessed despite some reservations regarding the practical facilities, such as machinery and equipment in both training centres. By comparing participants with non-participants (control group), we are able to further qualify these results and learn more about the impact of the programme.

Assessing the employment and income impact of the inclusive TVET programme

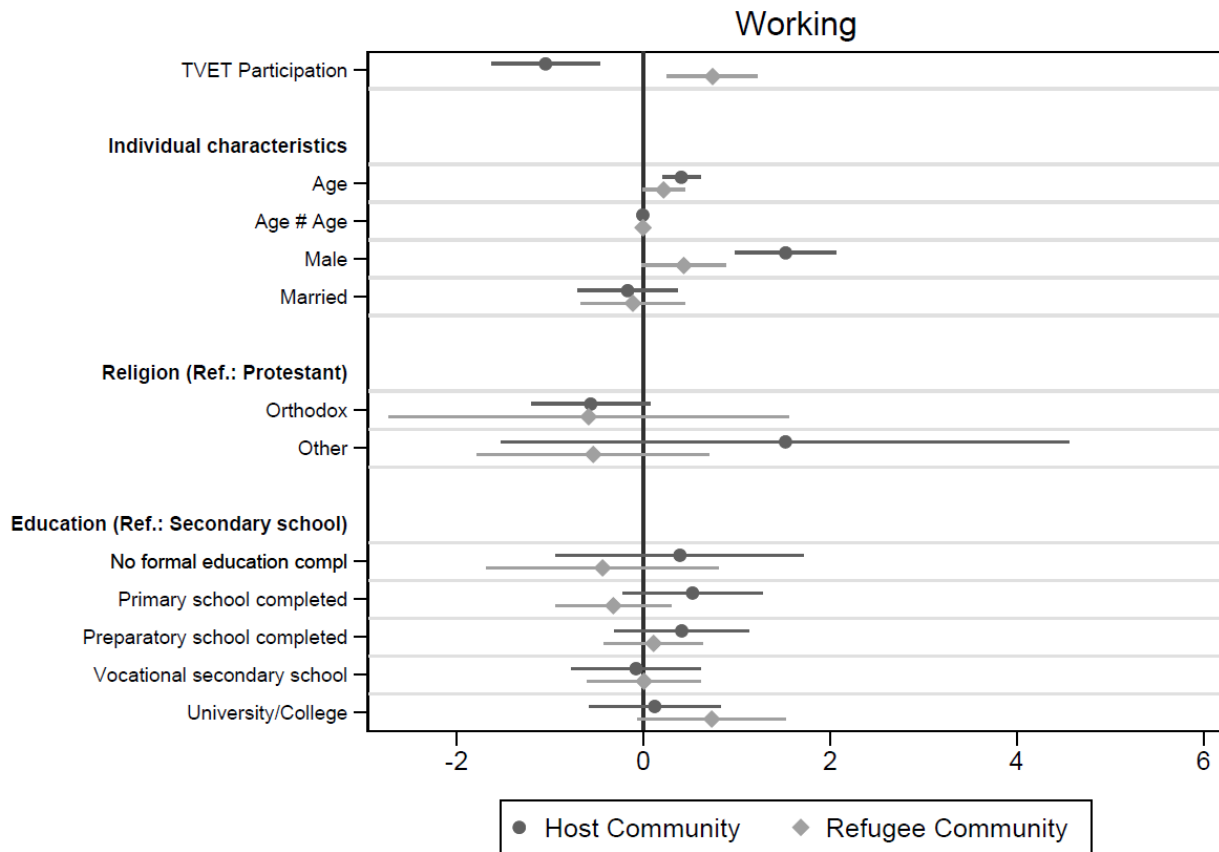
The key purpose of the inclusive TVET programme is to increase the employment prospects for its participants. Accordingly, we investigated the programme’s labour market and income effects.

The analysis does not find evidence supporting a general employment effect, but it does indicate remarkable heterogeneous effects: for certain groups, participation in the TVET programme significantly increases their probability of working while others do not benefit. Most interestingly, the effect of the training seems to vary starkly between host and refugee community. While the results indicate that the TVET training has a positive effect for refugee participants, the effect is negative for members of the host community. As Figure 2 illustrates on average, compared with their respective control group, training participants of the refugee community have higher probabilities of finding a job after the training (particularly in the informal sector). By contrast, compared with their control group, participants of the host community have lower probabilities of finding a job (particularly in the formal sector). The surprising negative effect for members of the host community can partly be explained by selection into the TVET training programmes. While the participants and the control group look similar in terms of the basic demographics, host country members differ significantly with respect to their

previous earnings. This can hint at closer labour market attachment of the control group. Still, the

results indicate that the training is not able to compensate for these prior differences.

Figure 2: Impact of TVET on finding a job



Based on subsamples; no ongoing trainees considered.

Notes: RE estimation, SE clustered at individual level, N=1,650 (host=775, refugee=875)

Source: Authors

Figure 2 also illustrates that men have a significantly higher probability of working. In fact, TVET participation is more effective with respect to employment for men than women. Previous studies have shown that impact differences with respect to gender can partly be explained by differences in occupational choice (Kruppe & Lang, 2018). In line with this, data show that men and women self-selected into different occupational TVET training majors.

There are further interesting heterogeneous effects across the different occupational sectors that the trainings focus on. While graduates of the housekeeping and welding programmes have higher chances of finding employment after success-

ful completion of the programme, this is not true for participants of the sanitary and electrical installation classes. In line with this, the training appears to be more successful for refugees, which can partly be connected to the fact the refugees decided in larger numbers to take the housekeeping and welding majors. We find that men are more likely to find a job and, interestingly, the previous level of education does not play an important role for the employment probability.

It is important to note that programme participation does significantly increase the chances of informal employment for both host community members and refugees. This finding is in line with the positive effect of the TVET training for those

participating in the housekeeping major – a job which is often done informally.

Overall, we do not find any significant effects of the TVET programme on income for refugee or host TVET participants.

There are, however, significant effects on variables associated with optimism and expectations about the future. For instance, compared with non-participants, both groups of participants have significantly better assessments of questions such as “Compared to two years ago, would you say your access to job opportunities has improved?” and “How do you expect your personal income to develop over the next six months/three years?” This is also relevant because according to the literature, TVET programmes often do not have immediate labour market effects but only show an effect in the long-term. This optimism effect might be a good starting point for effects to evolve in the future. In line with this, within the data limitations we have, some quantitative and qualitative evidence indicates the view that the employment effect might be more positive in the long term.

Overall, the assessed impact in this area points to results probably below the expectations: while the employment effect is positive for participants from the refugee community, the host country participants have difficulty immediately benefitting from the TVET programme. Furthermore, no income effect was identified.

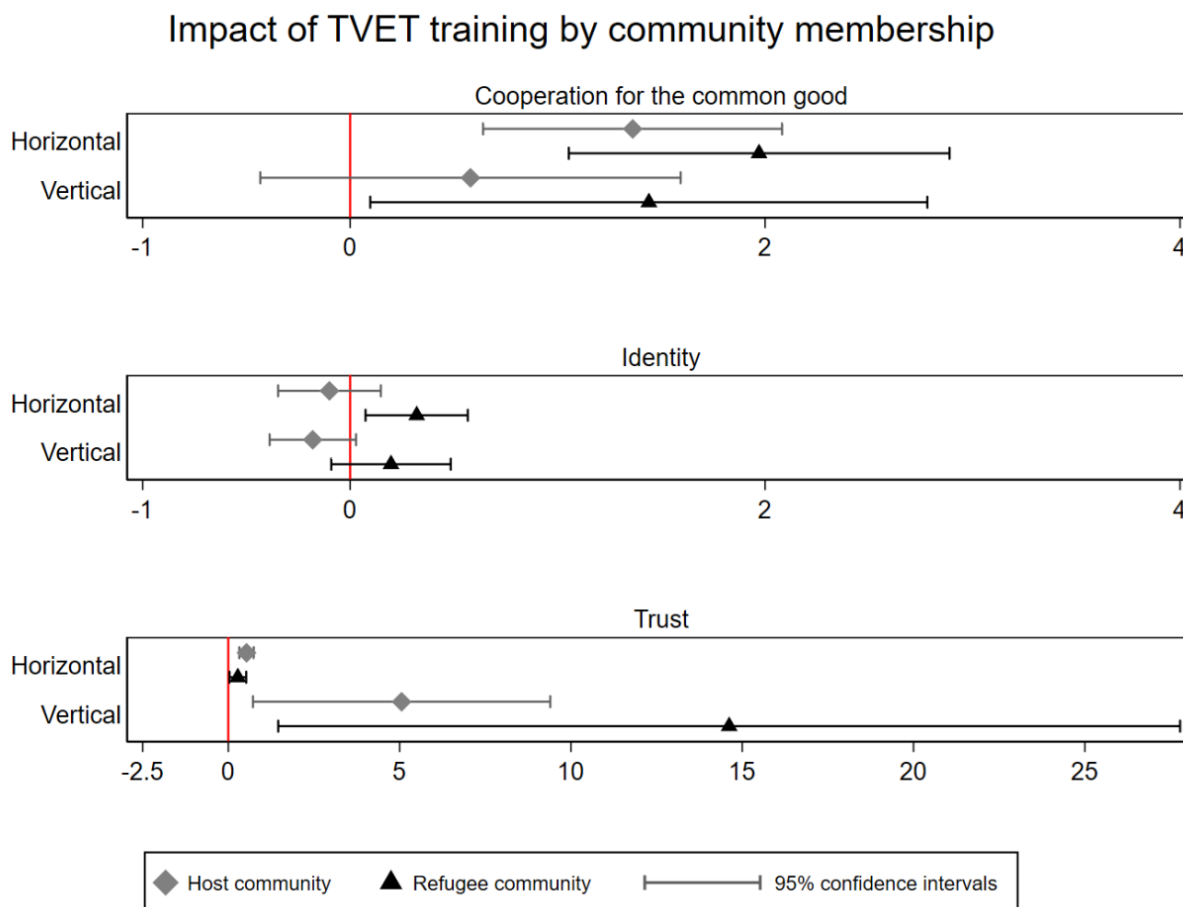
The relevance of variables such as sector or sex of participants draws attention to structural factors that limit the de facto potential effect of the programme. High unemployment rates and limited opportunities for formal employment in Ethiopia starkly influence the probability of accessing the labour market – irrespective of receiving additional training.

Assessing the social cohesion impact of the inclusive TVET programme

The aspect of “inclusiveness” in the design of the TVET measure is particularly innovative. The joint training of members of the host and refugee community explicitly aims at improving social relationships between both groups. In line with studies that suggest that increased interaction improves attitudes and behaviour towards the other group (e.g., Wagner, Christ, Pettigrew, Stellmacher, & Wolf, 2006), our overall results indicate a positive effect of the inclusive TVET programme on several elements of social cohesion.

In the study we apply the concept of social cohesion as proposed by Leininger et al. (2021), which includes a vertical and a horizontal dimension and three different attributes: trust, inclusive identity, and cooperation for the common good. We find that, in particular, the horizontal dimension (i.e., elements between groups) is positively affected. In comparison with non-participants, both refugee and host participants show significantly higher levels of trust towards people they only know at a distance, and they tend to cooperate more frequently with others for the common good (i.e., attending/organising community meetings or volunteering activities). For refugee participants, we also find that, compared with their control group, they show stronger identification with the local community. On the vertical dimension, we only find significant results for trust: here, refugee and host participants are more likely than non-participants to trust state institutions. While some of these effects seem to fade over time (such as trust towards strangers) others seem to be persistent over time (such as horizontal cooperation).

Figure 3: Impact of TVET on social cohesion



Notes: FE estimation with controls (marital status, education level, religion), SE clustered at individual level, N=1,970 (host=933; refugee=1,037)

Source: Authors

Our qualitative evidence supports these results and further sheds light on necessary conditions for the effects to materialise. Both refugees and host students found the joint classes to be interesting and important for fostering positive relationships between the refugees and hosts. Sharing classes enabled them to frequently interact and establish friendships that outlasted the time of the training.

In addition, the possibility for refugees to move freely and, therewith, interact with the host community in public and private spaces as well as participate in joint community activities is essential. In the urban context in Addis Ababa, several of the participants already had prior encounters or even friendships with members of the other group. The training deepened those relationships. In camp contexts (such as Assosa) this interaction is

limited and the joint programme was oftentimes the first opportunity for refugees and hosts to meaningfully interact. However, language barriers in this setting were partly hindering factors.

What can be problematic and sometimes stressful is the dependency of refugee participants on hosts in terms of access to finance, licences or land. The only way for refugees to start businesses without work permits and licenses is to use (i.e., rent) the licenses of Ethiopian friends (or business partners). Refugees are highly dependent on their local counterparts, and there have been instances where refugees have lost their businesses because the Ethiopian partners withdrew from the partnership.

Conclusions and policy implications

In the context of high unemployment in several countries of the Global South, TVET programmes continue to be popular measures implemented by international and national actors. Increasing long-term displacement situations in many of these countries and the aim to foster sustainable integration of refugees led to further renewed attention towards these programmes. However, systematic empirical evidence that supports TVET's impact on the employability of its participants is inconsistent. Similarly, evidence is very scarce when it comes to societal effects that are increasingly prominent in the discourse around the merits of TVET.

Overall, our analysis indicates that while the activities were generally very positively assessed by the participants, when comparing with control groups, there is limited evidence of programme participation having an impact on employment and income. Stronger evidence is found on social cohesion effects, particularly on the horizontal dimension.

In line with these results and existing preceding literature in this field, TVET does not seem to be the silver bullet to improve labour market outcomes and general productivity. It can be effective for some subgroups, but even there it is crucial to consider context and structural conditions that can shape or limit the effects.

In the Ethiopian context, formal employment opportunities are very limited and even improved skills do not seem to significantly increase chances of finding work. Refugees are further starkly limited to accessing the formal labour market due to their lack of work permits. However, TVET attendance increases their access to informal employment.

Box 2: Illustrative example of the importance of legal conditions for programme impact

The Directive to determine the procedure for refugees' right to work (Directive no. 02/2019) can serve as an example to showcase the importance of the legal environment and structural conditions for the success of TVET interventions. According to this directive, a refugee with an Ethiopian spouse or children may not need a residence permit to either be self-employed or to work jointly with members of the host communities. We find that married refugee men benefit more from the TVET programme (in terms of improved income) than non-married refugee participants, which is likely to be also influenced by the above Directive.

In terms of social cohesion, the effects of the inclusive TVET programme are very encouraging. In particular, trust and cooperation are positively affected by training participation. As access to the labour market and the high competition for jobs between groups can be a very challenging and loaded environment, it is encouraging that joint learning and sharing of experiences create bonds that positively translate into improved social cohesion, even under these circumstances. The results indicate which elements of social cohesion can be effectively impacted by the inclusive TVET programme, which allows for more strategic planning and targeting, as well as reasonable goal setting.

The social cohesion effect seems to materialise independently of success in terms of employment, which is encouraging but also opens up the question of efficiency and whether measures specifically focussing on fostering social cohesion might be more cost-effective. In line with this, the results suggest that there is a potential role for inclusive TVET systems to play in the social cohesion realm. However, the primary goal of TVET is and will remain increased employment and productivity. If this is not achieved, it seems difficult to defend the measure as the most reasonable approach based on a social cohesion effect that could probably be achieved differently.

We derive the following main policy implications and recommendations for international and national actors active in this field:

- For TVET to work as envisioned, a demanding set of necessary pre-conditions is required. Careful adaptation to context and the demand side of the labour market is essential. Much can be done in planning by targeting graduates, and defining curricula and learning techniques. Here, close collaboration with specific firms as potential employers can be very relevant. However, there are structural conditions such as the absorption capacity of the formal labour market and legal barriers that simply make it impossible for TVET programmes to perform. It is key to monitor these conditions closely as they can create situations of dependency or differential treatment of participants that might undermine the effects of programmes or even lead to unintended negative effects (such as harming social cohesion between groups due to dependencies).
- Efforts should be extended and intensified to improve the legal base for refugees to formally access the local labour market (salaried or self-employed). This involves working on processes connected to work permits and business licenses but also access to financial means. The centrality of these barriers emphasises the relevance of continued dialogue and support at the government level. At the same time, it is necessary to openly discuss these structural limitations with the college management, training participant, funders and local governments alike to prevent unrealistic expectations.
- In line with adaptation, it is essential to consider targeting in the measure design. Programmes are more effective when they are tailored to the needs and challenges of the participants. For example, female participants need particular support and measures as they do not seem to benefit in terms of employment from the general training measures.
- TVET can help improve social cohesion between groups. In fact, several elements of social cohesion appear to be positively affected. Still, it is an open question if TVET is the most efficient tool to achieve that goal. Leveraging and optimising this effect is essential, but this cannot be the main legitimising argument for TVET if its primary goal is not achieved.
- TVET measures require strong accompanying, contextualising and monitoring. In view of this, scaling up is problematic if resource scarcity lowers the capacity to manage the projects closely and rapidly adapt. For instance, job demands, market dynamics as well as the political environment influencing refugee integration efforts change rapidly and are not comparable between urban, semi-urban and rural areas. Also, the profile of graduates (i.e., living conditions, language abilities) varies strongly and needs to inform both the methods as well as the content of curricula and social cohesion measures.
- It is crucial to extend the knowledge on medium- to long-term impacts of TVET programmes in LMICs. Previous studies indicate that labour market effects might take time and only materialise after several years. The evidence base needs to be improved generally, but also particularly concerning potential societal impacts of TVET programmes, which remain heavily understudied.

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