Dogo, Zinder, Niger
(Sean Sheridan/Mercy Corps)

STRENGTHENING SOCIAL COHESION FOR VIOLENCE PREVENTION

Ten Lessons for Policymakers and Practitioners

MARCH 2022

Strengthening social cohesion is a cornerstone of many peacebuilding programs and other donor interventions in fragile and conflict-affected states. This has taken on new urgency in light of emerging evidence that the COVID-19 pandemic has eroded relations within and between groups in multiple countries. The *U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability* – also known as the Global Fragility Strategy – pledges to address weak social cohesion, along with other key drivers of violence and instability, in order to "promote peaceful, self-reliance nations" around the world. Yet the link between social cohesion and violence prevention is often assumed, not demonstrated, which frequently results in the conflation of social cohesion and peace outcomes. More evidence is needed on **whether, when, and how improving social cohesion can help prevent conflict and build peace across different contexts.**

Mercy Corps has spent the past decade conducting research on building social cohesion in various fragile and conflict-affected settings. This brief distills the evidence from these studies, along with the broader

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[academic](#) and [policy](#) literature, into ten lessons that respond to the most pressing questions policymakers and practitioners need answered to effectively invest in strengthening social cohesion for violence prevention, namely:

- What do we mean when we talk about social cohesion?
- How does weak social cohesion shape violence within and between communities?
- How can donors and practitioners help to build social cohesion in order to prevent violence?

What do we mean when we talk about social cohesion?

1. **Social cohesion is a set of values, identities, attitudes, and behaviors that help hold society together.** Efforts to design policies and programs to build social cohesion have been hampered by a lack of consensus over basic definitions, many of which are confusing, circular, and divorced from reality. Yet a common theme that emerges among both [researchers](#) and [practitioners](#) is that social cohesion is the "glue" that binds communities together. This encompasses cohesion within and between groups (inter- and intra-communal relations), and between citizens and formal or informal leaders (state-society relations). In practice, this means that **social cohesion exists in a given context when there is a sense of trust, shared purpose, and a willingness to engage and cooperate among different individuals, groups, and institutions in that area.**

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2. **Social cohesion has multiple dimensions – and they are not all correlated with each other.** Because social cohesion is a composite of several distinct values, identities, attitudes and behaviors, policies and programs must be built on an awareness of what the most important underlying components are and how they affect conflict and violence. Mercy Corps' [approach to social cohesion programming](#) identifies **six dimensions of social cohesion: trust, belonging, shared identity, attitudes towards other groups, collective action norms, and civic engagement** (see Figure 1). The relative strength or weakness of these different components can vary significantly within communities and societies.
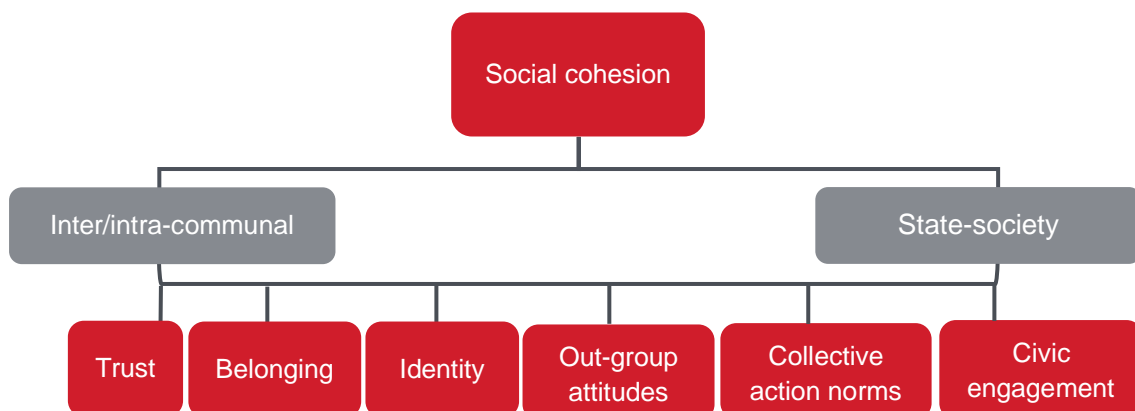

Figure 1: Dimensions of Social Cohesion

Using Afrobarometer survey data from multiple sub-Saharan African countries, we examined the relationship between these components and found that they do not all strongly correlate with each other or neatly aggregate into a single measure of social cohesion. Similarly, survey data from a Mercy Corps' peacebuilding program in Niger showed only a weak relationship between dimensions of social cohesion like trust, cooperation, and collective action. The underlying components of social cohesion may also have differing effects on violence and peace. Our research in Niger found that only some components were associated with violence-related attitudes and behaviors. Practitioners should **be wary of relying on aggregate indices of social cohesion and must consider – and measure – program effects on different aspects. Disaggregating social cohesion is also important for designing strategies and interventions around clear and specific pathways that affect social dynamics in a given context.**

How does weak social cohesion shape violence?

3. **Building trust is central to reducing support for violence**. Our analysis of Afrobarometer data found that trusting other people *in general* had only a weak relationship with reduced support for, and participation in, violence. However, trust in people *whom you know* was strongly associated with less support for violence in general. Peacebuilding programs should therefore focus on social and geographical proximity and aim to improve relations between people who are already in contact and live or work close to each other, particularly if they are from different groups. In Niger, we found that individuals who reported higher levels of inter-group trust were less likely to endorse the use of violence, even in communities that have experienced conflict with other groups. In Mali, we found that greater trust across groups was associated with lower levels of reported conflict in a community. And in Iraq, surveys showed that Yazidis who expressed greater trust in Sunni Arabs were less likely to justify violence against others.

The link between trust and reduced support for violence is not limited to relationships between and within individuals and groups (inter-communal cohesion). It also applies to relationships between individuals and leaders (state-society cohesion). In the analysis of Afrobarometer data, we found that the more survey respondents trusted leaders and institutions, the less likely they were to support the use of violence in general. In Niger, greater confidence in state security forces was similarly associated with less support for violence. These findings highlight the importance of incorporating governance-focused programming to improve state-society relations alongside interventions aimed at strengthening intercommunal relations as part of any effort to enhance social cohesion. **The Global Fragility Strategy is unlikely to achieve its goal of reducing violence and promoting peace unless efforts to build trust between different groups are paired**

Borno State, Nigeria (Corinna Robbins/Mercy Corps)

Our research highlights the importance of pairing initiatives to improve state-society relations with interventions aimed at strengthening intercommunal relations in order to prevent violence.

with initiatives to bolster citizens' trust in leaders and institutions. Evidence from Mercy Corps programs in Nigeria and Niger indicate that this can be accomplished by facilitating opportunities for communities to collaborate across conflict lines on joint projects that address collective needs, promote the peaceful management of shared resources, and foster engagement between citizens and local authorities.

4. **Identity-based grievances can fuel support for violence, but shared identity and belonging can help lay the groundwork for peace.** Attachment to specific identities can influence attitudes and behavior related to violence. Analysis of survey data from Afrobarometer indicates that across sub-Saharan Africa, identifying more closely with a sub-national group, such as an ethnic group, instead of one's nationality is associated with greater support for violence. We observed similar patterns in Iraq. In a survey of Yazidis – Iraq's second-largest religious minority – we found that the more attached people were to their Yazidi identity, the more they supported the use of violence both to defend their community and to further a political cause. Attachment to one's Iraqi identity, in contrast, was not significantly associated with attitudes about violence.

Group attachments are not inherently problematic, however. Our Afrobarometer analysis also found that compared with those who only identified with their ethnic group and those who only identified with their nationality, people who claimed equal attachment to *both* their ethnic and their national identity were *less* likely to support or participate in violence.
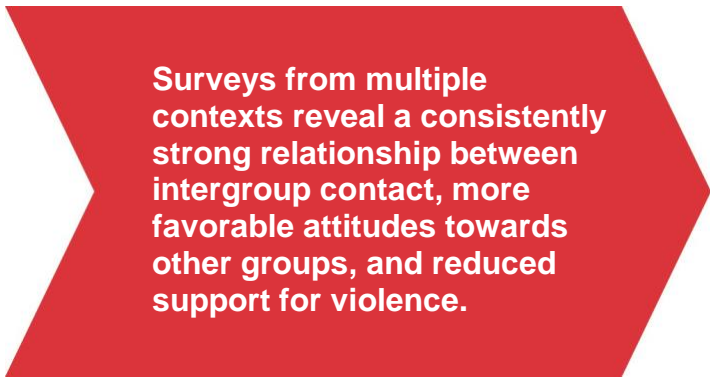

Nairobi, Kenya
(Ezra Millstein/
Mercy Corps)

A crucial factor affecting the relationship between identity and violence is whether people perceived that their group had been treated unfairly by the government. Perceived unfair treatment strengthened the relationship between group attachment and support for violence. It was also associated with more *incidents* of violence: we found that regions in Africa with higher perceptions of unfair ethnic treatment

experienced more violent events.[1] **This reinforces the importance of promoting good governance that ensures fair treatment of all groups.** While strong ethnic identity – relative to national identity – can contribute to greater support for violence, it can be ameliorated if one's group is treated fairly by governing authorities. These findings echo qualitative research conducted by Mercy Corps in Afghanistan, Colombia, Somalia, and Mali – which showed that youth often join armed groups in response to perceived government neglect and injustice – and are also consistent with evidence that shows a strong link between inter-group inequalities and violent mobilization.

5. **Civic engagement can help reduce support for violence, but it also poses risks.** Compared to other components of social cohesion, the relationship between civic engagement and violence is highly contingent. Analysis of survey data from Afrobarometer suggests that individuals who have contacted local leaders were more likely to express support for violence. Yet, getting together with others to raise an issue with local authorities or community leaders was associated with *less* support for violence, and with fewer violent events. This likely reflects the fact that *how* individuals interact with leaders and institutions, and what the *outcomes* of those engagements are, influence their willingness to endorse violence. Indeed, research from a Mercy Corps' youth program in Somalia found that a combination of education and civic engagement – largely community service – led to a decrease in support for, and engagement in, violence. But if greater civic participation exposes people to corrupt or unjust behavior by leaders, or it fails to yield benefits, then it may result in increased frustration and grievances that could stoke, rather than mitigate, conflict, at least in the short term. Moreover, our research on intercommunal conflict in northwest and north central Nigeria indicates that politicians and other local leaders can exploit civic engagement for the purposes of encouraging or enabling violence to serve their own purposes. Interventions that aim to expand civic participation should therefore **impose safeguards to discourage this kind of manipulation and focus on the quality, not the quantity, of people's engagement with their leaders and the processes used for civic engagement.**

6. **Interactions between groups can help reduce support for violence – particularly when those interactions are positive.** Surveys conducted by Mercy Corps in multiple contexts reveal a consistently strong relationship between intergroup contact, more favorable attitudes towards other groups, and reduced support for violence. In Niger, we found that positive interactions across identity group lines were linked to increased levels of trust and more positive attitudes towards other identity groups, as well as reduced support for violence. Our research in Nigeria similarly found that people who reported more frequent positive engagement with other ethno-religious groups were significantly less likely to express support for violence or a willingness to engage in it. In Iraq, Yazidis who were displaced with Sunni Arabs and reported interacting with them more frequently were more likely to welcome Sunni returnees into their communities.

> **Surveys from multiple contexts reveal a consistently strong relationship between intergroup contact, more favorable attitudes towards other groups, and reduced support for violence.**

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[1] Using violent events data from ACLED.

Providing opportunities for positive intergroup interactions and improving attitudes towards out-groups is important for violence prevention because it **makes it difficult for armed groups – including pro-government militias, gangs, and violent extremist organizations (VEOs) – to exploit prejudice and identity-based grievances that make individuals susceptible to recruitment.** Even among individuals who are most at risk of recruitment into VEOs, our research in Kenya shows that those who engaged and developed interpersonal relationships with people from diverse backgrounds were less likely to support violence. Evidence from Niger and our analysis of Afrobarometer data also shows that individuals with more positive attitudes towards out-groups are less likely to support and participate in violence. On the flip slide, through qualitative research in Mali we found that where there is little interaction among community members, cooperation and conflict management are more challenging. These findings suggest that **the extent to which intergroup contact can strengthen social cohesion and reduce the risk of conflict hinges on the *substance* and *process* of those interactions.**

How can donors and implementers help build social cohesion and prevent violence?

7. **Creating opportunities for positive intergroup collaboration toward a shared goal is vital for building social cohesion.** Participatory and collaborative approaches to community development – which bring conflicting groups together to design and implement joint projects – are often a central part of initiatives aimed at strengthening social cohesion. The theory underlying these approaches is that by engaging in joint projects, individuals can work across identity or other lines of division toward a common goal or to address a shared need. This can increase empathy and understanding by providing meaningful and repeated opportunities to be exposed to, and have positive interactions with, other groups, building intergroup trust and increasing people's willingness to cooperate in the future. But such **participatory projects need to carefully design and implement the process through which individuals and groups engage each other to ensure quality interactions and model the behaviors that produce these interactions throughout all phases of the project.**

Sulaimaniyah, Iraq
(Mercy Corps)

Mercy Corps' inclusive community engagement process, CATALYSE, facilitates joint project planning that builds communities' capacity to identify and organize around collective priorities, mobilize resources, implement projects, and influence leaders. Our programs in Nigeria have used this model to improve relations and mitigate conflicts between farmer and pastoralist communities in the Middle Belt region. A randomized control trial showed that this approach led to more positive interactions and increased trust between farmers and herders, even as intergroup tensions increased within the broader area where the program was being implemented. Similarly, a quasi-experimental study of a peacebuilding program in Niger, which also used the CATALYSE approach to strengthen social cohesion, found that these activities – particularly ones that required greater coordination and collaboration between more individuals within and between communities – had a positive impact on intra-community trust, trust of out-groups, and collective action. And in Jordan, we demonstrated that combining community-driven infrastructure projects with training in conflict management had a strong, positive impact on social cohesion between Syrian refugees and Jordanian host communities. Evidence reviews of the peacebuilding sector by other organizations have also found that interventions that foster sustained, meaningful collaborations between groups through joint community projects contribute to increased trust and reductions in violence.

There is promising evidence that participatory and collaborative approaches to community development, and other joint projects, can improve cohesion between different groups.

Photo: Borno, Nigeria (Corinna Robbins/Mercy Corps)

8. **Interventions that strengthen the effectiveness and trustworthiness of local leaders can improve conflict management and reduce violence, regardless of whether they enhance intergroup trust.** Improving relations between citizens and leaders can also stop conflict by improving communities' ability to resolve disputes and diffuse tensions. Our research from Mali shows that trust in village chiefs and other local leaders can strengthen communities' conflict resolution capacities by improving people's participation in, and satisfaction with, negotiation and mediation processes managed by these leaders.

Moreover, interventions designed to improve leaders' mediation capabilities can be effective at reducing violence and improving security, even when they do not have an impact on levels of social cohesion between identity groups. A randomized controlled trial of this type of intervention in northern Nigeria assessed the impact of training local leaders in Interest-Based Negotiation and Mediation. Leaders who participated in mediation training reported feeling more skilled and better prepared to negotiate disputes, which translated into increased beliefs among community members that disputes were resolved in a way that all sides found satisfactory. In addition, in communities where local leaders received the mediation training, residents reported reductions in violent events and an increased sense of security. At the same time, the training did not shift key dimensions of social cohesion – trust in particular – between identity

groups. **Donors and policymakers should therefore pair interventions that aim to stop violence, such as mediation training, with those seeking to strengthen social cohesion, improve community perceptions of state and local leaders, and address other underlying causes of conflict.**

9. **Interventions must account for gender-specific barriers to improving social cohesion.** In Iraq, we found that Yazidi women were much more reluctant to accept Sunni returnees than Yazidi men, indicating that improving social cohesion may require addressing gender differences in the level and drivers of mistrust. In Niger, the involvement of women in participatory and collaborative community development activities was often met with indifference and interference from men and community elders. This points to the barriers that women – and other marginalized or disadvantaged groups – often face when they try to engage in patriarchal social and economic structures, which can undermine efforts to build social cohesion. More research is needed to better understand the roles that these groups play in improving social cohesion, and the intended and unintended consequences of their participation in different kinds of activities. But our research indicates that **interventions need to (1) include activities that target group-specific barriers to social cohesion – such as psychosocial support (PSS) and trauma healing – and (2) develop strategies to mitigate the resistance, or even backlash, that these groups may face for participating in these programs.**

10. **Violence prevention is more likely to be effective when programs have the flexibility to design activities to respond to context-driven diagnoses of social cohesion dynamics**. Taken together, the evidence presented in this brief indicates that violence prevention interventions should be designed using a problem-driven diagnostic process that identifies which dimensions of social cohesion need to be strengthened in order to mitigate conflict and promote peace. Other evidence reviews have drawn similar conclusions, emphasizing that programs that accurately identified local bottlenecks to intergroup cohesion tended to have a larger effect. Building programs this way can help to ensure that theories of change are specific about how each activity will change underlying attitudes, norms, and behaviors, and respond to social and identity drivers of conflict that may vary widely at the local level.

> **Donors and practitioners must identify and target the specific dimensions of social cohesion that need to be strengthened to prevent violence, which may differ in each locality.**

Taking a holistic and problem-driven approach to designing social cohesion programming will likely lead to programs that are simultaneously more *targeted* at specific social cohesion dimensions while also being more *layered* with approaches and theories of change from other sectors than many conventional approaches within the peacebuilding sector. For example, our preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) programming in Kenya, which focuses on preventing radicalization and recruitment into VEOs among high-risk individuals, is underpinned by evidence that preventing recruitment requires improving multiple dimensions of social cohesion along with addressing other factors such as a lack of perceived agency and limited livelihood opportunities. Our P/CVE program addresses this mix of drivers with a combination of interventions, including mentorship, trauma-healing, and support for social, civic, and economic participation. Evidence from program assessments suggests this bundle of interventions can contribute to changing norms and attitudes and reducing violent behavior among participants, illustrating the promise of localized and layered interventions to advance peace. **Donors and practitioners should therefore target the specific dimensions of social cohesion that need to be strengthened to prevent violence, which may differ in each community.**

Acknowledgements

Suggested Citation

Olawole, I., Lichtenheld, A., and Sheely, R. (2022). *Strengthening Social Cohesion for Violence Prevention: 10 Lessons for Policymakers and Practitioners*. Washington, D.C.: Mercy Corps.

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