



MOBILIZING COMMUNITIES TO BUILD SOCIAL COHESION AND REDUCE VULNERABILITY TO VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Evidence from a Peacebuilding Program in Niger

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Can bringing people together to collaborate on projects that address shared needs improve social cohesion in fragile and conflict-affected settings? Does improving social cohesion – a sense of trust, shared purpose, and willingness to cooperate among different individuals, groups, and institutions in an area – reduce vulnerability to violent extremism? In recent years, [donors](#) and [practitioners](#) have suggested that building social cohesion could help ameliorate the grievances and social marginalization that motivate people to engage in violent extremism (VE). Yet there is limited evidence to support these claims, including a relative dearth of rigorous evaluations of social cohesion programs on violence-related outcomes.

To fill this gap, Mercy Corps examined the impact of its USAID-funded Preventing Violent Extremism Actions through increased Social Cohesion Efforts (PEACE) program in the Tillabéri region of Niger. PEACE used Mercy Corps' signature approach to community mobilization and participatory planning, [CATALYSE](#), to support communities in identifying local issues and implementing projects together that addressed shared



needs. These projects – which included mediation and dialogue initiatives, infrastructure rehabilitation, natural resource management, livelihoods support, and cultural events – provided opportunities to strengthen social cohesion along ethnic, citizen-government, and other lines of division in order to make it more difficult for VE groups to exploit identity differences and feelings of marginalization. Under the program, which lasted from 2019 to 2021, Mercy Corps and its local partner, Cercle Dev, randomly assigned 40 villages deemed at risk of VE recruitment to either receive activities during the first phase (the “treatment” group), or to act as a “control” group during the first phase and receive activities during the second phase. Drawing on surveys of 1,800 respondents before, during, and after the program, we tested the impact of different activities on multiple indicators of social cohesion and violent extremism. To help triangulate and explain these results, we also analyzed qualitative data collected by the program.

Key Findings

The program had a positive impact on some aspects of social cohesion, but only certain activities increased trust between groups.

The more PEACE activities of any type implemented in a village, and the more respondents participated in them, the more respondents’ trust in their communities improved. Yet when it came to improving trust of *other groups*, infrastructure projects and cultural activities had a positive and statistically significant impact, but mediation and livelihoods-related interventions did not. This is likely because infrastructure and cultural activities engaged more people, required greater coordination between different groups, and centered around addressing shared needs and participating in meaningful traditions.

PEACE’s impact on inter-group cohesion also depended on the level of ethnic diversity in a community.

PEACE activities had a more positive impact on inter-group trust in villages in Tillabéri with a higher number of ethnic groups, and a more *negative* impact in villages where there was only one ethnic group. Because many activities were conducted at the community level, they appeared to improve trust between groups in ethnically-mixed villages. But in ethnically homogenous villages, the program may have bolstered within-group trust at the expense of out-group trust. This suggests that PEACE was more effective when projects intentionally brought members of different groups together to collaborate.



Sean Sheridan/Mercy Corps

The program made modest improvements in relations between citizens and governing actors.

PEACE also helped improve people’s perceptions of their leaders. Villages that received more activities (of any type) experienced an increase in respondents reporting that leaders kept their commitments to the community. We also found a small, positive effect of PEACE activities on the perceived availability of social services and the perceived effectiveness of conflict resolution mechanisms, such as mediation processes.

Perceptions regarding the roles of women and youth in the community did not improve as a result of the program.

We did not find significant differences in the effect of PEACE interventions by gender, age, or livelihood group. While the program made a concerted effort to include and empower women and youth as co-leaders and participants in joint projects, it did not improve perceptions of the roles they play in community decision-making or in driving conflict. Participants reported that the involvement of women and youth in PEACE activities was often met with indifference and interference from men and community elders. This points to the resistance that marginalized and disadvantaged groups can face when they try to meaningfully engage in patriarchal social and economic structures. Deteriorating security conditions in Tillabéri during the program implementation period, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the relatively short duration of the program limited the ability of PEACE to effectively address this challenge.

Despite evidence that PEACE helped improve social cohesion, its impact on reducing vulnerability to violent extremism was mixed.

The program had no impact on the perceived level of conflict or armed group activity in project areas, including VE activity. This could reflect the fact that some villages experienced greater insecurity during the programming period due to incursions by armed groups from Mali. Regarding attitudes on violent extremism – measured using survey techniques that reduce the risk of people providing socially desirable responses – we found mixed results. PEACE had a statistically significant effect on reducing support for political violence. Yet only certain activities were associated with a reduction in support for *violent groups*, including the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). In particular, we found that mediation and dialogue activities both reduced support for violence and reduced support for ISGS. However, we did not find a direct link between improvements in social cohesion and changes in support for violence or for armed groups. More evidence is needed, then, on the role that social cohesion plays in reducing vulnerability to VE in contexts like Niger.

Implications and Recommendations for Donors and Practitioners

Use community mobilization and participatory planning to build social cohesion. Improving relations between groups and between citizens and leaders is valuable in its own right, as it can reduce social and political tensions, mitigate the risk of armed conflict, and bolster individuals' and communities' resilience capacities. This study provides further evidence that mobilizing communities to collaborate on participatory projects across lines of division can help strengthen social cohesion. Based on our findings, we recommend that practitioners work with communities to prioritize projects that have the greatest potential to improve social cohesion: those that mobilize a broad cross-section of individuals and groups to collaborate on meaningful initiatives that address collective needs and produce tangible results.

Sharpen theories and outcome measures regarding the links between social cohesion and violence, including violent extremism. Other research by Mercy Corps indicates that strengthening social cohesion is important for preventing violence and promoting peace. Yet this study raises questions about how and to what extent improving cohesion reduces communities' vulnerability to *violent extremism*. PEACE may not have improved the dimensions of social cohesion that are most crucial to reducing vulnerability to VE – or

Focusing on violent extremism in an active conflict context may be impractical or ineffective, as isolating vulnerability and risk factors for VE versus violence in general can be very difficult.

improved them to the level needed to have a meaningful impact. Donors and practitioners should therefore invest more in identifying and testing the precise mechanisms that potentially link social cohesion to VE risk. Sharpening this theory of change is critical for informing program design: if the primary mechanism relates to the inclusion of marginalized groups, then it has different implications for what approaches are likely to be effective than if the mechanisms relate to inter-group contact. Donors and practitioners also need to specify what exactly they are trying to prevent or change and how they will measure it. This will help social cohesion programs calibrate their interventions to address the main sources of division that contribute to violent extremism in a given context.

Alternatively, programs may want to broaden their aperture and strive to reduce participation in a range of violent activities, especially if these activities share similar drivers. Focusing on VE in an active conflict context – particularly in a place like Niger, which is riven by a series of distinct but overlapping insurgent, inter-communal, and cross-border conflicts – may be impractical or ineffective, as isolating vulnerability and risk factors for violent extremism versus violence in general can be very difficult.

Fund multi-year projects. Altering community relations and changing attitudes, values, and behaviors regarding extremism and the use of violence often takes years. Shifting norms around gender, youth, and the inclusion of marginalized groups is also a multi-year undertaking. Donors must ensure these kinds of interventions are given enough time to realize the changes they seek by funding longer-duration projects that offer repeated, sustained activities over an extended period.

Target activities at the group, community, and elite levels to address multi-faceted drivers of violent extremism. Our findings suggest that activities that are effective at strengthening social cohesion may not be the same as those that help reduce support for violence and violent groups, at least in the short-term. In some villages, this seemed to reflect a misalignment between the focus of PEACE activities (improving intergroup relations) and the primary drivers of violence and VE (tensions between local elites). Mediation and dialogue activities did appear to both reduce support for violence and reduce support for ISGS, perhaps not by strengthening cohesion, but by [improving the conflict resolution skills of local leaders](#) and helping communities peacefully resolve disputes. Future interventions should therefore aim to address other factors that radicalize people or lead them to engage in violence, such as a lack of psychosocial support and ineffective governance.

Develop strategies to overcome resistance to the involvement of women, youth, and other marginalized groups in community decision-making. PEACE provides another example of the barriers to encouraging women and youth to participate in power structures in patriarchal environments. The program lacked a concerted plan and sufficient time to work on altering the enabling environment in a way that might help overcome these barriers. Future interventions should develop longer-term strategies – such as identifying and engaging key male allies, or implementing behavioral change interventions targeted at men and women – to contend with the deeply entrenched sources of resistance these groups face when they try to engage in male-dominated spaces.

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