

UNBUNDLING PEACEBUILDING

How Mediation and Community Dialogues Help to Prevent and Manage Violent Conflict in North Central Nigeria

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Executive Summary

The effects of conflict last for generations, from the untold lives lost, protracted displacements, reduced economic activity subjecting people to poverty, limited security preventing travel to school or for healthcare, and the continued trauma of living under violence and uncertainty. Consequently, both governments and donors invest in numerous types of peacebuilding interventions, hoping something will stick. While there is a growing evidence base about the effectiveness of peacebuilding interventions, this diverse set of activities are typically implemented as a bundle that attempts to address as many different types of conflict drivers and underlying causes as possible. However, this mode of implementation makes it difficult to know which parts of the bundle of peacebuilding interventions are having an impact on which outcomes. As a result, it is difficult for practitioners and policymakers to use this type of evidence to improve the effectiveness of their programs and make decisions about what types of programs should be scaled up in any given context.

To fill this evidence gap related to the disaggregated effects of bundled peacebuilding activities, we conducted a Randomized Control Trial (RCT) on a peacebuilding program that combined two different types of peacebuilding interventions: community dialogues and mediation training for local leaders. The program, Community Initiatives to Promote Peace (CIPP), funded by USAID, has worked across six states in North Central Nigeria since 2019. The study was conducted in Benue, Kogi and Plateau states, where farmers and herders have fought for decades over scarce resources, shaping deep-seated negative narratives across this social divide. Aside from community-level mediation training and community dialogues, CIPP also implemented a range of other activities at the LGA-level, including (but not limited to) designing and airing social media campaigns and radio programming that promote peace, youth-led action research, and supporting women's peace groups to help advance Gender, Peace, and Security aims.

Methodology

The study presented here is the second in a two-study series. In the [first study](#), we randomly assigned 88 communities in Benue, Kogi and Plateau states to either serve as a comparison group or to receive a mediation training intervention, which involved training community leaders in Interest-Based Mediation and Negotiation (IBMN). For the [second study](#), we randomly assigned half of the intervention communities and half of the comparison communities from the first study to receive the dialogue intervention, which brought conflicting groups together to discuss perceptions of the conflict and to build stronger ties between groups. From October to December 2022, we surveyed a random sample of 4,398 households across all four conditions. We asked community members about their perceptions of violence and security in their communities and the amount of social cohesion they felt with members of the groups with whom they had the most conflict.

Results

The effects of IBMN training on violence and insecurity persist over 3 years. In the earlier CIPP study, we found a strong effect of training leaders in mediation. In the present study, we find that the mediation intervention (consisting of the initial training three years earlier and ongoing mentoring and coaching) had strong positive effects on both violence and security. Forty-one percent of people in comparison communities report violent events compared to 19% in communities with the IBMN intervention and 10.4% in communities with both the IBMN and dialogue interventions. Additionally, individuals in communities with leaders trained in IBMN reported feeling more secure.

We observe an increase in social cohesion in communities where leaders were trained in IBMN. In the first study in this series, we observed mixed effects on social cohesion measures. In the second study, we continue to see more positive behaviors in communities with only the IBMN intervention and with both the IBMN and dialogue interventions. We also see a statistically significant difference in trust, with those who live in communities with leaders trained in IBMN reporting more trust in the out-group than those in comparison or dialogue communities.

We find little impact of community dialogues on measured outcomes. We see few changes between those who received the dialogues and those who did not on either security or social cohesion outcomes. We attribute the lack of an effect to the design and implementation, where the focus was to include many different people in one-off dialogue events.

Recommendations

- **Continue to invest in improving the mediation capabilities of local leaders.** Preventing and stopping violence is a top priority for many peacebuilding programs. Our results indicate that local leaders, with the right tools, can be effective at reducing violence and improving security. Moreover, mediation also supports social and economic interaction between groups, and it appears that the combination of the reduction in violence and increased interactions over time contributed to people shifting their attitudes about the other group over time.

We also see that the results from the first study held for additional two years, with additional mentoring and coaching. That we see lower levels of violence in communities that received the IBMN intervention three years after the initial training illustrates the potential sustainability and cost-effectiveness of these interventions. In this context, training and mentoring 340 leaders over the course of three years cost approximately USD 60,000 for the initial training and an additional USD 25,000 for refreshers. Donors should continue and increase their investments in enhancing the skills of local leaders to resolve conflicts, particularly in areas where state presence is weak.

- **Consider more intensive dialogue interventions with influencers to promote greater attitudinal and behavioral change.** We attribute the inability of the dialogue intervention to affect the wider community to the “light dosage” of this intervention. In this programming context, dialogues were designed as one-off sessions with groups of participants selected from the community at large. Based on other research on the effectiveness of dialogues and similar interventions, we recommend that dialogues involve the same well-connected individuals over time to provide people with sufficient opportunity to learn about each other, understand each other’s perspectives, and begin to formulate a new group identity.

- ***Incorporate evidence from behavioral science in programs to support broader societal change.***
Peacebuilding programs often expect that change at the individual level will lead to change at societal level. In this theory of change, individuals who participate in such programs will influence their families and friends, and over time, prosocial attitudes and behaviors will spread widely enough to move societies. Yet without intentionality about how that spread occurs, that wider change tends to be limited. Behavioral science provides insights into how change moves from individuals to the collective. For example, research shows that social norms, which develop through public information, role models, and networks, are influential in changing people's behavior at scale. Future programming and research should investigate how to cost-effectively combine community-level interventions with mass communication campaigns such as radio and social media to increase the likelihood that changes that occur among intervention participants lead to greater societal change.

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