Nigeria—Corinna Robbins

DOES PEACEBUILDING WORK IN THE MIDST OF CONFLICT?

Impact Evaluation of a Peacebuilding Program in Nigeria

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Executive summary

Persistent violence between farmers and pastoralists in Nigeria has contributed to more than 7,000 deaths in the past five years and costs the Nigerian economy $13 billion a year. Communities in the Middle Belt that once cooperated over natural resources are competing for increasingly scarce land and water as climate change intensifies, sparking migration further south in search of available resources. Underdevelopment and poor governance further contribute to a breakdown in traditional agreements, and farmer and pastoralist communities are fast becoming polarized as clashes take on religious and ethnic overtones.

In response, Mercy Corps and our local partner, Pastoral Resolve (PARE), implemented the USAID-funded Engaging Communities for Peace in Nigeria (ECPN), from 2015 to 2019 in the Middle Belt states of Benue and Nasarawa. The program sought to prevent violent conflict between farmer and pastoralist communities through three main interventions: (1) strengthening the capacity of local leaders to resolve disputes inclusively and sustainably, including training and coaching them in interest-based negotiation and mediation; (2) building trust by facilitating opportunities for people to collaborate across conflict lines on quick-impact projects and natural resource management initiatives that addressed shared needs; and (3) fostering engagement among community leaders and local authorities to prevent conflict through joint violence prevention planning as well as information sharing around conflict triggers and violent incidents.

Because of a demand among policymakers and practitioners for more evidence on the impact of peacebuilding investments, we conducted a randomized impact evaluation of the first phase of the program, which lasted approximately two years. With this evaluation, we test a central tenet of ECPN and many other peacebuilding programs: do mediation and contact over shared interests change attitudes and increase cooperation among conflicting groups?

Research Design

We hypothesized that, compared with those not participating in the program, communities and individuals involved with the ECPN program would experience improved intergroup attitudes, including trust and intergroup cohesion; increased perceptions of security; and increased peaceful behaviors, including higher levels of intergroup interaction, dispute resolution success, and cooperation. To test the program's effects on these outcomes, we used a randomized controlled trial (RCT) at the community level to examine the overall impact of the program on communities. We triangulated the results of the community-level RCT with a pre-/post-program analysis of individuals within communities to see how outcomes among direct participants—those most engaged in program activities—differed from outcomes among indirect participants—those living in intervention communities who were merely exposed to program activities. We also compared direct and indirect participants with those in control communities with no exposure to the program at all. We measured attitudes, perceptions and behaviors, and used a combination of surveys, behavioral games and observational monitoring tools to assess these various outcomes.

Key Findings

Overall, findings indicate that ECPN improved the conditions for peace in the communities in which it operated and among the individuals who participated most in activities that brought farmers and pastoralists together regularly. On most measures, ECPN communities either improved or stayed the same, while control communities stayed the same or deteriorated. That intervention sites and ECPN participants' attitudes improved or stayed steady is especially noteworthy, given heightened tensions and a regionwide uptick in violence during the final round of data collection, due at least in part to the implementation of a new Benue state law prohibiting open grazing.

Intergroup contact and trust between farmer and pastoralist communities increased or deteriorated significantly less in ECPN sites than in control sites, even as regional tensions increased. Contact between farmers and pastoralists in the control sites decreased by approximately 15 percent, while contact in ECPN sites stayed the same. Further, though trust between farmers and pastoralists in control sites decreased, trust within ECPN sites increased, leading to a difference of 13 percentage points in the overall level of trust between intervention and control sites.

Perceptions of security increased significantly more in ECPN communities than in control communities. By the end of the first phase of the program, perceptions of security in ECPN communities had improved by 15 percentage points more than in control sites. The increase in perceptions of security across all sites—both intervention and control—was surprising, given rising violence in the region. However, the added presence of security forces, including the military, in all communities due to recent events, and dialogues hosted by ECPN that incorporated control communities due to the immediacy of the situation, may explain this overall trend.

Among individuals, as a result of the program, direct participants' attitudes and behaviors improved more than those of indirect participants in ECPN communities, who in turn improved more than individuals in control communities. One criticism of peacebuilding programs is that they often only work with the "converted," those who want to participate, and do not affect the wider community. We found that the benefits to those who participated did spread to the wider community. These trends were strongest for intergroup trust and perceived security.

Perceptions of the effectiveness of dispute resolution mechanisms did not improve in ECPN communities. While direct participants' perceptions of dispute resolution slightly improved compared with those of indirect and control individuals, ECPN communities' perceptions related to dispute resolution decreased slightly more than the perceptions of control sites. One potential explanation for the difference in trends between the individual-level and the community-level results is that direct participants may have been more knowledgeable about the mediators' activities due to their level of engagement in the program. Those randomly sampled in the community may not have known about the more than 500 disputes resolved over the study period unless they had a dispute themselves or knew someone who used the mediators. However, these resolved disputes may have indirectly affected people's perceptions of security, attitudes, and behaviors, because fewer disputes erupted into violence. Or it is possible that the pathway to reaching the outcomes above did not go through dispute resolution. How dispute resolution does or does not affect peacebuilding outcomes requires further examination.

Recommendations

1. **Increase investments in programs that facilitate positive contact between groups in active conflict.** This study demonstrates that contact theory–based peacebuilding programs can support communities to maintain or improve relationships despite a broader escalation of violence. Donors should increase their investments in these relatively low-cost interventions, in this case, less than $60 per direct participant, to build communities' resilience to being drawn into violence during periods of intense conflict.

2. **Pair community-level interventions with robust advocacy campaigns to promote policies conducive to peace.** ECPN either improved peace outcomes despite the policy and conflict environment, or at least kept communities from being pulled into the broader conflict. Because donor-funded program impacts can go only so far if government policies sow divisions, peacebuilding investments should incorporate strategies for strengthening policies that will facilitate sustainable peace.

3. **Design interventions to maximize the ripple effect from direct participants to the broader community.** This study showed that people-to-people activities that facilitate close cooperation between members of communities in conflict had a positive effect beyond the specific individuals engaged. Unfortunately, the mediation component had less of a ripple effect. These results make it clear that program interventions' logic should clearly articulate the intended ripple effect and that program activities should be designed to accentuate this effect, such as publicizing successes due to cooperation or mediation through community forums or messaging.

4. **Invest in larger-scale, rigorous impact evaluations of peacebuilding programming.** Absent a rigorous impact evaluation with a comparison group, the program would have appeared to have little impact on peace outcomes in light of the overall deteriorating security conditions. When possible, more rigorous impact evaluations of peacebuilding programs are needed in order to (1) increase learning among practitioners and donors about how to implement peacebuilding programs effectively and which approaches present the best return on investment, and (2) support increased evidence-based investments in peacebuilding interventions.

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