EQUIPPED FOR PEACE

Conflict Resolution Training and Youth Violence Prevention in Niger

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Executive Summary

Across fragile and conflict-affected contexts, governments, donors, and practitioners increasingly invest in integrated youth programming that combines economic packages, civic engagement, and peacebuilding objectives. These approaches reflect growing recognition that violence is rarely driven by a single factor; instead, it emerges from the interaction of economic exclusion, weak institutions, social marginalization, and unresolved local disputes. Yet despite the emergence of integrated youth programs, there remains limited causal evidence on which specific components reduce violence, how they interact, and under what conditions they generate meaningful peace outcomes. This evidence gap is especially consequential in the Sahel, where youth are simultaneously at the center of conflict dynamics and among the most critical actors for long-term stability.

This report presents findings from a cluster randomized controlled trial (RCT) embedded within Youth Connect, a Mercy Corps youth development and violence prevention program in Niger and Burkina Faso. Youth Connect delivered vocational training, entrepreneurship support, civic education, and soft skills development to vulnerable youth in Niger and Burkina Faso. This study focuses on the Nigerien regions of Maradi and Tillabéri—areas characterized by high youth unemployment, weak state presence, recurrent local conflict, and growing exposure to violent extremist organizations. While Youth Connect aimed to address structural drivers of youth vulnerability, it was not explicitly designed to target conflict behaviors or local dispute dynamics.

To test whether adding a targeted peacebuilding component could strengthen violence prevention outcomes, Mercy Corps layered a light-touch conflict resolution intervention—Interest-Based Mediation and Negotiation (IBMN)—onto Youth Connect in a randomly selected subset of villages. IBMN is a low-cost, community-based training approach designed to strengthen participants' capacity to de-escalate disputes, identify underlying interests, and negotiate nonviolent solutions. This study is the first experimental evaluation of IBMN delivered directly to youth as primary peace actors.

The study compares outcomes across three groups: villages that received Youth Connect only, villages that received Youth Connect plus IBMN, and pure control villages that received no intervention. Drawing on survey data from 1,734 youth respondents, list experiments designed to measure sensitive attitudes toward violence, and geo-referenced conflict data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) project, the study assesses impacts on support for violence, norms around violent behavior, and real-world conflict incidents.

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Key Findings

Layering IBMN onto Youth Connect produced substantial and meaningful reductions in youth support for violence. Youth in villages that received Youth Connect plus IBMN were significantly less likely to endorse political violence, justify violent responses to everyday disputes, or perceive violence as socially acceptable within their communities. These effects were notably stronger than those observed in villages that received Youth Connect alone, where impacts on violence-related attitudes were limited.

The results indicate that economic and civic programming, while important for addressing structural vulnerabilities, may be insufficient to shift norms and behaviors related to violence without explicitly targeting conflict dynamics. By contrast, IBMN directly addressed the relational and institutional pathways through which disputes escalate, equipping youth with practical tools to mediate conflicts and reposition themselves as agents of peace rather than bystanders or participants in violence.

The effects of IBMN were pronounced in more economically disadvantaged villages, suggesting that conflict resolution training may be especially valuable in contexts where poverty, exclusion, and weak governance heighten the risk that small disputes spiral into violence. Complementary analysis of ACLED data also indicates fewer violent incidents in villages that received the IBMN intervention. While exploratory and subject to data limitations, this finding provides suggestive evidence and supports the possibility that shifts in attitudes and norms may have translated into modest reductions in real-world violence.

Implications

This study provides rigorous evidence that layered, integrated youth programming—combining livelihoods, civic engagement, and targeted conflict management—can produce stronger violence-prevention outcomes than standalone approaches. The findings demonstrate that low-cost, scalable conflict resolution training can significantly enhance the peacebuilding impact of existing youth development platforms, particularly in highly fragile and resource-constrained settings. In the context of shrinking aid budgets and growing humanitarian needs, these results highlight the value of integrated, evidence-driven designs that maximize impact without requiring entirely new program architectures.

Recommendations

Layer conflict management training onto economic and civic interventions for youth. This study underscores the limits of standalone economic and civic engagement interventions when it comes to shifting attitudes toward violence. While Youth Connect provided valuable economic support and opportunities for civic participation, these activities alone did not measurably reduce support for violence. However, when combined with conflict management skills (in this case, Mercy Corps' Interest Based Mediation and Negotiation training), the intervention significantly lowered both perceived community support for violence and individual support for violence, as well as actual violent incidents. These results suggest that peacebuilding efforts in fragile contexts should prioritize *layering*—combining livelihood and civic support with targeted training in conflict resolution to reinforce community norms around nonviolence.

Adapt conflict resolution programs to engage youth as agents of peace. This study demonstrates that adapting mediation and dialogue tools to engage youth (a group often central to cycles of violence but excluded from decision-making) can be both feasible and effective. IBMN trained youth not only to de-escalate interpersonal disputes but also to mediate broader community tensions. This bottom-up approach

appears to have contributed to reductions in both support for and the actual incidence of violence. Peacebuilding programs should continue to expand access to mediation training among young people and view youth not merely as beneficiaries, but as capable peacebuilders within their communities.

Target areas of greater deprivation with conflict management tools. The effects of IBMN were strongest in areas with more limited access to water, a proxy for higher economic deprivation. This aligns with a broader evidence base suggesting that material insecurity may both heighten vulnerability to violence and increase openness to peacebuilding (Fearon and Laitin 2003; Duursma and Smidt 2024; Miguel et al. 2004). In this context, IBMN's impacts were stronger where there was more economic hardship, suggesting that layered interventions may yield greater returns in poorer, more remote communities. Implementers should use data-driven targeting strategies to prioritize areas where structural deprivation may amplify the value of conflict resolution training.

Integrate youth-led IBMN into broader peacebuilding initiatives. While layering IBMN onto youth-focused programming proved effective, youth-led conflict management approaches should also be incorporated into wider community peacebuilding efforts, not just youth programs. These approaches can help amplify impact, particularly in settings where youth play critical roles in local dispute resolution, community cohesion, and early warning. Building peace with youth doesn't always require standalone youth programs; it can also mean embedding youth leadership within broader conflict mitigation efforts.

Invest in scalable peacebuilding models for humanitarian settings. The results from IBMN training underscore the potential of light-touch, locally grounded peacebuilding interventions even in fragile contexts like Niger. Niger is marked by extreme poverty, political instability, and active insurgencies. That IBMN was able to reduce support for and incidence of violence in this context suggests it holds promise for other humanitarian settings. As donors increasingly prioritize humanitarian contexts, where formal institutions are weak, conflict is active, and displacement and climate shocks drive instability, there is a pressing need for scalable, adaptable tools that can be integrated into broader humanitarian and resilience programming. Policymakers and practitioners should integrate conflict management into humanitarian programming, especially in contexts where violence exacerbates displacement, undermines aid delivery, or impedes social cohesion. Interventions like IBMN in fragile settings can complement existing efforts to meet basic needs, while also addressing root causes of violence. Investing in more evidence generation in humanitarian contexts to identify what works under extreme constraints will be useful for building the evidence base on violence prevention. This way, peacebuilding is not siloed from humanitarian response but embedded within it.

Suggested Citation

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