MERCY CORPS

Strengthening Social Cohesion *for* Violence Prevention

LESSONS FOR POLICYMAKERS AND PRACTITIONERS

Mercy Corps has spent the past decade conducting research on building social cohesion in various fragile contexts. This brief highlights key takeaways from these studies for those seeking to effectively invest in strengthening social cohesion for violence prevention and peacebuilding.

Social cohesion exists when there is a **sense of trust, shared purpose, and a willingness to cooperate** among different individuals, groups, and institutions in an area. This encompasses relations within and between groups, and between citizens and leaders.

Building trust is central to reducing support for violence.

Peacebuilding programs should aim to improve trust between people who live close to each other, particularly if they are from different groups.

Moreover, interventions that **strengthen the effectiveness and trustworthiness of local leaders** can improve conflict management and reduce violence, regardless of whether they enhance intergroup trust. Donors and policymakers should 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. →

Social cohesion has six primary dimensions.

Each of these dimensions can be measured within groups, between groups, and between citizens and the state.

- **TRUST**
- **COLLECTIVE ACTION NORMS**
- **BELONGING**
- **SHARED IDENTITY**
- **CIVIC ENGAGEMENT**
- **ATTITUDES TOWARD OTHER GROUPS**

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Identity-based grievances can fuel support for violence, but shared identity and belonging can help lay the groundwork for peace.

A crucial factor affecting the relationship between identity and violence is whether people perceive that their group had been treated unfairly by the government. This reinforces the importance of promoting good governance and improving state-society relations as part of any effort to enhance social cohesion.

Civic engagement can help reduce support for violence, but it also poses risks.

Our research indicates that it is not whether, but how individuals interact with leaders and institutions, and what the outcomes of those engagements are, that influence their willingness to endorse violence. Interventions should therefore focus on the quality, not the quantity, of people's engagement with their leaders.

Positive intergroup collaboration toward a shared goal is vital for building social cohesion.

Surveys by Mercy Corps in multiple contexts reveal a consistently strong relationship between intergroup contact—particularly positive contact—favorable attitudes towards other groups, and reduced support for violence. We have also found that participatory approaches to community development that bring conflicting groups together to implement joint projects can improve intergroup cohesion. But such projects need to carefully design the process through which people engage to ensure quality interactions and model the behaviors that produce these interactions throughout all phases of the project.

Interventions must account for gender-specific barriers to improving social cohesion.

Our research indicates that interventions need to:

- Include activities that target group-specific barriers to social cohesion, such as psychosocial support and trauma healing
- Develop strategies to mitigate the resistance or backlash these groups may face for participating in these interventions

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How to Approach Social Cohesion Programming

Violence prevention is more effective when programs have the flexibility to respond to context-driven diagnoses of social cohesion dynamics. Interventions should be designed using a diagnostic process that identifies which dimensions of social cohesion need to be strengthened in order to mitigate conflict and promote peace. Donors and practitioners should **target the specific dimensions** of social cohesion that need to be strengthened to prevent violence, which may differ in each community.