

CAN MEDIATION REDUCE VIOLENCE?

The Effects of Negotiation Training for Local Leaders in North Central Nigeria

Overview

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Introduction

In numerous inter-communal conflicts around the world, local leaders are relied upon to help mediate and resolve disputes. In more remote areas, the state may not be present, and local leaders—including traditional, youth, and women leaders—are often trusted more than other actors due to their knowledge of and connections with communities. Consequently, peacebuilding interventions often focus on local leaders as a key element to prevent or curb violence.

Yet little is understood about the effectiveness of interventions that support local leaders in their efforts to resolve disputes. Few evaluations of these programs have a comparison group, so it is unclear if the additional support that leaders receive helps them become more successful in resolving disputes. **There is also little understanding of how these interventions benefit not just the leaders receiving the intervention and the disputants, but the overall community.** Do communities see changes in security and social cohesion as a result of leaders receiving mediation and negotiation training?

To answer these questions, we conducted a randomized control trial (RCT) of a peacebuilding program in North Central Nigeria. The USAID-funded Communities Initiative for Peace Program (CIPP), which aims to promote peaceful coexistence and stability in Nigeria, addresses the proximate and root causes of violence in the region, including farmer-herder conflict, which account for a significant proportion of violence in Nigeria today. The program provides mediation training for local leaders, convenes dialogues between communities and policymakers, and engages in radio and social media interventions.

The Context: North Central Nigeria

Nigeria's ethnically and religiously diverse northern region is experiencing violence that is splintering communities. Farmers from various ethnic groups and herders—who are largely ethnically Fulani and often nomadic or semi-sedentary—have a long history of conflict. However, these tensions had intensified due to a combination of 1) climate change, which is reducing the amount of arable or grazable land and water resources; 2) more people migrating into the north central region due to increasingly arid land farther north; 3) a greater number of people using a smaller amount of available land, intensifying resource competition; and 4) population shifts, changing people's minority vs. majority status.

Methodology

We randomly assigned 88 communities in Benue, Kogi and Plateau states to either receive a mediation training intervention or serve as a comparison group. Leaders of 44 communities were trained in Interest-Based Mediation and Negotiation (IBMN) and 44 other communities were assigned to the comparison group, where leaders continued to resolve disputes the way they had in the past. We surveyed 662 leaders across intervention and comparison sites to see how strongly they felt about their dispute resolution skills, their perceptions of violence and security, and the degree of cohesion they felt with one another.

We also surveyed a random sample of 4,013 households within the intervention and comparison communities. We asked community members about how satisfied they were with their leaders' dispute resolution skills, 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. We tested to see if the intervention affected various groups differently and did not find any consistent statistically significant differences across gender, livelihood, or age groups.

Results

We found that mediation training had a positive effect on both leaders and their communities. As expected, leaders who received the training felt they had stronger conflict resolution skills, perceived fewer violent events, felt there was greater security in their communities, and rated their interactions with leaders from the conflicting group more positively than those who did not receive the training. We saw similar results for communities. While intergroup violence had decreased overall in Benue, Kogi, and Plateau, **we saw a sharper decrease of violence in communities where leaders were trained in mediation.** Twenty-nine percent of participants who lived in communities whose leaders received the mediation training reported that they experienced a violent incident in the last six months, compared to 55% of participants in comparison sites. **Participants in the intervention communities also reported feeling more secure.** They were more likely to walk around their communities and less likely to avoid certain areas than those in comparison communities. They were also more likely to interact economically and socially with members of the conflicting group and report being more satisfied with their leaders' dispute resolution skills. All of these differences were statistically significant.

However, for both leaders and community members, the mediation training did not have a statistically significant effect on intergroup trust. **While the intervention appears to have made a dramatic shift in perceptions of security, it had less of an effect on improving social cohesion.** This indicates that mediation interventions are useful for preventing and stopping violence but may have less direct effects on strengthening relations between communities.

Recommendations

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 – and these results can be realized relatively quickly. Moreover, training and mentoring 340 leaders over the course of a year cost approximately USD 60,000. Alternative methods for securing communities, such as expanding policing or other forms of security, are much more expensive. Based on this promising evidence and low cost, donors should increase their investments in enhancing the skills of local leaders to resolve conflicts, particularly in areas where state presence is weak.

Pair peacebuilding interventions that halt violence with interventions that build trust between groups: The underlying causes of conflict are based on structural, social, and institutional inequities, as well as the social and psychological factors that foment mistrust and make conflict difficult to resolve. Proximate causes—such as land encroachments or elections—often trigger violence. In the results presented here, we see that mediation interventions were effective at addressing proximate causes of conflict, but did less in changing underlying causes, such as a lack of cohesion between groups. Therefore, we recommend that donors and implementers combine interventions that stop violence, like mediation training, with ones that address the underlying causes of conflict in areas with active violence.

Consider sequencing in peacebuilding interventions. Rather than conducting all activities at once, particularly in contexts with active conflict, prioritizing mediation and other methods for directly reducing violence first may provide the most immediate benefit to communities. Implementers should consider designing workplans that sequence activities so that those focused on stopping violence are implemented first. While there is often a feedback loop linking violence and social cohesion, stopping violence first may be more likely to create a “quick win,” while cohesion activities may take longer to produce tangible results.

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* For the full-length research report that describes these findings in more detail, please see Reardon, C., Wolfe, R., and Ogbudu, E. (2021) [*Can Mediation Reduce Violence? The Effects of Negotiation Training for Local Leaders in North Central Nigeria*](#). Washington, DC: Mercy Corps.