Sean Sheridan/Mercy Corps

MOBILIZING COMMUNITIES TO BUILD SOCIAL COHESION AND REDUCE VULNERABILITY TO VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Evidence from a Peacebuilding Program in Niger

JUNE 2022

Executive Summary

Can bringing people together to collaborate on projects that address shared needs improve social cohesion in conflict-affected settings? Does improving social cohesion – a sense of trust, shared purpose, and willingness to cooperate among different individuals, groups, and institutions in an area – reduce vulnerability to violent extremism? In recent years, donors and practitioners have suggested that building social cohesion between individuals and groups could help ameliorate the grievances and social marginalization that motivate people to engage in violent extremism (VE). Yet there is limited evidence to support these claims, including a relative dearth of rigorous evaluations of social cohesion programs on violence-related outcomes.

To fill this gap, Mercy Corps examined the impact of its USAID-funded Preventing Violent Extremism Actions through increased Social Cohesion Efforts (PEACE) program in the Tillabéri region of Niger. PEACE used Mercy Corps' signature approach to community mobilization and participatory planning, CATALYSE, to support communities in identifying local issues and implementing projects together that addressed shared needs. These projects – which included mediation and dialogue initiatives, infrastructure rehabilitation, natural resource management, livelihoods support, and cultural events – provided opportunities to strengthen social cohesion along ethnic, citizen-government, and other lines of division in order to make it more difficult for VE groups to exploit identity differences and feelings of marginalization. Under the program, which lasted from 2019 to 2021, Mercy Corps and its local partner, Cercle Dev, randomly assigned 40 villages deemed at risk of VE recruitment to either receive activities during the first phase (the "treatment" group), or to act as a "control" group during the first phase and receive activities during the second phase. Drawing on surveys of 1,800 respondents before, during, and after the program, we tested the impact of different activities on multiple indicators of social cohesion and violent extremism. To help triangulate and explain these results, we also analyzed qualitative data collected by the program.

Key Findings

The program had a positive impact on some aspects of social cohesion, but only certain activities increased trust between groups.

The more PEACE activities of any type implemented in a village, and the more respondents participated in them, the more respondents' trust in their communities improved. Yet when it came to improving trust *of other groups*, infrastructure projects and cultural activities had a positive and statistically significant impact, but mediation and livelihoods-related interventions did not. Infrastructure and cultural activities also helped improve the frequency and quality of inter-group interactions reported by respondents. This is likely because these activities engaged more people, required greater coordination between different groups, and centered around addressing shared needs and participating in meaningful traditions.

PEACE's impact on inter-group cohesion also depended on the level of ethnic diversity in a community.

PEACE activities seemed to have a more positive impact on inter-group trust in villages with a higher number of ethnic groups, and a more *negative* impact in villages where there was only one ethnic group. Because many activities were conducted at the community level, they appeared to improve trust between groups in ethnically-mixed villages. But in ethnically homogenous villages, the program may have bolstered

within-group trust at the expense of out-group trust. This suggests that PEACE was more effective when projects intentionally brought members of different groups together to collaborate.

The program made modest improvements in relations between citizens and governing actors.

PEACE also helped improve people's perceptions of their leaders. Communities that received more activities experienced an increase in respondents reporting that leaders kept their commitments to the community. We also found a small, positive effect of PEACE activities on the perceived availability of social services and the perceived effectiveness of conflict resolution mechanisms, such as mediation processes.

Perceptions regarding the roles of women and youth in the community did not improve as a result of the program.

We did not find significant differences in the effect of PEACE interventions by gender, age, or livelihood group. While the program made a concerted effort to meaningfully include and empower women and youth as co-leaders and participants in joint projects, it did not improve perceptions of the roles they play in community decision-making or in driving conflict. Participants reported that the involvement of women and youth in PEACE activities was often met with indifference and interference from men and community elders. This points to the resistance that marginalized and disadvantaged groups can face when they try to engage meaningfully in patriarchal social and economic structures. Deteriorating security conditions in Tillabéri during the implementation period, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the relatively short duration of the program limited the ability of PEACE to effectively address this challenge.

Despite evidence that PEACE helped improve social cohesion, its impact on reducing vulnerability to violent extremism was mixed.

The program had no impact on the perceived level of conflict or armed group activity in project areas, including VE activity. This could reflect the fact that some villages experienced greater insecurity during the programming period due to incursions by armed groups from Mali. Regarding attitudes on violent extremism – measured using survey techniques that reduce the risk of people providing socially desirable responses – we found mixed results. PEACE had a statistically significant effect on reducing support for political violence. Yet only certain activities were associated with a reduction in support *for violent groups*, including the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). In particular, we found that mediation and dialogue activities both reduced support for violence and reduced support for ISGS. However, we did not find a direct link between improvements in social cohesion and changes in support for violence or for armed groups. More evidence is needed, then, on the role that social cohesion plays in reducing vulnerability to VE in contexts like Niger.

Implications and Recommendations for Donors and Practitioners

Use community mobilization and participatory planning to build social cohesion. Improving relations between groups and between citizens and leaders is valuable in its own right, as it can reduce social and political tensions, mitigate the risk of armed conflict, and bolster individuals' and communities' resilience capacities. This study provides further evidence that mobilizing communities to collaborate on participatory projects across lines of division can help strengthen social cohesion. Mercy Corps' approach is predicated on the idea that *how* communities are mobilized to design and implement joint projects is as important as the type of project they work on. Yet the findings from PEACE suggest that the type of project still matters. Certain activities may be more conducive to forging positive interactions and improving trust, regardless of

the process used to facilitate them. Practitioners should work with communities to prioritize projects that have the greatest potential to improve cohesion: those that mobilize a broad cross-section of individuals and groups to collaborate on meaningful initiatives that address collective needs and produce tangible results.

Sharpen theories and outcome measures regarding the links between social cohesion and violence, including violent extremism. Other research by Mercy Corps indicates that strengthening social cohesion is important for preventing violence and promoting peace. Yet this study raises questions about how and to what extent improving cohesion reduces communities' vulnerability to *violent extremism*. PEACE may not have improved the dimensions of social cohesion that are most crucial to reducing vulnerability to VE – or improved them to the level needed to have a meaningful impact. Donors and practitioners should therefore invest more in identifying and testing the precise mechanisms that potentially link social cohesion to VE risk. Sharpening this theory of change is critical for informing program design: if the primary mechanism relates to the inclusion of marginalized groups, then it has different implications for what approaches are likely to be effective than if the mechanisms relate to inter-group contact. Donors and pracit(t)oners also need to specify what exactly they are trying to prevent or change and how they will measure it. This will help programs calibrate their interventions to address the main sources of division that contribute to VE in a given context. Alternatively, programs may want to broaden their aperture and strive to reduce participation in a range of violent activities, especially if these activities share similar drivers. **Focusing on VE in an active conflict context – particularly in a place like Niger, which is riven by a series of distinct but overlapping conflicts – may be impractical or ineffective, as isolating vulnerability and risk factors for violent extremism versus violence in general can be very difficult.**

Fund multi-year projects. Altering community relations and changing attitudes, values, and behaviors regarding extremism and the use of violence often takes years. Shifting norms around gender, youth, and the inclusion of marginalized groups is also a multi-year undertaking. Donors must ensure these kinds of interventions are given enough time to realize the changes they seek by funding longer-duration projects that offer repeated, sustained activities over an extended period.

Target activities at the group, community, and elite levels to address multi-faceted drivers of violent extremism. Our findings suggest that activities that are effective at strengthening social cohesion may not be the same as those that help reduce support for violent groups, at least in the short-term. In some villages, this seemed to reflect a misalignment between the focus of PEACE activities (improving intergroup relations) and the primary drivers of violence and VE (tensions between local elites). Mediation and dialogue activities did appear to both reduce support for violence and reduce support for ISGS, perhaps not by strengthening cohesion, but by improving the conflict resolution skills of local leaders and helping communities resolve disputes peacefully. Future interventions should therefore aim to address other factors that radicalize people or lead them to violence, such as a lack of psychosocial support and ineffective governance.

Develop strategies to overcome resistance to the involvement of women, youth, and other marginalized groups in community decision-making. PEACE provides another example of the barriers to encouraging women and youth to participate in power structures in patriarchal environments. The program lacked a concerted plan and sufficient time to work on altering the enabling environment in a way that might help overcome these barriers. Future interventions should develop longer-term strategies – such as identifying and engaging key male allies, or implementing behavioral change interventions targeted at men and women – to contend with the deeply entrenched sources of resistance these groups face when they try to engage in male-dominated spaces.

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Acknowledgements

Suggested Citation

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Supplementary Data

Tables showing all regression results cited in this report can be found in an online appendix.

Introduction

Over the past five years, the threat of violent extremism has increased across West Africa, particularly in the Sahel region. Extremist armed groups such as the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) have escalated attacks against both civilians and security forces, exploiting and exacerbating local drivers of violence, including banditry, political and socio-economic marginalization, inter-group inequalities, and land degradation and encroachment. In the Tillabéri region of Niger, the spillover of armed group activity from neighboring Mali has compounded these dynamics. The expansion of ISGS in the region has prompted local communities to organize self-defense militias, deepening tensions between groups that have been targeted for recruitment by ISGS (such as the Fulani) and those that have formed militias in response to ISGS attacks (such as the Zarma). Moreover, growing natural resource competition due to climate change, migration, and other stressors has increased tensions between pastoralists and agriculturalists; a cleavage that overlaps with (and thus reinforces) ethnic divisions. Armed mobilization along ethnic lines has stoked fears of intercommunal violence. There are concerns that violent extremist organizations (VEOs) and other armed groups are capitalizing on these inter-group tensions and feelings of marginalization to radicalize the local population, recruit new members, and bolster their influence. If this happens, it would likely exacerbate conflict and instability in Niger and risk the further spread of violence in the Sahel – jeopardizing livelihoods, thwarting humanitarian and development efforts, and making it harder to forge peace, promote good governance, and spur economic growth in the region.

In response, Mercy Corps and a local partner organization, Cercle Dev, implemented the Preventing Violent Extremism Actions through increased social cohesion Efforts (PEACE) program from April 2019 to October 2021. Funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the PEACE program supported communities in the Tillabéri region in developing and implementing joint community projects aimed at strengthening cohesion along ethnic and citizen-government lines. PEACE was an "action research program" meant to test whether Mercy Corps' signature approach to community mobilization and participatory planning – called CATALYSE – improved social cohesion and reduced vulnerability to violent extremism in Tillabéri. Previous research by Mercy Corps under the USAID-funded Vulnerability and Resilience Assessment Initiative,[1] along with an analysis of data from the PEACE baseline survey,[2] indicated a link between a lack of social cohesion and greater susceptibility to violent extremist attitudes and behaviors in the region. The primary goal of PEACE, then, was to contribute to the body of knowledge on preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) in West Africa by addressing the question: what are the most effective interventions to increase social cohesion and resilience against violent extremism?

The relevance of this question goes well beyond the PEACE program. Improving social cohesion – a *sense of trust, shared purpose, and a willingness to engage and cooperate among different individuals, groups, and institutions in a community or area*[3] – has become a central focus of policies and programs aimed at preventing violence, building peace, and enhancing people's resilience to economic and environmental shocks.[4] In recent years, donors and policymakers have posited that building cohesion between individuals and groups can help ameliorate the grievances and social marginalization that motivate people to engage in violent extremism.[5] Yet there is limited evidence to support these claims, including a relative dearth of rigorous evaluations of social cohesion programs on violence-related outcomes.[6]

To fill this gap, we conducted a quasi-experimental evaluation of the PEACE program to understand the impact of the overall intervention – and of different types of activities – on social cohesion, perceptions of violence, and support for violent extremism.

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[1] Mercy Corps 2018.

[2] Lichtenheld et al. 2021a.

[3] Kim et al. 2020a.

[4] CRS 2019; Kim et al. 2020b; Kurtz and McMahon 2015; Sonnenfeld et al. 2021; United Nations and World Bank 2018.

[5] Government of the United States 2020; United Nations and World Bank 2018.

[6] Glazzard et al. 2021; Lichtenheld et al. 2021a; Sonnenfeld et al. 2021.

Ezra Millstein/Mercy Corps

Background and Program

VRAI (2016-2018)

In the wake of growing concerns over the threat of violent extremism in the Sahel, Mercy Corps implemented the USAID-funded Vulnerability and Resilience Assessment Initiative (VRAI) to identify the most at-risk communities and help inform the design of P/CVE programs.[7] We partnered with local organizations to carry out assessments in the Diffa and Tillabéri regions of Niger, along with the Gorom-Gorom commune of Burkina Faso, to measure community vulnerability and resilience to recruitment by VEOs. Tillabéri was targeted because of its location along the border with Mali, from which multiple VEOs have staged attacks and expanded their influence in western Niger.

Under VRAI, Mercy Corps and its local partners developed a Village Selection Tool (VST), which consisted of a set of vulnerability and resilience criteria that a committee of local leaders and other community stakeholders used to rank villages in each region. The VST was the product of an adaptive and collaborative research process. We first drew on the existing literature regarding drivers of violent extremism to compile a set of potential risk and resilience factors. Then, using a suite of research tools – including surveys, focus group discussions, key informant interviews, and participatory mapping exercises with communities in each

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[7] For more details on VRAI's methodology, findings, and recommendations, see Mercy Corps (2018).

region – we refined and pared down the factors to a set of 23. These factors ranged from levels of education, to access to services, to socio-demographic characteristics, to the presence of dispute resolution mechanisms. As part of this research, VRAI learned that communities in Tillabéri identified **social cohesion and inter-communal dialogue** as one of the primary factors that increased resilience to violent extremism. This finding informed the design of the PEACE program.

PEACE (2019-2021)

Like VRAI, PEACE was a learning-oriented program that integrated research and evidence into the entire project lifecycle. But while VRAI examined the factors that made communities more or less vulnerable to violent extremism, PEACE aimed to better understand what interventions are effective at reducing this vulnerability. The program focused on the Tillabéri region, and – based on the findings from VRAI – sought to improve social cohesion within and between communities that were particularly susceptible to violent extremism. PEACE used the VST to identify the most vulnerable communities and **employed Mercy Corps' signature approach to community mobilization and participatory planning, CATALYSE, with the goal of building social cohesion through collaboration and collective action.** Mercy Corps has conducted two previous studies of PEACE. These studies used data from the program baseline to understand local sources of social cohesion in Tillabéri,[8] and to test the program's theory of change – described in more detail below – by exploring the relationship between social cohesion and violence.[9]

CATALYSE

Using the CATALYSE: Communities Acting Together approach,[10] Mercy Corps guided 40 villages in Tillabéri through a participatory process of identifying and understanding community issues, developing solutions, and implementing joint projects that addressed shared needs. CATALYSE shares some of the features of community-driven development (CDD) in that it uses a bottom-up approach to deliver assistance and vests primary control of resources and decision-making to local communities. But unlike traditional CDD modalities – which emphasize economic and service-delivery outcomes – CATALYSE prioritizes *social and governance* outcomes by focusing on the *process* of mobilizing communities for collaborative projects, not just the outputs of those projects. Mercy Corps developed this approach based on lessons and evidence on the shortcomings of many CDD programs.[11] Focusing on community mobilization as a process while building social cohesion means that CATALYSE aims to build facilitation skills while also demonstrating the benefits of cooperation and collective participation. This

> **Unlike traditional community-driven development, which emphasizes economic and service-delivery outcomes, Mercy Corps' approach prioritizes *social* outcomes and focuses on the *process* of community mobilization, not just the results.**

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[8] Lichtenheld et al. 2021b.
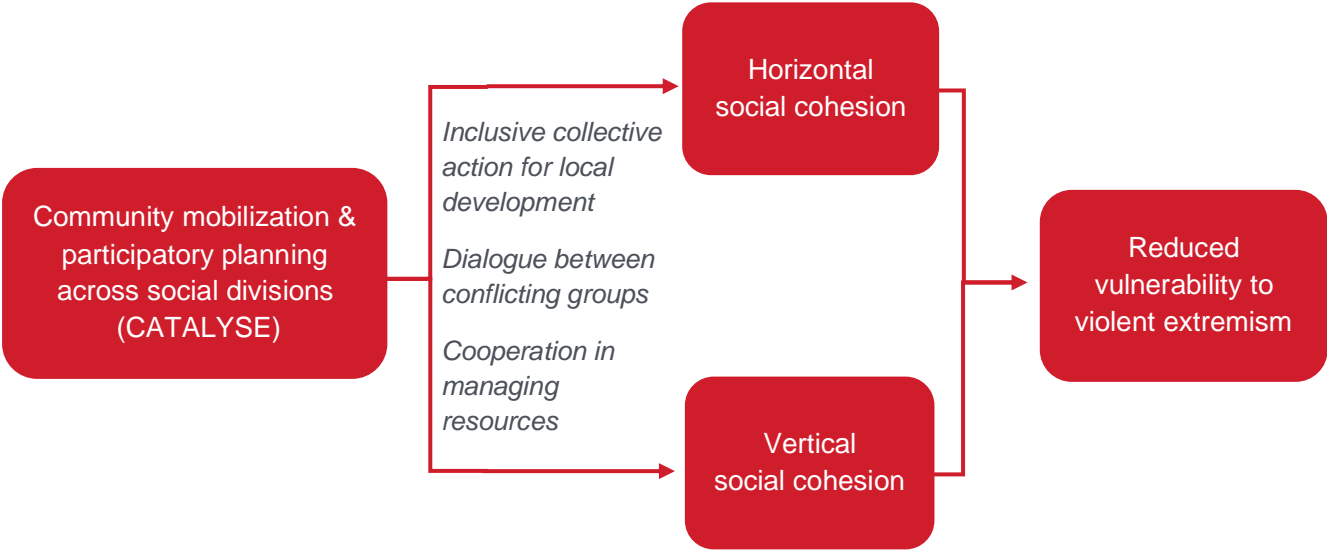[9] Lichtenheld et al. 2021a, Lichtenheld et al. 2021b.
[10] Mercy Corps, *CATALYSE: Communities Acting Together: A Governance in Action Guide and Toolkit,* available online at: https://www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/catalyse-communities-acting-together
[11] See Mercy Corps (2017).

gives people from different communities and identity groups an opportunity to interact and work together for the common good over an extended period of time. CATALYSE also emphasizes social inclusion and integrates training to mentor potential leaders, including women, youth, and marginalized groups, to increase their confidence and demonstrate their ability to contribute to community affairs. In addition to promoting trust, cooperation, and tolerance within and between communities (**horizontal social cohesion**), by bringing together multiple stakeholders involved in community development – including government, private sector, and civil society actors – Mercy Corps' approach seeks to foster engagement and collaboration between community members and those in positions of power, aiming to improve **vertical social cohesion** and good governance.

In applying CATALYSE, the PEACE program's theory of change posited that *IF communities are fully involved in the assessments, design, and implementation of community projects, and the community projects work to bring diverse communities together to strengthen trust, improve social interactions, facilitate cooperation, and support tolerance, THEN community resilience to violent extremism will improve.*[12] This theory is predicated on the idea that as cleavages along ethnic, citizen-government, and inter-generational lines widen, groups become more divided, stereotyping and scapegoating becomes normalized, and people feel their group's identity is threatened. These dynamics create space and opportunities for VEO recruitment.[13] By facilitating a collaborative and inclusive process to build social cohesion across lines of division, and helping communities peacefully manage shared resources that drive conflict – such as land and water – PEACE would decrease tensions and prejudice. This, in turn, would make it more difficult for VEOs to exploit identity differences and feelings of marginalization to recruit supporters.

FIGURE 1: PEACE PROGRAM THEORY OF CHANGE

Community mobilization & participatory planning across social divisions (CATALYSE)

Inclusive collective action for local development

Dialogue between conflicting groups

Cooperation in managing resources

Horizontal social cohesion

Vertical social cohesion

Reduced vulnerability to violent extremism

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[12] While the theory of change is less explicit about PEACE's impact on "vertical" cohesion (state-society relations), it implies that by increasing the frequency and quality of communities' interactions with local authorities, and providing opportunities for those authorities to be responsive to people's needs, public perception of these authorities will improve, their legitimacy will increase, and people will rely on formal and informal institutions to solve problems rather than resorting to violence.

[13] Lichtenheld et al. 2021a.

CATALYSE places the responsibility for developing, implementing, and monitoring projects on the communities themselves, with Mercy Corps serving as a facilitator and mentor. Under PEACE, the intervention began by creating a mobilization strategy for each village, which involved gathering initial information about the community and making initial contact with local leaders. After developing relationships with a broad cross-section of community representatives, Mercy Corps guided the community through a participatory assessment process that aimed both to better understand local problems and to model participatory decision-making. Information from the assessment was assembled into a community profile shared with the wider community to review, discuss, and approve.

TABLE 1: PEACE PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

Type of Activity	Examples
Mediation and dialogue	• Training local leaders on mediation, negotiation, and communication • Establishing and facilitating spaces for dialogue between different groups • Promoting youth and women's leadership in conflict management
Infrastructure management and rehabilitation	• Constructing community grain mills, cereal banks, and animal feed banks • Building the capacity of members of infrastructure management committees
Access to shared natural resources	• Joint delineation of livestock corridors and grazing areas • Raising awareness of land use regulations • Workshops on technical issues related to land and water
Livelihoods and economic inclusion	• Income-generating activities for youth and women in farming, soapmaking, sewing, hairdressing, and other areas • Increasing access to educational opportunities for excluded groups
Cultural and sporting events	• Traditional wrestling tournaments • Women's exchanges around traditional dishes and meals • Cultural festivals and other events sharing common stories and histories

After capturing information about the issues affecting the community, Mercy Corps facilitated consensus-building and prioritization through multiple workshops to help community members come to agreement about which issues were most critical to address through initial projects. Then, led by Community Action Committees (CACs) comprised of men, women, youth, and ethnic minorities, each village developed

solutions and created action plans to implement planned projects, including activities, budgets, roles, responsibilities, and a monitoring and evaluation plan. When developing action plans, facilitators worked with CACs to incorporate targeted opportunities to build relationships and trust across diverse community groups and subpopulations. Community members then took the lead in implementing and monitoring the progress of each project. Ultimately, villages targeted by PEACE implemented five different types of projects: mediation and dialogue activities; infrastructure rehabilitation; initiatives to increase access to shared resources; economic and livelihoods activities; and cultural and sporting events (see Table 1).

Testing Our Approach

The PEACE program provided an opportunity to test two main hypotheses. The first reflects the logic of other community mobilization and CDD approaches: that intergroup contact, in pursuit of a common goal, can reduce prejudice, improve mutual understanding and trust, and discourage conflict by showing people the benefits of working together.[14] The evidence for this logic is mixed. Although research has found that CDD programs have a positive effect on economic outcomes, their impact on social cohesion has been limited.[15] Yet this could be a function of the tendency of these programs to prioritize economic over social outcomes, as noted above. Other evidence indicates that interventions that explicitly focus on improving social cohesion by bringing communities together to collaborate across conflict lines can be effective. A randomized control trial (RCT) of a Mercy Corps program in Nigeria found that facilitating cooperation between farmers and herders on joint projects to address shared needs improved trust between these groups.[16] Another Mercy Corps program in Jordan, which combined community-driven infrastructure projects with conflict management training, had a similarly positive impact on social cohesion between Syrian refugees and Jordanian host communities.[17] And an RCT in post-ISIS Iraq found that playing on a soccer team composed of a mixture of Christians and Muslims had a positive effect on players' attitudes and behaviors towards the other group, but only within the context of soccer.[18]

Taken together, this research points to the promise – and potential limits – of the CATALYSE approach for improving social cohesion. We therefore expect that a higher "dosage" of the PEACE program, both at the community and the individual level, will be associated with improvements in social cohesion:

> » Villages that received more PEACE activities, and for a longer period of time, will exhibit greater improvements in social cohesion than those that received fewer activities, and for a shorter period of time.

> » Direct participants - those most engaged in PEACE activities - will exhibit greater improvements in social cohesion than indirect participants - those living in participating villages who were merely exposed to the program.[19]

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[14] Allport 1954; Sherif 1958. There is a debate over whether contact of any sort (Pettigrew 1998), or only contact under "ideal" circumstances – two groups having equal status, common goals, effective cooperation, the support of relevant authorities, and personal interactions (Allport 1954) – is needed to strengthen social cohesion.

[15] Casey 2018; Mercy Corps 2017; White et al. 2018.

[16] Dawop et al. 2019.

[17] Ferguson et al. 2019.

[18] Mousa 2020.

[19] Other than direct and indirect participants, we did not have any a-priori hypotheses about program effects on different subgroups, such as men compared to women, youth compared to elders, or differential impacts by ethnicity or livelihood group.

While a growing body of evidence has examined the impact of community mobilization and CDD on social cohesion, the effect of these interventions on violence-related outcomes, particularly violent extremism, has received much less attention. A handful of studies have looked at the impact of CDD programs in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Philippines, and find different effects on levels of violence.[20] Yet these programs were largely anti-poverty initiatives and did not explicitly focus on building social cohesion. The literature is especially lacking in rigorous evaluations of social cohesion interventions on violent extremism. This is part of a larger deficiency in the field of P/CVE programming where, according to a recent review, evidence of impact "is very scarce."[21]

Generating this evidence is particularly important for social cohesion interventions, as research on conflict and extremism suggest that social dynamics can both encourage and discourage participation in violence.[22] On one hand, participating in violence can generate social benefits stemming from feelings of group solidarity, bonding, and conforming to social norms.[23] Strong ties between members of a group or community can change the costs of participating in violence – by providing people with the skills, resources, and motivation to be recruited and mobilized[24] – and encourage exclusionary and repressive behavior towards out-group members.[25] On the other hand, greater cohesion across different groups can decrease the costs of social transactions, allow for the peaceful resolution of intercommunal conflicts, and promote trust, discouraging the use of violence.[26] Social cohesion can also help communities resist armed groups, including VEOs, by giving them fewer divisions and grievances to exploit and making it easier to implement collective strategies to maintain internal order and settle disputes.[27]

Given these contrasting theories and insights, it is critical to test the impact of social cohesion interventions on violent extremism. Mercy Corps' previous research on the PEACE program, which relied on data from the baseline survey, found a strong relationship between some dimensions of social cohesion reported by respondents – namely trust of others – and lower levels of support for the use of violence, a proxy for violent extremism.[28] This suggests that the program, by improving both horizontal and vertical cohesion, should reduce individual and community vulnerability to violent extremism. The second hypothesis tested under PEACE, then, encompasses the following:

» Villages that received more PEACE activities, and for a longer period of time, will exhibit greater reductions in vulnerability to violent extremism than those that received fewer activities, and for a shorter period of time.

» Direct participants of PEACE activities will exhibit greater reductions in vulnerability to violent extremism than indirect participants (those living in participating villages who were exposed to the program, but did not directly engage in its activities). [29]

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[20] See Zürcher 2017.
[21] Glazzard et al. 2021.
[22] Cragin 2014: 350; McCauley and Moskaleko 2008.
[23] Inks et al. 2017; Raets 2017; Sageman 2017.
[24] Claassen 2016; Fuji 2009; Wood 2003.
[25] Portes 1998; Alcorta et al. 2020.
[26] Krause 2018; Alcorta et al. 2020.
[27] Arjona 2015; Masullo 2017, 2021; Kaplan 2017.
[28] Lichtenheld et al. 2021a.
[29] Again, we had no specific hypotheses about differential program effects by gender, age, ethnicity, livelihood group, etc.

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Data and Methodology

To test our hypotheses, we draw on survey data collected by the PEACE program from 40 villages at baseline (in January 2020), 28 villages at midline (April 2021), and 24 villages at endline (September 2021).[30] The total sample – combining baseline, midline and endline – encompasses **1,843 respondents** (55 percent male, 45 percent female). Our main outcomes of interest are listed in **Table 2**. They include:

Horizontal social cohesion: this refers to social cohesion within and between groups in society, including trust, the quality and quantity of interactions, cooperation, tolerance, and collective action.

Vertical social cohesion: this refers to cohesion between leaders (including state and non-state actors) and society, and includes perceptions of government services and people's confidence in leaders.

Violent extremism: For vulnerability to violent extremism, we use measures of whether people support the use of violence – specifically, political violence, a common definition of extremism – and whether they perceive that their community supports violence. The logic here is that those who endorse or sanction

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[30] These sample sizes were reduced from the 40 villages sampled at baseline due to budgetary constraints and security concerns, which limited Mercy Corps' and our partners' ability to access and collect data from some villages.

violence, and those who live in environments where social norms permit the use of violence, are most vulnerable to recruitment into VEOs and most likely to be enticed into supporting VEO activity. Supporting violence can also reflect a certain degree of radicalization that motivates people to join VEOs.[31] We also asked people if they had experienced conflict in their community in the past six months.

TABLE 2. SOCIAL COHESION AND VIOLENCE MEASURES

Variable	Measure/Dimension	Survey Question
Horizontal social cohesion	Trust	I trust my community
		I trust other groups
	Interaction	Frequency of interaction with other groups
		Quality of interactions with other groups
	Cooperation	I enjoy cooperation with other groups
	Tolerance	Able to accept idea/custom from other groups
	Collective Action	People expected to help with community activities
Vertical social cohesion	Services	Services increase or decrease in past 6 months?
	Perceptions of leaders	Government includes community in decision-making
		Leaders keep commitments to community
Violence	Support for violence (Direct)	Use of violence is/is not justified for a social/political cause
		Community accepts use of violence to solve problems
	Support for violence (Indirect)	List experiment with sensitive item: use of violence for a political or religious cause is justified
	Support for violent groups (indirect)	List experiment with sensitive item: support for armed groups
		Endorsement experiment with armed group treatment
	Incidence of violence	Community experienced conflict in past 3-6 months

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[31] U.S. Department of Justice 2015.

While these questions were asked across all three survey periods (baseline, midline, and endline), for the endline we added three survey experiments to indirectly measure support for violent extremism. These are meant to mitigate the risk of social desirability bias, and included two list experiments and an endorsement experiment that estimated respondents' support for violence and their support for armed groups.[32] In the first list experiment, we asked respondents to tell us how many of a list of statements they agreed with, including "Western powers should continue to intervene to keep the peace in Niger, "All children should go to school," "Other people in Niger are not at all trustworthy," and "In line with our customs, we should respect our elders." Half of respondents were randomly given a fifth statement – the sensitive item, or "treatment condition" – which read, "It is justifiable to use violence for a political or religious cause."

In the second list experiment, we provided a list of actors and asked people how many they support, including the government, local farmers, local herders, and Western soldiers in Niger. Half of respondents were randomly given a fifth actor (the treatment condition): the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara. For the endorsement experiment, we randomized whether respondents received a "control" statement: "local cattle herders should arm themselves to defend against cattle raids by other herders," or a "treatment" statement: "Armed groups have encouraged local herders to arm themselves to defend against cattle raids." We then asked respondents how much they agreed with the statement they were provided. For each experiment, we compared responses between the treatment and control groups to infer support for the sensitive item.

Along with the survey measures, we created indicators of violent extremist activity in each village using geo-coded data from the Armed Conflict and Location Events Dataset (ACLED).[33] These variables include the number of violent incidents that took place within ten kilometers of each village, along with the number of incidents involving Jihadist groups and the number involving government forces (which could indicate a Jihadist presence). We include violent incidents in the six months preceding a survey period for baseline, midline, and endline.[34] Figure 2 shows the geographic distribution of these variables across the project areas at baseline and endline.

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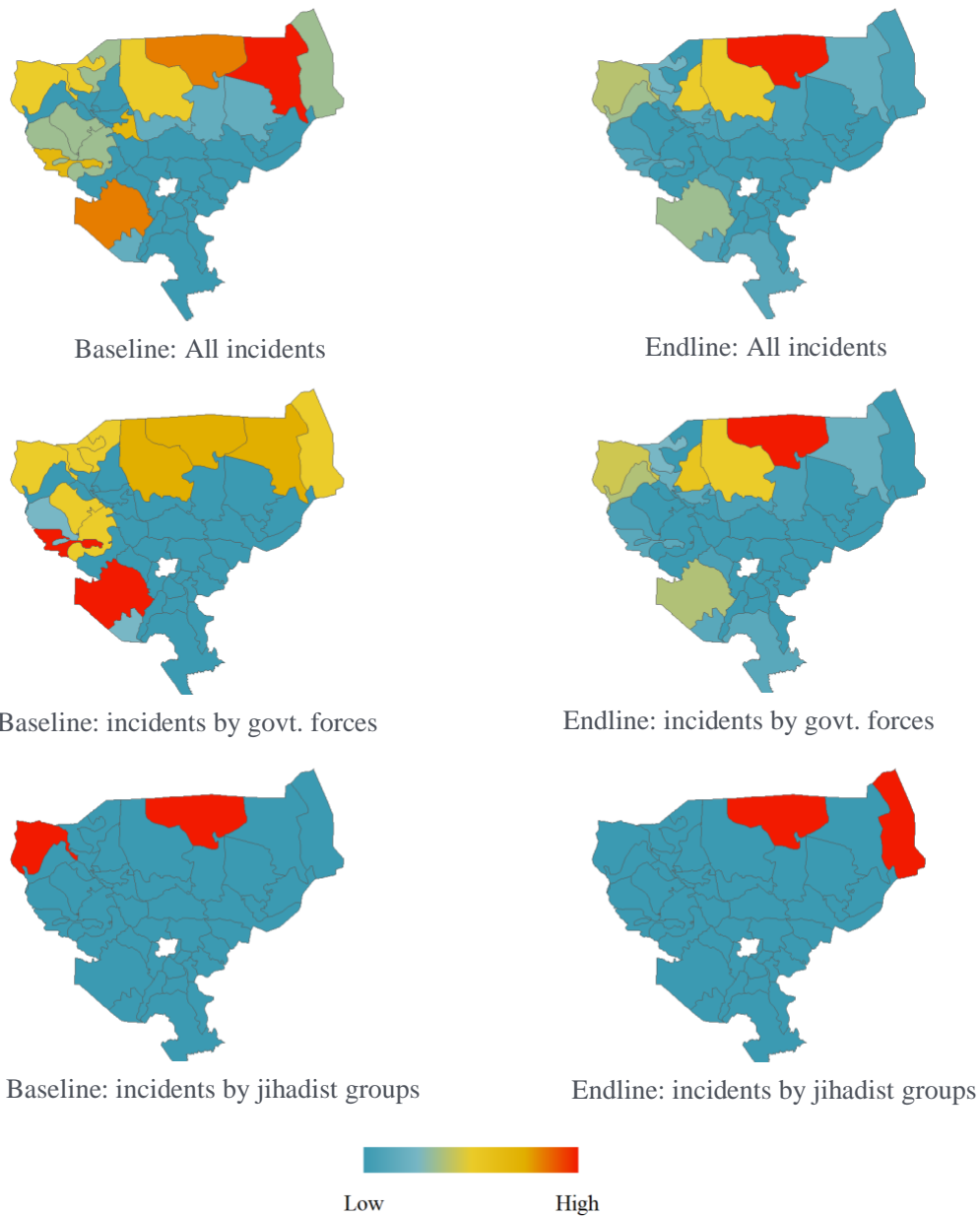[32] Blair et al. 2014; Lyall et al. 2020.
[33] Raleigh et al. 2010, see https://acleddata.com
[34] As a robustness check, we repeated our analysis with a 25-kilometer buffer instead of a 10-kilometer buffer, and the results are substantively similar.

FIGURE 2: SEVERITY OF VIOLENT INCIDENTS IN PEACE PROGRAM AREAS (ACLED)

Baseline: All incidents

Endline: All incidents

Baseline: incidents by govt. forces

Endline: incidents by govt. forces

Baseline: incidents by jihadist groups

Endline: incidents by jihadist groups

Low   High

Methodology

In order to select communities to participate in PEACE, Mercy Corps used the Village Selection Tool developed under the VRAI program to identify 40 villages in Tillabéri considered at risk of VEO activity and recruitment.[35] We then randomly assigned 20 villages to receive activities during the first phase of the PEACE program (the "treatment" group) and 20 villages to act as a "control" group before receiving activities

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[35] For more details, see Mercy Corps (2018).

during the second phase, after the midline survey in April 2021. In order to evaluate the impact of PEACE on the outcomes listed in Table 2, we used measures of **dosage** of the program. These included:

- *Timing of intervention*: whether respondents were in treatment or control villages during the first phase of PEACE (before the midline). Activities in the treatment villages did not necessarily continue to the same extent during the second phase of the program as they did during the first phase, so this does not necessarily reflect the duration or length of the intervention in each village. But treatment villages still had longer to experience the effects of activities than control villages. They also had the opportunity to maintain some projects for a longer period of time.

- *Intensity of intervention*: the number of activities implemented in a village.

- *Level of individual participation in the intervention:* whether a respondent was a direct participant (e.g., a member of a community development committee formed under the program, or a recipient of training or another activity under PEACE) or an indirect participant (e.g., (s)he did not participate in a PEACE activity directly but was a resident of a village that received the activity).

FIGURE 3. RESEARCH TIMELINE

Group 1 20 Villages (*Treatment*)	PEACE Activities	PEACE Activities
Group 2 20 Villages (*Control*)	Waiting for Program	PEACE Activities

January 2020
Baseline **April 2021**
Midline **September 2021**
Endline
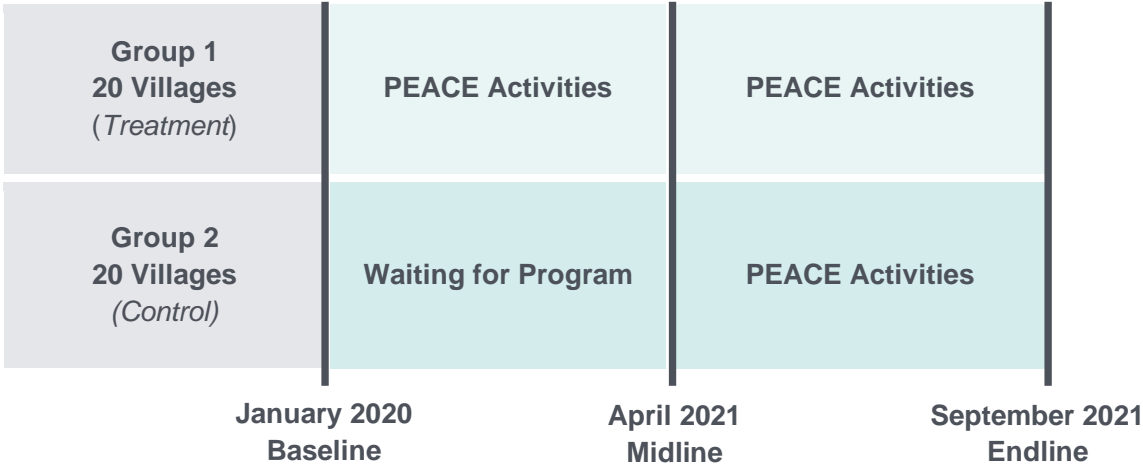
Using these measures, we conducted a difference-in-differences analysis to estimate the effect of PEACE programming. First, we leveraged the randomization of villages into "treatment" and "control" groups during the first phase of the project (pre-midline). We compared the difference in changes from baseline to midline between those in the treatment group (who received PEACE programming) and those in the control group (who did not receive PEACE programming).[36] Second, for questions that were only asked at midline, we compared midline values using difference-in-means tests (t-tests) and regression analysis.

Third, we conducted two-period (for baseline and endline) and three-period (for baseline, midline, and endline) difference-in-differences using multivariate regression analysis. Since there is no pure "control" group at endline (as all villages received PEACE activities by then), we compared dosage effects, based on

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[36] We also used difference-in-means tests at midline, controlling for baseline values, and the results were similar.

the number of PEACE activities, timing of intervention, and whether respondents were direct or indirect beneficiaries. As such, much of this evaluation relies on a quasi-experimental design, comparing shifts in responses in villages that received a higher dosage of the program before, during, and after with responses in villages that received a lower dosage. This allows us to estimate the potential effect of PEACE, since simply looking at changes from baseline to endline in our indicators cannot within itself be used to evaluate project impact, as these changes could be attributable to factors other than project activities.

In our regression models – the results of which are provided in an online appendix to this report – we controlled for the gender, ethnicity, age, and livelihood activity of the respondent. We conducted the analysis for all PEACE activities as a whole and compared the results for different types of activities outlined in Table 1. We also conducted sub-group analyses to compare results by gender, age, ethnicity, and livelihood group, in order to see if the program has different effects on different segments of the population. In addition to this quantitative evidence, we drew on qualitative data collected by project field monitors as part of monitoring and evaluation activities under the program. These primarily took the form of interviews and discussions with members of village CACs, along with men, women, and youth in communities that received PEACE activities.

Limitations

Some limitations to this study are worth noting. First, only one of our dosage variables – the timing of the intervention – was randomized. Due to a question wording error in the midline survey, we did not have a high enough response rate for the social cohesion questions to fully leverage the randomization process during the first phase of PEACE and compare results across "pure" treatment and control groups. Our other measures of program dosage, the intensity of the intervention and level of participation, were not randomized across individuals and communities. As a result, we are somewhat limited in our ability to make causal claims.[37] We attempt to address these limitations by triangulating our results across several measures, including those that were the result of random selection, and by supplementing our quantitative findings with qualitative evidence that help illuminate causal mechanisms.

Second, our measures of violent extremism are imperfect. Our main proxies – support for violence and support for armed groups – may not accurately reflect the likelihood that people will join or support VEOs (or endorse their ideologies), particularly since research shows that civilian support for violent groups takes a wide variety of forms.[38] Moreover, our direct questions about support for violence were sensitive and may not have elicited truthful answers. We added indirect questions (the list and endorsement experiments) to the endline survey to overcome these concerns. Yet because these questions were only asked at endline, we can only compare people's responses at the end of the program, based on the dosage of PEACE that their community received, rather than assessing changes over time. This also significantly reduces the sample size for this part of the analysis, as only data from endline respondents is available. The smaller sample size for these experimental questions (n = 589) also reduces our statistical power, making it more difficult to detect effects – meaning we may be missing some of the potential impact of PEACE on violence-related attitudes. For this reason, the statistically significant results we do find are particularly noteworthy.

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[37] Particularly when comparing outcomes associated with different types of activities. While the timing of the program as a whole was randomized across villages, the specific type and bundle of activities was endogenously selected by each village.
[38] Arjona 2017.

Findings

Results for Horizontal Social Cohesion

We found that if different dimensions of horizontal social cohesion – in this case, trust, interaction, cooperation, tolerance, and collective action – are aggregated into a single social cohesion index, the PEACE program seemed to have no effect. But looking at particular *dimensions* of social cohesion, and different *types* of program activities, the evidence suggests that PEACE contributed to notable improvements in several areas. Figure 4 summarizes the statistical results from the difference-in-differences analysis, which are provided in detail in the online appendix.

First, the program had a positive impact on **intra-community cohesion**. The more PEACE activities implemented in a village, and the more a respondent participated in them, the greater the increase in whether people reported trusting members of their community.[39] Second, comparing treatment and control villages at the program midline, PEACE had a positive effect on **collective action norms.** In response to whether people felt that members of their community are expected to help with community activities, we found a 14 percentage point increase for treatment communities compared to control from baseline to

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[39] These results are statistically significant for these dosage measures. The finding for the *timing* of intervention was positive but insignificant.

midline (see Figure 5). Moreover, this increase was higher for *direct* participants than for indirect participants. These differences were statistically significant, and we discovered a similar result for direct participants at endline. The results held when controlling for the gender, age, ethnicity, and livelihood group of respondents (a targeted analysis of results by gender and age is provided later in this section)

FIGURE 4. IMPACT OF PEACE PROGRAM ON HORIZONTAL COHESION

		Trust in community	Trust of other groups	Number of intergroup interactions	Quality of intergroup interactions	Cooperation	Tolerance
Program in General	Timing						
	Intensity	** (green)		* (green)		* (green)	
	Level of Participation	* (green)					** (red)
Mediation & Dialogue							
Infrastructure		*** (green)	** (green)	** (green)	** (green)		** (green)
Shared Resources		*** (red)		** (red)	** (red)		
Livelihoods							
Cultural & Sports			** (green)	* (green)	*** (green)		

Green: positive impact; Yellow: no impact; Red: negative impact

Stars denote statistical significance with *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Yet when it came to trust of *other ethnic or livelihood groups,* only certain types of PEACE activities appeared to make meaningful improvements in social cohesion. Activities that brought people together to develop or rehabilitate **community infrastructure**, or to engage in **cultural and sporting events**, had a positive and statistically significant impact on out-group trust. The more these activities were implemented in a village, the greater the increase in whether residents said they trusted other groups and were comfortable trading with them, working with them, and having them watch their animals. Infrastructure and cultural activities also helped improve the frequency and quality of inter-group interactions reported by respondents. This is likely because these activities engaged more people, required greater coordination between different

groups, and centered around addressing shared needs and participating in meaningful traditions.[40] Since more frequent and positive interactions were strongly associated with increased trust of other groups – consistent with Contact Theory[41] – the more collaborative and inclusive nature of these activities may explain their impact on inter-group cohesion. In contrast, mediation/dialogue and livelihoods-related activities implemented by PEACE were less communal in nature and targeted a smaller number of individuals within a village. As a result, these interventions had a limited impact on social relations.

FIGURE 5: PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS WHO AGREE THAT "IN MY COMMUNITY, PEOPLE ARE GENERALLY EXPECTED TO HELP WITH COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES"
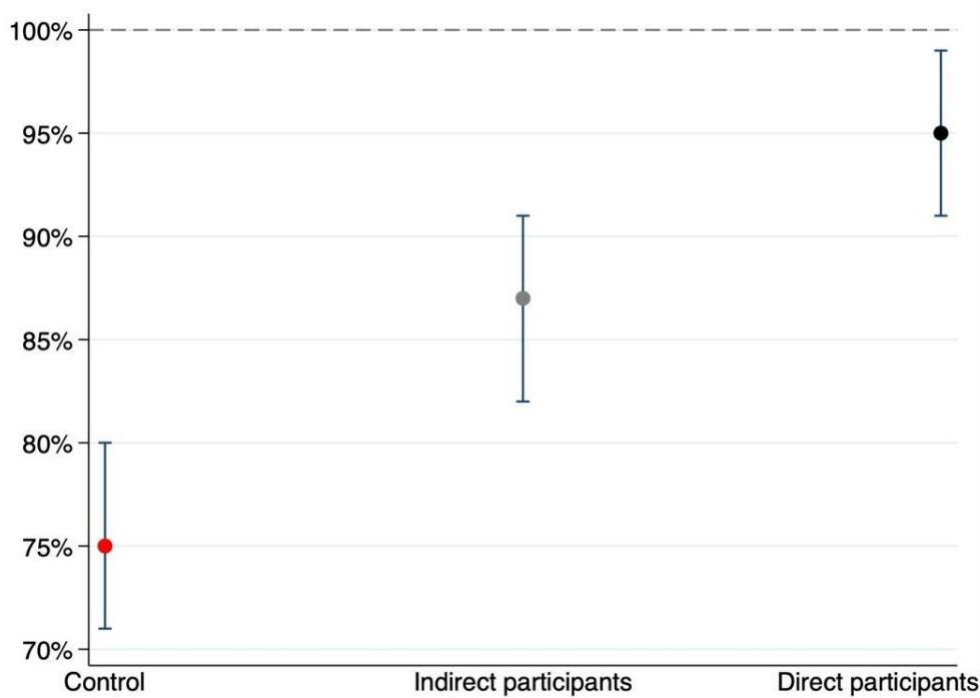
Qualitative evidence from interviews with Community Action Committee (CAC) members and other residents support these findings. According to CAC members in Gatti, the development of a community grain mill under PEACE "brought together the different ethnic groups that make up the village. [This] has facilitated access to grain to all members of the community without exclusion, and the availability of grain in the village has solved the complex of some ethnic groups who are ashamed to pay for a small amount at the market. Inhabitants of other surrounding villages also benefit from this [mill] without any discrimination." Community members in Ayoungoum and Gaountane echoed this sentiment, saying their grain mills "[brought] together the inhabitants of the beneficiary village and its neighbors" and "increas[ed] transparency in the management of food supplies, [which] has increased trust among community members." These activities

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[40] Due to donor regulations, the program was unable to fund the rehabilitation of certain types of infrastructure - namely wells and boreholes - even though many communities identified them as priority needs. The fact that infrastructure projects still had an effect despite these limitations is notable, particularly since a lack of access to clean water has been identified as a driver of intercommunal tensions and conflict in the region.
[41] Allport 1954; Pettigrew 1998.

therefore appeared to help enhance trust between groups and communities by facilitating cooperation and collaboration around a key resource.

> **Infrastructure projects and cultural activities seemed to be more effective at improving inter-group trust than other activities because they engaged a greater number of people, required more coordination and collaboration between different groups and communities, and centered around addressing shared needs and participating in meaningful traditions.**

In contrast, mediation and dialogue activities tended to focus on local leaders and were not necessarily designed to engage the broader community. They therefore did not garner participation from a broad cross-section of community members. According to participants from Gatta Goubé, "the number of participants is insufficient in relation to the total population and women are under-represented in the [mediation] training." While some of these activities sought to promote mutual understanding and tolerance between different groups, they often focused more on dispute resolution than on building social cohesion. Moreover, insecurity sometimes made it difficult for certain leaders to participate in dialogues or mediation trainings, or to disseminate their content to other members of the community. According to residents of Takroujat, for example, "the security situation in the village does not allow for public meetings to be held to share the content of the [mediation and dialogue] training with the whole community," which "is made up of several groups, which have less contact with each other."

As indicated in Figure 4, we also found that **activities that sought to improve sharing of natural resources within and across communities – such as delineating grazing areas or raising awareness of land use regulations – had a *negative* impact on social cohesion.** It is unclear why this was the case. One possibility is that these activities surfaced or exacerbated disagreements over resource use, leading to negative interactions between groups. It is also possible that resource-sharing agreements forged under PEACE were subsequently violated, stoking mistrust between communities (such as farmers and herders) that often compete for access to land and water. We did not find evidence of these negative impacts in our qualitative data, however. Further research is therefore needed to confirm and explain this finding.

> **While the program appeared to improve trust between groups in ethnically-mixed villages, in ethnically homogenous villages, it may have bolstered within-group trust at the expense of out-group trust.**

Finally, along with the extent of community and group participation, our findings suggest that whether program activities helped improve inter-group cohesion **depended on the level of ethnic diversity in a community**. In general, PEACE was associated with an increase in inter-group trust in communities in Tillabéri with a higher number of ethnic groups, and a *decrease* in inter-group trust in communities where there was only one ethnic group. Because many activities were conducted at the community level, they seemed to improve trust between groups in ethnically-mixed villages. But in ethnically homogenous villages, the program may have bolstered within-group trust at

the expense of out-group trust.[42] By increasing cohesion within these homogeneous communities, PEACE potentially also reinforced their social insularity, or – by strengthening group identity and belonging – made them more suspicious or less trusting of other groups. This suggests that PEACE was more effective when projects intentionally brought members of different groups together to collaborate. In situations where this is not possible, this finding could indicate a potential trade-off between strengthening intra-communal cohesion and improving inter-communal relations. At the very least, it underscores the need to tailor interventions to the identity make-up of each community and clearly identify the cleavage around which activities are aiming to improve social cohesion.

Results for Vertical Social Cohesion

Our results also suggest that PEACE made some modest, albeit limited, improvements in **relations between citizens and governing actors.** Communities that received more activities experienced an increase in respondents reporting that leaders kept their commitments to the community.[43] As with *horizontal* (or inter-group) cohesion, infrastructure projects appeared to have the strongest impact on *vertical* cohesion (state-society relations). Cultural and sporting activities were also associated with improved perceptions of government and local leaders, but the results were only statistically significant in some models. Yet mediation and dialogue, access to natural resources, and livelihoods interventions seemed to have little impact on vertical cohesion. This could be because, unlike livelihoods interventions, building or rehabilitating infrastructure required the active involvement of state and community authorities. Moreover, unlike mediation and dialogues, infrastructure activities produced tangible, visible results – from grain mills to cereal banks – that provided a stark reminder of the presence of government at the local level.

Comparing treatment and control villages at midline, we discovered a small, positive effect of PEACE activities on both the availability of social services reported by survey respondents and the perceived effectiveness of conflict resolution mechanisms. We found a 2.5 percent increase in people reporting improved services in treatment communities, and a 9.5 percent *decrease* in control communities – a total difference of 14 percent between the treatment and control groups. The increase in treatment communities was also higher for direct participants than for indirect participants, a potential reflection of direct participants' exposure to the services provided to their community under the program. In treatment communities, we also detected a modest improvement in people's perceptions of the effectiveness of conflict resolution mechanisms – which are typically led by local leaders and governing authorities – and a decrease in perceived effectiveness in control communities, a difference that was statistically significant. This is where mediation/dialogue activities seemed to have the greatest impact, as villages that received these interventions experienced a larger increase in the perceived effectiveness of conflict resolution mechanisms than villages that did not receive these interventions. We did not find a similar trend for treatment villages that received other types of activities, such as infrastructure. This suggests that particular

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[42] While PEACE particularly focused on improving cohesion between ethnic groups, the areas where the program operated featured multiple (and sometimes overlapping) social cleavages that program activities sought to bridge. In our survey, of those who reported conflict in their area (288 respondents), 20 percent said it was inter-communal, 25 percent said it was *intra*-communal, and 10 percent said it was ethnic in nature. When asked what the main cleavage in their community was, 53 percent of respondents said it was based on livelihood (e.g., farmer/herder), 25 percent said it was inter-generational (e.g., between youth and elders), and six percent said it was based on ethnicity.
[43] The results for the timing of intervention and level of individual participation were also positive but statistically insignificant, however.

interventions are effective at improving certain dimensions of social cohesion – including horizontal and vertical cohesion.

FIGURE 6. IMPACT OF PEACE PROGRAM ON VERTICAL COHESION

		Perceived improvement in services	Govt includes community in decision-making	Leaders keep commitments to the community
Program in General	Timing	***		
	Intensity			*
	Level of Participation			
Mediation & Dialogue				
Infrastructure			**	*
Shared Resources				
Livelihoods				
Cultural & Sports			*	

Green: positive impact; Yellow: no impact; Red: negative impact

Stars denote statistical significance with *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Results for Women and Youth

Comparing our results across different segments of the population, we did not find significant differences by gender, age, or livelihood group. The program made a concerted effort to meaningfully include and empower women and youth as co-leaders and participants in joint projects. This included creating women and youth working groups within leadership structures, organizing forums with local leaders to discuss the needs of marginalized groups, and targeting livelihoods and social cohesion activities at women in order to empower them economically and expand their social networks. There is some evidence that these activities helped improve social cohesion *between women* from different groups and communities. In Tassaoubarat, for example, program participants reported that women's working groups and meetings convened over shared meals "improved relations and socialization among women of different ethnicities." In other villages, interviews revealed that program activities helped foster "a climate of trust between women through positive daily interactions" and a recognition of the shared challenges women from different communities faced in running their households.

At the same time, our survey results suggest that, among the broader community, the PEACE program did not improve perceptions of the roles that women and youth play in community decision-making or in driving conflict. For some measures, this may have been due to the fact that in the baseline survey, an overwhelming majority of respondents expressed favorable views of women and youth engagement, leaving little room for improvement.[44] But we also found that the involvement of women and youth in program activities was often met with indifference and interference from men and community elders. In Kato Koira, for instance, residents reported that women were at the center of village consultations for a cereal bank activity, but the "interference of men in the management of the bank has been detrimental to the management of [the bank]." Similarly, in Louga Banda, a hair salon activity under PEACE – which sought to promote the economic inclusion of women and youth – experienced "interference from older men" on the CAC.

This points to the resistance that marginalized and disadvantaged groups can face when they try to engage in patriarchal social and economic structures, particularly from men in the community who wield disproportionate power and influence.[45] In Tillabéri, patriarchical norms stymied the meaningful inclusion of these groups in multiple ways. Membership in the CAC and other leadership structures still reflected existing power dynamics, deferring to older men who were already considered to have adequate stature to lead on community matters. While women comprised nearly 60 percent of program participants, they only made up 30 percent of CAC members. Even for women and youth CAC members – and those who participated in working groups within or alongside these structures – they struggled to be heard or exert influence compared to members with higher social status. Participants reported that members of these groups were often ignored because "they do not have the legitimacy of the older men in the community."

Photo credit: Mercy Corps

Expectations regarding women's roles in managing the household and tending its crops also created barriers to their participation. We found multiple instances where the program struggled to mobilize women for activities because it created extra demands on their time. If women were busy with household tasks or working in their fields, then they were unable to participate in a meeting, dialogue, or livelihood activity, particularly if it required travel. Men, in contrast, often did not share household duties or were able to offload them because of expectations that they should be engaged in community affairs. Women and youth generally possessed less power to determine what they did outside the household.

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[44] For example, 97 percent of survey respondents agreed that youth actions contribute to peace in their village, while 91 percent claimed that women were involved in community decision-making.
[45] As noted by Matfess (2021). See also Gottlieb (2016).

PEACE recognized these challenges early on. During the baseline, the program team observed that "patriarchal and traditional aspects of the culture prevent women from playing a role in resolving conflicts," and that the program would therefore need to realize that "promoting the inclusion of women and youth and other marginalized groups into decision-making may disrupt norms and have a [negative] effect on social cohesion in the short term." Yet the program lacked a concerted plan to holistically address these barriers or alter the enabling environment in a way that might help overcome them. That said, certain features of the program (namely, its relatively short duration) and the operating context (including deteriorating security and the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic) would have made this very difficult. Both insecurity and COVID-19 containment measures forced the program to rely on remote management for long stretches of time. This limited the program team's ability to provide detailed guidance and assistance on sensitive issues around gender and youth integration.

Even where women and youth were engaged in program activities, their involvement was often met with indifference and interference from men and community elders – pointing to the resistance these groups can face when trying to participate in patriarchal structures.

The incursion of VEOs and other armed groups into Tillabéri during the implementation period exacerbated these challenges. Many of these groups, which operate across the Niger-Mali border, encouraged or attempted to impose the strict separation of men and women in the public sphere. They also tried to prevent women from participating in matters of community governance and development. Given these dynamics, achieving the deep, meaningful, and sustained inclusion of women and youth into local power structures may not have been realistic.

Results for Violent Extremism

Despite some evidence that PEACE had a positive impact on social cohesion, we found **mixed results regarding its impact on violence and violent extremism**. The program's theory of change does not propose a direct relationship between the intervention and levels of violence. PEACE sought to mitigate drivers of violence that emanated from within communities – based on community divisions and intergroup grievances – as opposed to external forces, which fell beyond the scope of the program. Still, the theory of change suggests a potential indirect impact of the program on armed group activity and influence. We found that people in villages that received more PEACE activities, and received them earlier in the programming period, did not report less conflict in their communities in recent months than those who received a lower dosage of the program. Similarly, events data from ACLED suggests that the program did not contribute to a significant decrease in armed group activity, including by Jihadist groups, as measured by the number of battles, attacks on civilians, and other violent incidents in which these groups were engaged. As noted above, some villages targeted by PEACE (along with other communities that were not targeted by the program) experienced an increase in incursions by armed groups during the implementation period.

Survey questions regarding people's support for violence and violent groups provide more valid and relevant measures of vulnerability to violent extremism, the outcome that PEACE aimed to directly affect. For our

direct measure of whether people endorsed using violence for a political cause, we found no statistically significant change as a result of PEACE. But for our *indirect* measure of support for violence (asked through a list experiment) we found that the timing of the intervention, but not the number of activities or level of participation, had a statistically significant effect. Given that the indirect measure is less likely to suffer from social desirability bias – and that intervention timing is our strongest indicator of the program's effect from a causal inference perspective – this is a promising finding. It strongly suggests that PEACE reduced support for violence. Yet we did not find a similar effect of the program as a whole on people's support for violent *groups*, including the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), in our other survey experiments.

FIGURE 7. IMPACT OF PEACE PROGRAM ON VIOLENT EXTREMISM

		Support for violence (Direct)	Incidence of violence (Direct)	Support for violence (Indirect)	Support for ISGS (Indirect)	Support for violent groups (Indirect)
Program in General	Timing			***		
	Intensity					
	Level of Participation					
Mediation & Dialogue				**	**	
Infrastructure						
Shared Resources			*			
Livelihoods			*			
Cultural & Sports						

Green: positive impact (reduced support for violence/VE); Yellow: no impact;
Red: negative impact (greater support for violence/VE)
Stars denote statistical significance with *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

In comparing the effects of different types of activities, however, we did find that mediation and dialogue activities were significantly associated with reduced support for violence and support for ISGS. It is possible that these activities reduced vulnerability to violent extremism not by strengthening social cohesion, but by improving the conflict resolution skills of local leaders and helping communities resolve disputes through peaceful means.[46] Other types of activities – including infrastructure, livelihoods, and cultural activities – had

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[46] In a randomized control trial of conflict mediation trainings for local leaders in Nigeria, Mercy Corps found that these trainings had a significant, positive effect on both leaders and their communities. See Reardon et al. (2022).

no statistically significant relationship with our indirect measures of violent extremism. This differs from our findings on social cohesion, for which only infrastructure and cultural activities had a positive impact. Our results vary, then, across our different measures of violent extremism.

> **Only mediation and dialogue activities had a statistically significant effect on reducing people's support for political violence and their support for the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara.**

We also interacted different measures of social cohesion with our indirect measures of support for violence and violent groups generated through the survey experiments.[47] We found no statistically significant relationship between these measures and any of our social cohesion variables. This means that **people who reported higher levels of social cohesion were no more or no less likely to endorse the use of violence or express support for armed groups.** Looking at our direct measures of violent extremism, we did find an association between higher levels of social cohesion – particularly trust, attitudes towards out-groups, and confidence in leaders – and lower levels of support for political violence, mirroring the results of our previous analysis of the PEACE baseline.[48] Yet even for our direct measures, we did not find a relationship between *changes* in social cohesion and *changes* in people's willingness to support violence.[49]

Discussion

CATALYSE, the approach applied by the PEACE program, emphasizes that *how* communities are mobilized to identify, design, and implement joint projects is as important as the type of project they work on, and what it produces. This process-oriented approach is particularly important when the primary objective is to build social cohesion. Yet the findings of this study suggest that the type of project still matters. Certain activities may be more conducive to forging positive interactions and improving trust – because of the breadth of community participation or the extent of intergroup exchanges they entail – regardless of the process used to facilitate them. However, since a fundamental aspect of CATALYSE is that projects are community-led, communities may prioritize activities that stand to increase their material wellbeing or meet other immediate needs over those that will improve social relations. This points to a possible tension between the bottom-up nature of Mercy Corps' approach and the top-down nature by which program objectives are defined. If communities are empowered to choose their own priorities and solutions, the ones they select may not align with the primary goals of donor or implementers – in this case, strengthening social cohesion.[50]

Reconciling this tension may require narrowing project parameters and establishing specific selection criteria when implementing CATALYSE. If the goal is social cohesion, then program teams need to work closely with participating communities to provide guidance on developing projects that contribute to that objective while modeling the principles of collaborative and inclusive decision-making. A process-oriented approach suggests that facilitation is key. During the implementation of PEACE, the combination of increased

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[47] These tests for heterogenous treatment effects included an aggregate index of social cohesion along with the different components of it outlined in Table 1.
[48] Lichtenheld et al. 2021a.
[49] In other words, while a static comparison of baseline, midline, and endline data reveals a general correlation between social cohesion and support for violence, we did not find a similar result when comparing over-time changes in these outcomes from baseline to endline.
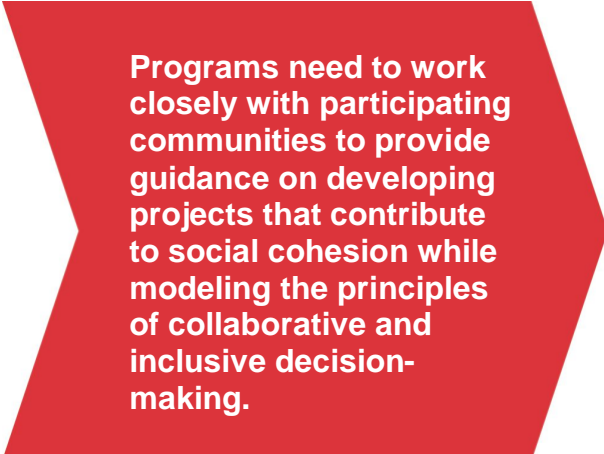[50] A review of the evidence for CDD programs highlighted a similar tension (see Mercy Corps 2017: 5).

insecurity due to armed group activity and the Nigerien government's imposition of COVID-19 prevention measures – including restrictions on travel and large gatherings – limited the program team's access to, and engagement with, local communities. Some participating villages were located in remote areas, where public transportation was nonexistent and a motorcycle ban was in place. This forced the PEACE team to rent vehicles and limit their field visits to a maximum of two hours in a village, or to rely on remote management, both of which complicated their ability to deliver and ensure quality control of the facilitation process under CATALYSE. This underscores just how difficult it is to do this kind of work in volatile and insecure environments. If insecurity risks impinging on the processes of community mobilization and participatory facilitation, then programs may need to selectively promote projects that are especially suitable for achieving social outcomes, such as those highlighted in this report.

Programs need to work closely with participating communities to provide guidance on developing projects that contribute to social cohesion while modeling the principles of collaborative and inclusive decision-making.

Despite these challenges, we found evidence that PEACE had some positive impacts on social cohesion in Tillabéri. But the extent to which these impacts reduced communities' vulnerability to violent extremism is unclear. Juxtaposing these results with Mercy Corps' research from the PEACE baseline – which found that some aspects of social cohesion, particularly trust, were associated with a lower propensity towards violence[51] – raises questions about how and under what conditions building social cohesion is effective at reducing support for violence and for armed groups. There are several possible explanations for these seemingly divergent findings. First, it could indicate a measurement problem. Some of our VE-related indicators measure support for the use of violence – the only outcome we measured in the baseline – while others measure support for violent groups. Support for the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) is probably the most reliable indicator of violent extremism. Simply sanctioning the use of violence, even for a political cause, does not necessarily mean someone is more inclined to join or support a violent group. Similarly, those who expressed support for armed groups in general may not have been envisioning VEOs, insurgent groups, or gangs, but rather community defense militias – some of which have actually been formed to *protect* communities against groups like ISGS. It may not be surprising, then, that we found different effects for different types of PEACE activities depending on which of these indicators we used. That said, in the endline survey, we did not find a direct link between these indicators and higher or lower levels of social cohesion.

A second possible explanation, then, is that PEACE did not strengthen social cohesion to the level required to systematically alter attitudes about violence. This could simply be a function of the program's relatively short duration, as actual implementation of PEACE lasted less than two years. Changing perceptions takes time, and PEACE may have been too brief of an intervention to make a measurable impact in these areas. This concern is not new. Previous evaluations of CDD as well as social cohesion programs have proposed

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[51] Lichtenheld et al. 2021a.

that limited timeframes of just a couple of years are likely inadequate to generate meaningful changes in social attitudes and behaviors.[52]

A third possible explanation for our findings is that activities that are effective at strengthening social cohesion are not the same as those that help reduce support for violence and violent groups, at least in the short-term. This is the most straightforward interpretation of the results, which indicate that while infrastructure and cultural activities helped improve social cohesion, mediation and dialogue activities were most strongly associated with reduced support for violence and for ISGS. The logic for the latter result is straightforward: the very focus of improving conflict mediation and dialogue across conflict lines is to encourage nonviolent dispute resolution and discourage people from relying on armed groups to solve problems. Yet the impact of social cohesion on violent attitudes and behaviors may be indirect or gradual, part of a larger causal chain that takes time to develop and may not manifest immediate changes.

These findings may also reflect a possible misalignment between the focus of PEACE activities and the primary drivers of violence, including violent extremism, in some program areas. For instance, intra- and inter-communal tensions in some villages primarily stemmed from chieftaincy conflicts and other elite rivalries. Thus even if PEACE improved relations between community members, and between community members and leaders, it still did not address the root of these conflicts by altering interactions and relationships *between leaders.* Indeed, the factors that drove people to endorse or engage in violence were often highly localized and related to dynamics – such as physical insecurity, low trust in security forces, and government expropriation of land and other natural resources – that PEACE was not designed to address. Many of these factors were the result of policy or government decisions, not community ones.

How do we reconcile this potential misalignment with the findings from VRAI, which indicated that people in Tillabéri perceive intergroup cohesion as a primary source of resilience to violent extremism? Those surveyed under VRAI may have attributed a relationship between social cohesion and violent extremism that is driven by another underlying factor. Or they could have observed reverse causation: communities that were more resilient to violent extremism, for whatever reason, may have exhibited higher levels of social cohesion. It is also possible that there was a disconnect between perception and reality. Research in other contexts has shown that individuals' impressions of other people's behavior in their community can differ significantly from how people actually behave.[53] VRAI ultimately relied on a limited – and not necessarily representative – sample of local residents, who may have misdiagnosed what drives (and protects against) violent extremism. Or perhaps their diagnosis was accurate for some communities or in some circumstances, but did not get at systematic drivers of violent extremism. As VRAI noted in its own research, these drivers are complex and multi-faceted. Social cohesion may still be important, if not adequate on its own, for reducing vulnerability to violent extremism, and should therefore be paired with other interventions – such as training local leaders on conflict mediation and negotiation – particularly when targeting the most at-risk communities.[54]

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[52] Wong 2012; Sonnenfeld et al. 2021.

[53] Amanela et al. 2020.

[54] While not focused on violent extremism, a recent RCT of interest-based negotiation and mediation training of local leaders in Nigeria found that these trainings had a significant effect on reducing violence and insecurity in targeted communities (Reardon et al. 2022).

Ezra Millstein/Mercy Corps

Conclusion and Recommendations

The PEACE program demonstrates that bringing people together to design and implement community projects through inclusive, participatory processes can help improve social cohesion. While the program's effects were relatively modest, they are still notable given the relatively short period of implementation and the insecurity that plagued programming areas, which sometimes hindered access to participating villages. The evidence suggests that the most effective interventions in Tillabéri were those that required coordination and collaboration between a greater number of individuals and groups, and provided tangible, collective benefits within and across communities. Interventions that targeted a smaller number of individuals or were confined to particular groups, required little engagement with local authorities, and produced less visible dividends were not as effective, particularly in building trust between different groups.

At the same time, this research indicates that **improving social cohesion may not be sufficient to change attitudes and behaviors regarding violence and violent groups.** P/CVE programs will likely need to address other factors, in addition to social cohesion, to reduce vulnerability to violent extremism. We urge donors, policymakers, and practitioners to:

Use community mobilization and participatory planning to build social cohesion. Improving relations between groups and between citizens and leaders is valuable within its own right, as it can reduce social and political tensions, mitigate the risk of armed conflict,[55] and bolster individuals' and communities' resilience capacities.[56] We show that mobilizing communities to collaborate on participatory projects across conflict lines can help achieve these goals. But success depends in part on the types of projects that are pursued, the caliber of facilitation that is used to support communities and help catalyze action, and whether the operating context, including security conditions, is suitable for facilitators to access and work closely with targeted communities. Donors and practitioners should invest in equipping facilitators with the skills and resources needed to model and impart the mechanics of inclusive and participatory decision-making that can increase social cohesion. Moreover, practitioners should work with communities to set clear project parameters and prioritize those that have the strongest potential to improve social cohesion: those that mobilize a broad cross-section of individuals and groups to collaborate on meaningful initiatives that address collective needs and produce tangible results. The application of Mercy Corps' CATALYSE model under PEACE indicates that in order to build social cohesion – as opposed to improving governance or achieving other aims – the process *and* the project are important.

Sharpen theories and outcome measures regarding the potential links between social cohesion and violent extremism. PEACE lacked a fully specified theory of how strengthening social cohesion would reduce vulnerability to violent extremism. While the results of this study could suggest that improving cohesion is not sufficient to affect VE, it may still play an important role in preventing violence and promoting peace, as research by Mercy Corps[57] and others[58] indicates. There needs to be more investment in identifying and testing the precise mechanisms linking social cohesion to VE risk at both the individual and the community level. Sharpening this theory of change is critical for informing program design: if the primary mechanism relates to the inclusion of marginalized groups, then it has different implications for what approaches are likely to be effective than if the primary mechanisms relate to intergroup contact or citizen-government engagement. Stronger theories also require clearly defined outcomes. While PEACE used multiple outcome measures, it often conflated violence (and its drivers) with violent extremism. Donors and practitioners need to specify what exactly they are trying to prevent or change and how they will measure it. This is particularly important because people's interactions with VEOs and other armed groups take different forms and serve different functions.[59] Clearly defining outcomes will also help social cohesion programs calibrate their interventions to address the main sources of division that contribute to violent extremism in a given context. Whether the salient cleavage is between groups, within communities, between state and society, or between elites will require programming around different pathways to affecting vulnerability to VE. Alternatively, programs may want to broaden their aperture and strive to reduce participation in a range of violent activities, especially if these activities share similar drivers. Focusing on VE in an active conflict context – particularly in a place like Niger, which is riven by a series of distinct but overlapping insurgent, inter-communal, and cross-border conflicts – may be impractical or ineffective, as isolating vulnerability and risk factors for violent extremism versus violence in general can be very difficult.

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55 Olawole et al. 2022.
56 Petryniak et al. 2020.
57 See Olawole et al. (2022) for a summary.
58 See Sonnenfeld et al. (2021) for a review.
59 Arjona 2017.

Fund multi-year projects. PEACE was designed to improve social cohesion and reduce vulnerability to violent extremism in a matter of months. Yet altering community relations and changing attitudes, values, and behaviors regarding extremism and the use of violence often takes years. Shifting norms around gender, youth, and the inclusion of marginalized groups is also a multi-year undertaking. Donors must ensure these kinds of interventions are given enough time to realize the changes they seek by funding longer-duration projects that offer repeated, sustained activities over an extended period.

> **P/CVE programs may want to broaden their aperture and aim to reduce participation in a range of violent activities. Focusing on violent extremism in an active conflict context may be impractical or ineffective, as isolating risk factors for VE from those for other types of violence can be very difficult.**

Target activities at the group, community, and elite levels to address multi-faceted drivers of violent extremism. Our findings suggest that activities that are effective at strengthening social cohesion may not be the same as those that help reduce support for violence and violent groups, at least in the short-term. In some communities, this seemed to reflect a misalignment between the focus of PEACE activities (community-level) and the primary drivers of violence, including violent extremism (elite-level rivalries). For complex outcomes like violent extremism – which has multiple causes – the impact of narrow programmatic interventions is likely to be limited. Future interventions should therefore aim to address other factors that radicalize people or lead them to engage in violence, such as a lack of psycho-social support[60] and ineffective governance.[61] At the same time, practitioners should be realistic about what their programs can actually achieve, as some drivers of violent extremism fall outside the scope of what community-level peacebuilding and development interventions can reasonably expect to influence.

Develop strategies to overcome resistance to the involvement of women, youth, and other marginalized groups in community decision-making. PEACE provides yet another example of the barriers to encouraging women and youth to participate in power structures in patriarchal environments.[62] While the program was cognizant of these barriers from the outset, it lacked a concerted plan and sufficient time to work on altering the enabling environment in a way that might help overcome them. Future interventions should develop longer-term strategies – such as identifying and engaging key male allies, implementing behavioral change interventions targeted at men and women, and engaging a cross-section of women and youth to better understand the problem and generate solutions together – to contend with the deeply entrenched sources of resistance these groups face when they try to engage in male-dominated spaces. These strategies should be grounded in the community-led solutions that are at the core of Mercy Corps' CATALYSE approach. They must consider how facilitators and local partners can amplify the voices of these groups during trainings and program activities, based on a rigorous gender, equity, and social inclusion (GESI) analysis. GESI analyses need to be updated throughout the project lifecycle, especially if security conditions or other local conditions change, and ensure that the inclusion goals of the program are directly linked to its broader learning and adaptation agenda.

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[60] For example, see Kurtz (2016).
[61] Egan et al. 2019.
[62] Matfess 2021.

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