EQUIPPED FOR PEACE

Conflict Resolution Training and Youth Violence Prevention in Niger

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MERCY CORPS

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Acknowledgements

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Executive Summary

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

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

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

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

Key Findings

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

The results indicate that economic and civic programming, while important for addressing structural vulnerabilities, may be insufficient to shift norms and behaviors related to violence without explicitly targeting conflict dynamics. By contrast, IBMN directly addressed the relational and institutional pathways through

which disputes escalate, equipping youth with practical tools to mediate conflicts and reposition themselves as agents of peace rather than bystanders or participants in violence.

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

Implications

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

Recommendations

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

Adapt conflict resolution programs to engage youth as agents of peace. This study demonstrates that adapting mediation and dialogue tools to engage youth (a group often central to cycles of violence but excluded from decision-making) can be both feasible and effective. IBMN trained youth not only to de-escalate interpersonal disputes but also to mediate broader community tensions. This bottom-up approach appears to have contributed to reductions in both support for and the actual incidence of violence. Peacebuilding programs should continue to expand access to mediation training among young people and view youth not merely as beneficiaries, but as capable peacebuilders within their communities.

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

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

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

Introduction

Over the past two decades, governments, donors, and implementers have invested heavily in peacebuilding and development programming in fragile and conflict-affected states. Yet, despite a growing recognition that violence is often rooted in social, economic, psychosocial and political factors, there is limited consensus and causal evidence on which interventions meaningfully reduce violence or build lasting peace. In these settings, development and peacebuilding programs are increasingly expected to do more: strengthen institutions, promote stability, reduce violence, and empower vulnerable populations. This has led to a push for more integrated interventions that combine peacebuilding objectives with development and humanitarian goals (Fluhmann et al. 2025). The rationale is twofold: first, it aims to reflect the reality that conflict drivers are multidimensional (Caparini and Reagan 2019; Moyer et al. 2022). Second, it seeks to ensure that peacebuilding is not treated as a siloed or stand-alone activity (Volkdal 2025).

These challenges are particularly pronounced in fragile regions like the Sahel, which faces persistent cycles of insecurity, poverty, instability, compounded by the escalating presence of violent extremist organizations (VEOs). In such fragile and conflict-affected settings, youth are a central demographic. Often framed simultaneously as a risk and an opportunity, they represent a demographic bulge that could contribute to either violence or peace. Niger, with one of the youngest populations in the world, is particularly vulnerable: its youth are at a heightened risk of recruitment into VEOs. The spread of violent extremism across the region has further exacerbated fragility, triggered severe humanitarian crises, and made it an especially challenging context to implement successful interventions aimed at mitigating youth engagement in violence and extremism.

As a result, efforts to engage youth in peacebuilding and development have become a key focus for donors, policymakers, and practitioners. Youth programming as a pathway to peace has proliferated, with a wide range of recent interventions ranging from employment and education initiatives to civic engagement and peacebuilding efforts by governments, NGOs, and donor organizations, all aimed at reducing youth participation in violence (Bhatt et al., 2024; Blattman & Annan, 2016; Pruett et al., 2024). But the outcomes of these efforts have been mixed. For example, some interventions—such as cash transfers or pro-peace messaging campaigns—aimed at reducing violence and hostilities in the region have inadvertently escalated tensions and increased violent incidents (Premand & Rohner, 2024; Grossman, Nomikos, & Siddiqui, 2023). These outcomes reflect broader inconsistencies in the evidence base on effective violence prevention (Dasgupta, Gawande, & Kapur, 2017; Premand & Rohner, 2024; Sexton & Zürcher, 2024).

There is growing recognition that development and peacebuilding efforts targeting youth often lack empirical grounding. Development actors and policymakers frequently invest in youth employment and civic engagement programs in contexts of violence, operating on the assumption that economic opportunities can reduce grievance, prevent recruitment into armed groups, or at least reduce their propensity toward violence (Mercy Corps 2015; UNDP 2017). However, rigorous impact evaluations have shown mixed or modest effects at best (Lyall et al. 2020; Sexton 2016). Studies increasingly suggest that economic opportunities alone do not necessarily reduce violence unless paired with efforts to shift social norms, address marginalization, or strengthen local institutions (Blattman et al. 2017; Casey et al. 2012). Even when interventions include these efforts, only a few rigorous evaluations have sought to assess how they influence youth behaviors in fragile settings and the findings are often inconclusive.

While many interventions target individual-level outcomes, fewer address how these changes influence broader conflict dynamics. Even fewer studies identify the specific mechanisms through which youth

programs may reduce violence or promote peace. The result is evidence that remains thin. Only a handful of studies have established causal links between youth-focused activities and peace outcomes, particularly in environments with limited state presence and shifting conflict dynamics (Lyall et al. 2020; Reardon et al., 2021; Reardon et al., 2024).

Moreover, few programs are designed with a theory of change that directly targets how youth relate to violence, whether as perpetrators, mediators, or bystanders. In regions like Niger and the broader Sahel, where violent conflict is shaped by a combination of local disputes, transnational armed groups, and weak governance, these dynamics are particularly complex. Existing analysis also often lacks critical examination of which program components matter most, for whom, and under what conditions. This leaves a gap not only in understanding what works, but in understanding how layered interventions might amplify or dilute one another's effects.

This study responds to these gaps using a cluster randomized controlled trial (RCT) embedded within Youth Connect (YC), a large-scale violence prevention and development program for youth in Niger. Youth Connect provided vocational training, entrepreneurship support, civic education, and soft skills training to improve livelihoods and civic participation among youth. Within this program, Mercy Corps piloted a low-cost, light touch targeted conflict resolution training known as Interest-Based Mediation and Negotiation (IBMN). IBMN was designed to strengthen youth capacity to mediate local disputes, challenge harmful norms, and foster a stronger sense of belonging and shared community purpose.

This study examines whether layering IBMN onto the core YC programming improved youth attitudes toward violence, increased their willingness and capacity to mediate disputes, and reduced violent incidents. Using data collected through structured surveys and list experiments, complemented by geo-referenced conflict data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) project, we tested our hypotheses in villages that received only Youth Connect activities, villages that received Youth Connect plus IBMN, and pure control villages that received no intervention. This study was conducted in the Maradi and Tillabéri regions of Niger where youth face persistent challenges stemming from interethnic tensions, competition over natural resources, and growing influence of violent extremist groups. These dynamics contribute to entrenched social divisions and undermine stability.

We find that the addition of IBMN significantly reduced youth support for violence and lowered perceptions of community-level support for violence. In contrast, the YC program alone—without IBMN—had limited effects on these outcomes. These findings suggest that combining economic and civic interventions with low-cost, community-focused and targeted conflict resolution training can enhance the overall impact of peacebuilding efforts in fragile regions.

With global aid budgets under strain, there is a pressing need for rigorous, actionable evidence to guide resource allocation and intervention design. This need has taken on new urgency amid shrinking aid budgets, heightened scrutiny, and growing pressure to demonstrate the distinct and combined value of different program components, understanding both the standalone and interactive effects to ensure that limited resources are used in ways that are both cost-effective and responsive to local needs. By rigorously testing an integrated approach to youth programming, this study contributes to that growing body of evidence on layered and multidimensional interventions in fragile settings. It offers timely insights for donors, practitioners, and policymakers seeking cost-effective, scalable models to reduce youth vulnerability to violence and violent extremism, particularly in fragile environments.

The Context: Youth, Conflict, and Development in Niger

Niger faces a convergence of multiple crises including climate pressure, violent extremism, and socioeconomic instability. Despite its relative political stability in the past decade, the country has witnessed rising insecurity, particularly in its border regions (Wilén 2022; CFR, 2024). The diffusion of violence from neighboring Mali, Burkina Faso, and Nigeria, combined with internal dynamics, has intensified the complexity and reach of conflict. Attacks by armed groups, intercommunal clashes, and confrontations over land and resources have all increased in frequency and severity, especially in the regions of Tillabéri, Tahoua, Diffa, and Maradi (UNICEF 2025; ReliefWeb 2024). In its southern and western border regions (particularly Maradi and Tillabéri), these overlapping challenges have produced persistent insecurity and eroded community resilience. The country's youth, who make up the majority of the population, are among the most affected (UNICEF 2018; NRC 2023).

Tillabéri, located in the volatile Liptako-Gourma tri-border area with Mali and Burkina Faso, has become a hotspot for violent extremist activity in recent years and was where the 2012 outbreak of conflict in Northern Mali gave rise to cross-border instability. Armed groups affiliated with the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and the Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) have expanded their operations in the region, often targeting local leaders, schools, and state institutions (Mahanty 2019). Insecurity has escalated significantly since 2018, with regular attacks on villages, ambushes of security forces, and the displacement of tens of thousands of civilians. The government's response—centered on a militarized state of emergency—has further strained state-citizen relations and weakened local institutions.

Maradi, situated in southern Niger along the border with Nigeria, is less directly affected by insurgency but faces a different set of conflict dynamics. The region has seen an uptick in rural banditry, land-related disputes, and pastoralist-farmer tensions. Local conflict is often shaped by competition over increasingly scarce natural resources, interethnic divisions, and limited access to justice (Koné 2022). While the presence of violent extremist groups is not as pronounced in Maradi as in Tillabéri, structural vulnerabilities including high unemployment, limited access to education, and weak state infrastructure continue to create conditions in which youth may be more susceptible to recruitment.

Figure I: Maradi and Tillabéri Regions of Niger

Maradi   Tillabéri

Youth Connect
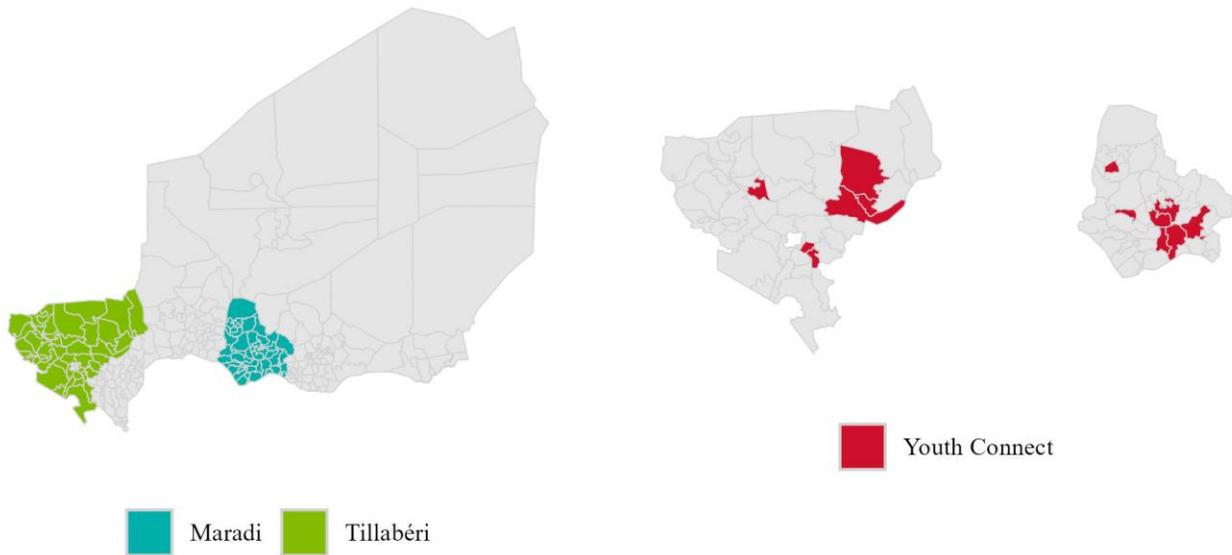
In 2022, the year before the IBMN interventions, ACLED recorded 982 violent incidents across Niger. Thirty-seven percent of those incidents took place in Tillabéri and 15 percent took place in Maradi. Across both regions, young people face daily pressures stemming from structural exclusion and localized insecurity. Many are out of school, underemployed, and disconnected from formal institutions. State presence is often minimal or perceived as predatory, particularly in rural areas, and therefore formal institutions of conflict resolution are rare throughout the country. In this vacuum, customary and religious leaders play a dominant role in community governance, including dispute resolution and social mediation. In the 2022 round of the Afrobarometer survey, only 20% of Nigeriens contacted their elected representative in the national assembly within the previous 12 months in contrast with 46% that had contacted their traditional chief within the same time period. However, traditional mechanisms are under strain: generational divides, shifting norms, and the politicization of ethnic and religious identities have all weakened the legitimacy and capacity of local leadership.

Youth are not only disproportionately affected by violence; they are also often sidelined from the very processes intended to resolve it. Youth are rarely included in traditional mediation processes and are underrepresented in community decision-making forums. In Maradi and Tillabéri, 54% of youth strongly or somewhat disagreed that their voice was heard by village and administrative authorities.[1] When asked "If you had a dispute about land/livestock/a business transaction, who would you approach to resolve the dispute?" 77 percent of youth said they would approach a traditional leader. Only nine percent said they would approach a government leader, further illustrating the importance of informal institutions in the region.

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[1] Based on a baseline survey conducted in the fall of 2022 before Youth Connect

The conflict landscape is also shaped by chronic humanitarian needs and environmental shocks. Both regions experience regular displacement, food insecurity, and disruption of livelihoods due to climate variability. In pastoral and agro-pastoral communities, disputes over transhumance corridors, farmland boundaries, and water access have intensified, especially in the absence of effective state regulation.

Taken together, these dynamics create a highly fragile operating environment in which violence is hyper-local but tied to national and transnational drivers, and where youth are at the intersection of both risk and resilience. Any attempt to reduce violence or promote peace in Niger must grapple with this complexity. It must also recognize that interventions focused solely on economic opportunity or civic participation may not be sufficient without also addressing the relational, institutional, and identity-based dimensions of conflict that shape how young people experience and respond to violence.

Youth Connect Program and Interest Based Mediation and Negotiation

Youth Connect (YC) was a flagship Mercy Corps' youth development program in Niger and Burkina Faso, designed to improve livelihoods, promote civic engagement, and support violence prevention among young people in fragile regions.[2] The program offered a multi-pronged package of interventions, including vocational training, entrepreneurship support, civic education, and soft skills development. Activities were delivered at the village level and targeted vulnerable youth identified through community-based selection processes. The program was implemented across Maradi and Tillabéri—regions characterized by high youth unemployment, weak institutional presence, and recurrent local conflict.

Youth Connect was developed in response to growing concerns about youth vulnerability to violence and violent extremism in the Sahel. By addressing both economic and social drivers of instability, the program sought to build youth resilience and reduce support for violence. The program engaged young people through structured group sessions and community activities, including training modules, mentorship, and opportunities for local civic engagement. While the core intervention focused on building individual-level skills and promoting youth agency, it was not explicitly designed to address community-level conflict dynamics or equip participants with tools to mediate violence.

To examine whether adding a targeted conflict resolution component could strengthen peacebuilding outcomes, Mercy Corps piloted a complementary intervention within the broader YC program: **Interest-Based Mediation and Negotiation (IBMN)**. This light-touch training module, layered onto Youth Connect in a subset of randomly selected villages, focused explicitly on youth and aimed to build youth capacity to resolve disputes and reduce support for violence. The IBMN curriculum was adapted from Mercy Corps' broader peacebuilding portfolio and was rooted in principles of mutual understanding, inclusive dialogue, and local problem-solving (Fisher & Ury 1981). IBMN is an approach to negotiation adapted from *Getting to Yes* by Fisher and Ury (1981), centered on the idea of identifying interests (rather than fixed positions), generating creative options, and pursuing win-win solutions. It focuses on teaching participants how to identify underlying interests in conflict situations, de-escalate tensions, and negotiate mutually acceptable solutions.

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[2] Though the program was implemented in both Niger and Burkina Faso, the research focused only on Niger.

IBMN is a grassroots peacebuilding intervention designed for contexts where there is low state capacity. Traditional peacebuilding approaches often rely on existing conflict resolution institutions (Autesserre, 2010). However, in contexts like Niger, where conflict and weak state capacity have severely undermined the state, these methods are less effective. In rural Niger, local governance typically operates through customary institutions, such as village councils and chiefs, which can sometimes co-opt programs intended to support marginalized groups like youth (Gibson & Woolcock 2008). In such environments, unresolved local disputes frequently escalate into violent incidents (Blattman, Hartman, & Blair 2014; Kalyvas 2003). To address this bottom-up production of violence, IBMN typically equips local leaders (including traditional, religious, and youth leaders) with skills to resolve both interpersonal disputes and broader conflicts within their communities. For instance, in northern Nigeria, training local leaders in IBMN reduced violence and bolstered social cohesion (Reardon, Wolfe, and Ogbudu 2021, 2024). Youth Connect, by contrast, marked a shift in focus: it was the first application of IBMN that we know of, explicitly designed for and delivered to youth as primary participants.

The IBMN intervention followed a *training-of-trainers* model, in which Mercy Corps' field agents selected the youth leaders (men and women) from each village to receive the intervention. Youth leadership was central to the design: these trained youth then assumed responsibility for delivering the training to their peers and community members, positioning them as frontline peacebuilders and facilitators of local dispute resolution. These 198 youth leaders then led training in IBMN approaches within their home villages. Youth participants engaged in scenario-based exercises, role plays, and discussions on how to apply interest-based approaches to conflicts within their families, peer groups, and communities. The three-day seminar centered on the core elements of negotiation including interests, alternatives, relationships, options, legitimacy, commitments, and communication (Fisher and Ury 1981). The curriculum also highlighted mediating conflicts using hypothetical scenarios drawn from real local disputes such as land disputes (more on the intervention below). Sessions emphasized respect, empathy, and reflection and were conducted in local languages to ensure accessibility. By involving youth in these processes, the framework not only strengthens their roles as peacebuilders but also reduces their vulnerability to violence and recruitment by extremist organizations. These efforts help position youth as vital contributors to community resilience and social cohesion.

Importantly, IBMN was designed to be cost-effective and scalable. By embedding IBMN within Youth Connect in a randomized subset of treatment sites, this study tested whether layered programming—economic and civic development paired with light-touch conflict resolution training—would produce greater impacts on violence-related outcomes than conventional youth programming alone.

Motivation and Hypotheses
Evidence Gaps

While integrated approaches that combine development and peace objectives are increasingly common, causal evidence on how different components interact remains thin. Previous Mercy Corps research has begun to unpack the effects of bundled peacebuilding interventions (Reardon et al. 2024), but more rigorous evaluations are needed to test how layered approaches (such as those combining economic, civic, and conflict-resolution components) shift attitudes and behaviors at scale in fragile settings.

This gap is particularly acute when it comes to programming targeting youth, who are both central to conflict dynamics and to prospects for peace in the Sahel. Interventions are often built on assumptions, such as the notion that economic empowerment or civic engagement alone will reduce young people's susceptibility to violence or recruitment by armed groups. While studies show that these interventions lead to improvements in livelihoods or attitudes, they rarely demonstrate causal impacts on violence, social cohesion, or community conflict management (Idris 2016; Denney & McLaren 2016; Reardon et al. 2021; Reardon et al. 2024). Rigorous evaluations in the Sahel and elsewhere reveal that economic support often has modest or no effect on violent behavior (Blattman & Ralston 2015; McLean, Garfinkel, & Shapiro 2021), and that narrowly targeted interventions (such as pro-peace messaging or cash transfers) can even backfire under certain conditions (Premand & Rohner 2024; Grossman, Nomikos, & Siddiqui 2023).

This reflects deeper issues in the design and evaluation of youth programming designed to reduce violence. Many interventions rely on theories of change that are only loosely linked to violence dynamics, focusing on individual-level changes such as skills acquisition or employment, while overlooking the relational and institutional dimensions that shape whether violence occurs. There are few efforts to test whether and how changes in individual attitudes translate into community-level shifts in conflict behavior, or whether interventions can alter the social norms and power structures that sustain violence. As Denney and McLaren (2016) note, even when peace is the stated goal, peacebuilding components are often only implicitly embedded, limiting the ability to assess their actual contribution.

Understanding the impact of layered interventions is also essential for identifying cost-effectiveness and scalable solutions. We theorize that layering IBMN (a conflict resolution component) atop Youth Connect's standard package will have stronger effects on support for violence than the Youth Connect package itself. Even when economic or psychosocial factors are relatively positive, the absence of strong conflict resolution institutions may cause small disputes to escalate into violence. Armed groups often exploit fragile environments and local grievances to pursue their own strategic aims, sometimes manipulating community cleavages or insecurity for recruitment and control (Kalyvas 2003). In the Sahel, groups such as JNIM and AQIM have similarly taken advantage of enabling environments to advance their own interests (Raleigh, Nsaibia, and Dowd 2021). The following sections draw on existing research to explain how youth attitudes, economic incentives, and local conflict-resolution institutions interact to shape support for violence, forming the foundation for our hypotheses.

Youth and Violence

In fragile and conflict-affected contexts like Niger, violence is not simply the outcome of individual choices or material incentives; it is often shaped by the broader social, political, and institutional environment in which youth live. Young people are embedded in relational systems (families, peer networks, communities) that can normalize, sanction, or even reward violent behavior. Support for violence may not stem from ideology but from socialization into environments where violence is viewed as a legitimate form of redress and unavoidable (Checkel 2017). Young people may support or participate in violence not only due to personal beliefs or incentives but also because violence is normalized within their peer groups, communities, or local institutions. That support can be tacit (expressed in tolerance) or active, through encouragement or participation.

Youth are also excluded from community decision-making and informal governance structures. In this context, they may see few nonviolent pathways to resolve conflict or gain recognition. In many rural settings, youth are often viewed as political outsiders (Resnick and Thurlow 2015). This marginalization can foster a sense of grievance and alienation, while also reducing access to non-violent mechanisms for managing

conflict. As Hilker and Fraser (2009) argue, youth violence is often rooted in structural exclusion and the failure of both formal and informal institutions to accommodate their aspirations or resolve their disputes. Consequently, they may participate in violence not because they prefer violence, but because they lack standing in informal governance systems, are excluded from dispute resolution processes, and see few nonviolent pathways for addressing conflict. In this view, violence is co-produced: shaped not only by individual disposition but also by group dynamics and institutional failures. To prevent violence, interventions must target these broader social dynamics, not just individual risk factors.

Understanding the social and institutional roots of violence among youth is critical for designing effective peacebuilding programs. Interventions that narrowly target individual-level traits—such as employability or civic attitudes—are unlikely to succeed unless they also address the normative environments and governance systems that shape youth behavior. This study adopts such a lens by examining whether light-touch conflict resolution training can shift these dynamics and reposition youth as agents of mediation rather than vectors of conflict.

Drawing on this lens, this study examines support and justification for violence as both an individual and community-level outcome, shaped by social norms, intergroup dynamics, and perceived legitimacy of violence as a means of resolving conflict.

Are Economic Explanations Enough?

Many theories of violence emphasize economic incentives as core to understanding support for violence (Weinstein 2007). In particular, competition over resources—such as land disputes in the eastern Congo and Côte d'Ivoire (Autesserre 2010; Boone 2003) and recurring farmer-herder conflicts and cattle rustling involving transhumant groups in the Sahel (Benjaminsen and Ba 2024)—remains a significant source of civil conflict. In this context, joining a violent group is often viewed as a way to access wealth or resources. In Niger, where youth face high unemployment, few pathways to formal livelihoods, limited economic mobility, and limited participation in civic life, violence may appear attractive, both for material gain and a sense of belonging. Armed groups often exploit this vulnerability, offering cash or status (UNDP 2017). Economic exclusion can fuel frustration, resentment, and perceived injustice. Yet the assumption that economic hardship alone explains violence is increasingly contested.

For example, militants recruited for financial gain rather than ideological reasons tend to be less disciplined and are more likely to perpetrate violence against civilians (Weinstein 2007). Some studies show that expanding access to alternative income or employment initiatives and cash transfers can raise the opportunity costs of violence and reduce it (Blattman & Annan 2016; Dasgupta et al. 2017; Crost, Felter, and Johnston 2016), but others find that cash transfers increase short-term support for armed groups and a rise in violent incidents (Lyall et al. 2020; Premand & Rohner 2024).

While economic marginalization matters, one reason for these mixed outcomes is that economic deprivation is complex, and rooted in social and political factors, suggesting that economic interventions alone are insufficient. Interviews with former militants and youth highlight how economic hardship fuels widespread grievances, which are further shaped by gender roles and identities (UNDP 2023: 72). In settings like Niger, where conflicts often revolve around resource access, economic programs alone are likely to have limited or short-lived impacts on violence. Short-term income support may not translate into sustained behavior change, especially in the absence of trust, belonging, or collective efficacy. In such contexts, peacebuilding strategies must also address how youth relate to others in their community, and how they understand and respond to conflict.

The Role of Conflict Resolution Institutions

Where formal justice institutions are weak or absent, disputes over land, water, or youth behavior are typically managed through informal systems such as chiefs, elders, or religious authorities. These areas often feature complex, localized power dynamics and intense competition over scarce resources (Bierschenk and De Sardan 1997). These actors are central to the governance of daily life. However, these systems are not **always accessible to youth**. This is particularly acute in Niger, where many conflicts are local—over land, water, intergenerational roles—and where formal justice systems are geographically distant, expensive, or distrusted. Without recourse to legitimate resolution mechanisms, conflict festers or escalates (Medam and Sheely 2025; Sheely and Medam 2025). Excluded from conflict resolution, young people may see violence as their only recourse (Bezares Calderon and Olawole 2025). To address violence, governments and practitioners can focus on reducing small-scale disputes through local conflict resolution or by shifting public opinion to diminish the link between disputes and violent outcomes.

At the same time, many communities report growing dissatisfaction with customary institutions, viewing them as biased, extractive, or incapable of responding to modern tensions. This creates an opening for armed groups to exploit local grievances. Introducing decentralized conflict resolution could reduce the number of local disputes that armed groups exploit. In Niger's Tillabéri and Maradi regions, rival armed groups and the state struggle for control, creating incentives for local elites and pastoralists to collaborate with groups like JNIM, often motivated by grievances related to resource access such as foraging and water rights (Balcells 2017; Raleigh, Nsaibia, and Dowd 2021). These groups strategically align with aggrieved communities to bolster support, reflecting a broader pattern where local conflicts — rather than broad ideological goals — drive violence (Kalyvas 2003, 2018; Lichtenheld and Ogbudu 2021). This dynamic is not unique to Niger; similar patterns of localized conflicts fueling violence occur in Chad and eastern Congo, where economic hardship and weak institutions allow disputes over land and resources to escalate (Debos 2016; Autesserre 2010). The intersection of economic deprivation and the absence of conflict resolution mechanisms creates fertile ground for violence.

To address this, recent initiatives focus on building alternative dispute resolution mechanisms. For example, community negotiation trainings in Liberia reduced violence and promoted norms against armed violence, with effects sustaining for three years (Hartman, Blair, and Blattman 2021). Similarly, programs improving farmer-herder relations in Nigeria enhanced inter-group trust and security perceptions (Grady et al. 2023).

Another key approach is shifting public attitudes to reduce support for violence. Armed groups rely on local collaborators to navigate disputes selectively (Balcells and Stanton 2021). By changing social norms to discourage violence, individuals become less likely to share information that enables armed groups' interventions and more likely to face social sanctions for supporting violence (Wenzel and Woodyatt 2025).

In Niger, poverty, lack of economic opportunity, and absent dispute resolution institutions converge to drive violence. This suggests that peacebuilding interventions that focus only on economic or institutional factors may have limited impact. Therefore, we examine whether pairing conflict-resolution training (IBMN) with Youth Connect's economic and civic engagement components strengthens effects on attitudes related to violence, compared to Youth Connect alone. The following sections explore combining conflict resolution training with vocational education and civic engagement to tackle these challenges holistically.

Intervention and Hypotheses

The Youth Connect program provided vocational training, entrepreneurship support, civic education, and life skills to youth in 84 villages in Maradi and Tillabéri. Participants were between the ages of 15 and 34, many of whom faced structural exclusion from markets and decision-making spaces.

Youth Connect provided tailored vocational training in both agriculture and non-agriculture livelihoods. Agriculture training emphasized links to market value chains and relevant farming techniques, while non-agricultural training was often delivered through apprenticeships. The trainings were context-specific, designed to match local economic realities and youth preferences in each village. To support young people in applying these skills, the program also distributed asset kits relevant to the training received. For example, youth who pursued catering were provided with gas bottles or cooking materials; those who trained in livestock management received animals. These in-kind resources were meant to overcome common barriers to entry and catalyze income-generating activities. The civic engagement component introduced soft-skills training aimed at helping youth better engage with community institutions. Training content included topics such as community mobilization, communication, and local governance. The goal was to empower youth to advocate for their needs, participate in local decision-making, and resolve disputes without resorting to violence.

Yet in extremely fragile areas like Maradi and Tillabéri, where the state is weak, and local institutions are often exclusionary, livelihoods and civic engagement alone may not be sufficient to shift attitudes related to violence. Recognizing this, Mercy Corps embedded an experimental layer within the Youth Connect program to test whether pairing economic and civic programming with conflict resolution training would strengthen its effects. To assess whether adding a peacebuilding component would enhance YC's impact, Mercy Corps introduced **Interest-Based Mediation and Negotiation (IBMN)**—a light-touch training delivered through three full-day sessions by trusted community facilitators—in a subset of villages. The IBMN training aimed to strengthen youth capacity to manage disputes, shift norms, and promote peaceful problem-solving.

Applying IBMN as a Conflict Resolution Add-On for Youth Development Programming

Mercy Corps has previously applied IBMN training in diverse contexts—from Nigeria and Mali to Iraq and Tajikistan—as a scalable, low-cost peacebuilding tool to improve community-level dispute resolution. In northern Nigeria, IBMN training helped reduce inter-group violence by equipping local leaders with tools to mediate conflict before it escalated (Reardon, Wolfe, and Ogbudu 2021). However, this is the first experimental study to evaluate IBMN in the context of youth-focused programming.

Four youth leaders per village (two men, two women) were selected by community leaders for IBMN training. These youth, aged 16–34, received intensive IBMN training during a three-day seminar held in regional capitals.

The IBMN training introduced participants to the seven elements of negotiation: interests, alternatives, relationships, options, legitimacy, commitments, and communication. These were contextualized using local examples. For instance, participants were asked to unpack a hypothetical land dispute, exploring the underlying interests (e.g., agriculture, grazing, community development) behind fixed demands like "give me this land." The training emphasized empathy, listening, and the co-production of peaceful outcomes.

Trained youth leaders then cascaded the training to their peers in their home villages. Many went on to resolve real-life disputes, such as a conflict between a farmer and a herder over destroyed crops, or a confrontation between a phone technician and a client. In post-training feedback surveys, participants reported significant increases in self-efficacy: they felt more confident mediating disputes, participating in meetings, and articulating their perspectives. These outcomes suggest the training was absorbed and perceived as useful.

This design allows us to test whether layering a *low-cost conflict resolution training* like IBMN can amplify the effects of broader development programming—by reducing support for violence and strengthening pro-social behavior. It also speaks to broader questions of *cost-effectiveness and integration*: how modest investments in programming can unlock larger returns when combined with economic or civic interventions.

Hypotheses

Based on the above, we test two core hypotheses:

Youth Connect addresses structural drivers of youth vulnerability, by providing vocational training, entrepreneurship support, civic education, and psychosocial development. These components are theorized to reduce frustration and increase youth engagement in nonviolent pathways, despite not explicitly targeting conflict behavior. However, because it does not directly target conflict behaviors or norms, its effects on support for violence may be limited, consistent with mixed evidence on stand-alone youth development programs. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

- **H1**: Respondents in villages that received *Youth Connect* (but not IBMN) will express less support for violence than respondents in pure control villages.

IBMN directly targets disputes at risk of turning violent, equipping youth with practical tools to mediate disputes, de-escalate tensions, and promote peaceful outcomes. By addressing the relational and institutional drivers of violence, it is more likely to shift behavior and reduce support for violence. If successful, mediation can not only prevent escalation but also reshape community dynamics by reinforcing youth as peace actors. Prior studies suggest mediation's effects are strongest on violence-related outcomes. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

- **H2**: Respondents in villages that received *Youth Connect* plus IBMN training will express less support for violence than respondents in villages that received *Youth Connect* alone.

While our main focus is on changes in support for violence, we also explore downstream impacts on real-world conflict incidents using ACLED data, presented later in the report.

Study Design and Methodology

To evaluate the impact of Youth Connect and IBMN, we utilize a cluster RCT conducted across 120 villages in Maradi and Tillabéri.[3] Within 84 Youth Connect implementation-frame villages, 42 villages received the Youth Connect package only and another 42 received Youth Connect and IBMN. In addition, 36 pure control

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[3] In this report, we use "village" to refer to study sites or localities, including both rural villages and commune centers (chef-lieu).

villages received neither.[4] Due to ongoing insecurity and guidance from local government officials, we did not conduct the survey in one village that received Youth Connect only and one village that received both Youth Connect and IBMN interventions. Across all 118 villages, we conducted surveys of 1,734 youths who were selected using two procedures. First, we surveyed about ten youths per village through a random walk procedure. When enumerators arrived at households, they asked the head of the household for the number of individuals between the ages of 15 and 34 who lived there. The data collection tool then randomly selected one youth to whom the survey was administered. Enumerators sought informed consent at each stage, and this process selected 1,232 youths in total. Because the random walk does not guarantee that sampled youths would have directly participated in Youth Connect, 532 youths who participated in Youth Connect's vocational training and civic engagement activities were also directly sampled (randomly) through Mercy Corps' record of participation in training. This latter sampling procedure was independent of IBMN treatment, but 257 (of the 532) came from *Youth Connect only* villages and 245 came from *Youth Connect and IBMN* villages. All respondents received the same survey instruments. This mixed sampling strategy also allows us to assess whether IBMN's peer-delivered model may have influenced attitudes beyond direct trainees, capturing potential village-level diffusion effects.

Experimental Design[5]

The Youth Connect program used a village selection tool (VST) to identify villages where the intervention was expected to have the greatest potential to impact violence. Program staff went to communes and met with local chiefs, elders, and elites to assess the needs of villages, qualitatively rank the problems experienced by their village, and garner the village's vulnerability to violent extremism (Ribar, Sheely and Lichtenheld 2023). After adding the scores across the VST indicators, the team selected five villages (with the highest scores) in each commune, for a total of 84 villages that make the Youth Connect implementation sampling frame of this study.[6] Out of this pool, we then randomly assigned each village into two groups: receiving only the Youth Connect program or receiving Youth Connect **plus** IBMN. Randomization was stratified by region, whether the location was a commune center, and the presence of ACLED events in the two-year period before randomization took place to ensure balance between groups and to facilitate credible comparison of outcomes. We stratify by village type to account for the presence of both rural villages and commune centers in the sampling frame. Commune centers are typically larger, more densely populated settlements with semi-urban characteristics. We also stratify on ACLED events to capture pre-intervention exposure to violence in Maradi. Since all but three villages in Tillabéri had at least one ACLED incident, we do not stratify on ACLED in Tillabéri. The total sample is not representative of the overall Nigerien population since Youth Connect specifically focused on communities that were especially at risk of violence recruitment by armed groups. So, while our survey is representative of youth in those high-risk areas, it isn't meant to represent all young people in the country. As a result, our survey weights are designed to reflect this sub-population rather than the broader national population. We therefore interpret our findings as identifying a local average treatment effect (LATE) among youth who are most at risk (Imbens 2010).

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[4] All villages (including those in the pure control) were supposed to initially receive both Youth Connect and IBMN after the midline survey, but all implementation was canceled as part of the January 2025 foreign aid freeze.

[5] This report estimates the causal effect of being treated with both Youth Connect and IBMN training, relative to Youth Connect by itself. However, in this report, we also include a pure control group, which received neither Youth Connect nor IBMN training (though was slated to). Including the pure control group gives this report a more holistic view of the Youth Connect program. However, in an academic article based on these findings we relegate the pure control to an appendix to avoid conflating our causally identified results (Youth Connect and IBMN relative to Youth Connect alone) with the pure control versus Youth Connect results.

[6] Pure control villages come from communes that were not scheduled for Wave 1 implementation. The country office identified priority communes for Wave 1 (criteria not documented in this report). Among the remaining communes, four were randomly selected to receive Wave 1 treatment and six were held for later implementation; all villages in those six communes served as pure controls during the evaluation period.

This is important when considering the external validity of this study. While the youth in our study are not typical of all Nigerien youth, they represent the key population of interest for violence prevention programming, namely, those most likely to support or participate in violence (Scacco and Warren 2018; Blattman and Ralston 2015).

Outcomes of Interest

The primary outcome of interest in this study is support for violence, conceptualized as a set of attitudes that justify or legitimize the use of violence to resolve disputes or achieve community goals. Given the sensitive political environment in Niger, where there is a history of state repression and limited tolerance for dissent (Amnesty International 2024), asking questions directly about any individual's support for violence could potentially endanger both respondents and enumerators. As a result, we avoided any survey questions that could make enumerators and respondents uncomfortable. Relatedly, we were also mindful of social desirability bias, which could lead respondents to underreport support for violence if they suspect they could be penalized or judged for a particular type of response. While prior research suggests that concerns about such bias are sometimes overstated (Blair, Coppock, and Moor 2020), our questions met all the commonly accepted conditions for heightened risk of social desirability bias: respondents knew the study was by an international organization, understood that their answers could be interpreted as indicating support for violence, and likely believed that such views would be unwelcome or even dangerous to share. We therefore took steps to word questions carefully and to emphasize confidentiality, in order to mitigate these risks as much as possible.

We measure this using a battery of survey items capturing attitudes toward violence. Specifically, respondents were asked whether people in their community think it is justified to use violence to defend one's ethnic group; force the government to change its policies; defend one's religion; and retaliate against violence. This set of questions serves as an indirect proxy to measure support for violence.

Support for Violence Measures

Do people in your community think it is sometimes, rarely, or never justified to use violence to do each of the following?	Response Options
Retaliate against violence	Sometimes justified Rarely justified Never justified
Defend one's ethnic group	Sometimes justified Rarely justified Never justified
Defend one's religion	Sometimes justified Rarely justified Never justified
Force the government to change its policies	Sometimes justified Rarely justified Never justified

Survey Experiments

Next, we utilize a series of list experiments to further guard against social desirability bias, a method increasingly employed in sensitive contexts (Blair and Imai 2012). Measuring sensitive attitudes, such as support for violence, poses challenges, especially in conflict-affected contexts where respondents may fear repercussions or disapproval. To reduce social desirability bias, we embedded two types of list experiments in the survey.

List Experiment I

In the first list experiment, enumerators read a list of innocuous statements to each respondent and asked them to identify how many (but not which) they agreed with. Half the respondents were randomly assigned a version of the list that included an additional sensitive statement: "It is justifiable to use violence for a political or religious cause."[7] By embedding a sensitive item within the response list shown to only a random subset of participants, this approach protects respondent anonymity and allows us to estimate average support for this view without requiring anyone to reveal their stance directly.

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[7] The prompt was "I am going to read you a list of statements. I'd like you to tell me how many of these statements you agree with. Please don't tell me which items you agree with, just how many of them you agree with. Now, I will read the statements."

CONTROL GROUP LIST	TREATMENT GROUP LIST
Western powers should continue to intervene to keep the peace in Niger	Western powers should continue to intervene to keep the peace in Niger
All children should go to school	All children should go to school
Other people in Niger are not at all trustworthy	Other people in Niger are not at all trustworthy
In line with our customs, we should respect our elders	In line with our customs, we should respect our elders
	It is justifiable to use violence for a political or religious cause (*additional randomized item*)

List Experiment II

To more precisely gauge how people respond to questions on violence, we embedded another additional survey experiment centered on specific, locally grounded scenarios. Prior research suggests that individuals are more likely to express support for violence when questions are posed in the abstract rather than in concrete terms (Westwood et al. 2022). We sought to capture this nuance by presenting respondents with short vignettes describing realistic situations that could plausibly arise in their communities. Each respondent was presented with five hypothetical scenarios describing locally plausible conflict situations—such as land disputes, herder-farmer tensions, exclusion from village decision-making, or ethnic bias in local leadership—followed by one list of possible responses.[8] For each scenario, respondents were presented with a single list of possible reactions and asked how many (not which ones) they would consider. Participants were randomly assigned to see either a control list or a list that included a sensitive item (e.g., "threaten the other person with a weapon" or "chase them out of the village").

CONTROL LIST I	CONTROL LIST II	SENSITIVE ITEMS (RANDOMIZED)
Ask another youth to intervene	Complain to friends	Threaten the other person with a weapon
Complain to family	Get help from an Imam	Chase the other person out of the village
Go to gendarmerie	Summon the sous-prefect	
Contact an NGO	Wait for the problem to resolve itself	
Ignore the problem entirely	Leave the village	

For each of the five scenarios, respondents were randomly assigned to (i) one of two non-sensitive control lists and (ii) whether and which sensitive item was included. These factors were randomized independently,

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[8] The vignettes were developed in consultation with the program and country team to ensure cultural and contextual appropriateness. The full vignette texts for the scenarios are provided in the Appendix.

yielding **six total conditions**: each control list shown either alone or with one of the two sensitive items. A full breakdown of vignettes, experimental arms, and assignment logic is in the Appendix. Appendix Table 1 shows the items used, and Table 2 summarizes the full experimental arms.

Violent Events Data

In addition to support for violence, the second outcome of interest in this study is actual violent incidents, using data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED). ACLED codes daily incidents of violence, including remote violence, battles between armed groups, and attacks on civilians (Lichtenheld and Ogbudu, 2022). We disaggregate ACLED incident data by the identity of the primary perpetrating actor. Specifically, we categorize incidents according to whether the actor was (1) a state entity, such as the government or its military; (2) a jihadist group, including Katiba Macina, Boko Haram, AQIM, or JNIM; or (3) a local actor, such as village-based militias or ethnic self-defense groups. This classification allows us to explore whether violence trends differ based on the nature and affiliation of the armed actor involved.

Analytical and Estimation Strategy

We estimate treatment effects using ordinary least squares (OLS), including enumerator and region fixed effects and clustering standard errors at the village level. Respondents were weighted using within-sample inverse-probability weights. Our models include comparisons between villages exposed to IBMN and two other groups: those receiving only Youth Connect, and pure control sites. Demographic covariates include ethnicity, education level (none, madrassa/Koranic school, primary, secondary or higher), autochthony status, sex, age, age squared, and an index of household wealth.[9] We report specifications with and without controls.

For the list experiments, we use standard difference-in-means for the binary treatment design and average marginal component interaction effects (AMCIEs) for the factorial list experiment.[10]

Findings

Community perceptions of violence declined in IBMN villages

The results of the analysis show consistent evidence that IBMN reduced community-level support for violence. In villages that received both Youth Connect and IBMN, respondents were significantly less likely to say that people in their community justify the use of violence to defend religion or to retaliate against others. These reductions are substantial in magnitude: the IBMN treatment is associated with a 0.13 to 0.15 percentage point reduction in support for violence on a three-point scale (see Table III in the Appendix). Relative to the sample means, they correspond to a reduction of approximately 8 percent in perceived community support for violence. In villages that received IBMN training, respondents did not differ from those in Youth Connect only villages in their views on whether violence was justified to defend one's ethnic group or push the government to change its policies. The coefficients are negative (columns 1-4), suggesting lower support for violence even in these cases, but they are not statistically significant.

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[9] Autochthony status refers to whether individuals were born into (or whose family lineage originates from) the local community in which they now reside or not.
[10] For more detail on the analytic strategy, see Appendix A

Respondents in pure control villages do not report meaningfully different perceptions than those in Youth Connect-only villages, suggesting Youth Connect on its own did not reduce perceived support for violence. Together, these findings support the second hypothesis (H2): IBMN reduced support for violence. They do not support the first hypothesis (H1), which anticipated that Youth Connect alone would have an impact. This finding indicates that Youth Connect's economic and civic engagement activities on their own were not sufficient to reduce community support for violence.

These patterns hold when using composite indices that aggregate across the survey questions on community perceptions of support for [the four types of] violence (Table IV, Appendix). Again, IBMN leads to a statistically significant reduction in community-level support for violence. Respondents in IBMN villages perceived lower community support for the use of violence than those in Youth Connect-only villages. These results provide strong support for Hypothesis 2 (H2): IBMN reduces perceived community support for violence. However, as with above, we again find no support for Hypothesis 1 (H1): no significant differences emerge between pure control and Youth Connect-only villages.

Youth in IBMN Villages Were Less Willing to Endorse Political Violence

Next, we turn to respondents' own views. To understand young people's own willingness to justify violence, we use a list experiment that reduces social desirability bias. Respondents were randomly assigned to receive a list of four actions and asked how many they agreed with, without identifying which ones. For one subgroup, the list included a sensitive item: "It is justifiable to use violence for a political or religious cause." A positive coefficient on the list treatment indicates that respondents were more likely to endorse the sensitive item that was included.

Across specifications, the coefficient on the treatment indicator is positive—suggesting general willingness to justify violence—but it only becomes statistically significant when also controlling for whether the respondent was in a village which received IBMN (see Table V in the Appendix). However, respondents in villages that received both IBMN and Youth Connect were significantly less likely to endorse political violence than those in Youth Connect-only villages. The interaction term between the IBMN treatment and the list item is negative and statistically significant, consistent with hypothesis H2. Among respondents in Youth Connect-only villages, receiving the sensitive item leads to a 0.166-point increase in the number of statements selected, indicating support for violence. In contrast, the marginal effect of the list treatment in IBMN villages is indistinguishable from zero, suggesting no detectable support for the violent item among this group. The interaction term for pure control villages is small and not statistically significant, indicating similar levels of support as in Youth Connect-only areas. Taken together, the results suggest that Youth Connect alone did not reduce support for violence, but when paired with IBMN, it did. Youth in IBMN villages were less willing to justify violence, even under conditions designed to minimize social desirability bias.

IBMN Reduced Support for Violent Responses in Everyday Disputes

The scenario-based list experiments show that respondents in villages that received the IBMN intervention were significantly less willing to endorse violence, compared to those in villages without IBMN. To understand whether youth would endorse violent responses to specific situations, we used a set of scenario-based list experiments. These asked respondents how many actions they might consider taking in response

to common village conflicts, without requiring them to specify which ones. For some respondents, the list included a sensitive option: using violence. In Youth Connect-only villages, receiving the sensitive item led to a measurable increase in the number of actions selected, suggesting that around 11 percent of youth would be willing to consider violence. In contrast, in IBMN villages, the same sensitive option had no effect on respondents' choices. Respondents in these communities were no more likely to choose violence than those who weren't shown the option at all. Put simply, when presented with real-world scenarios, youth in IBMN villages were less likely to consider violence a legitimate response. Youth Connect on its own did not shift views in the same way. These findings reinforce the earlier results: IBMN reduced support for violence not just in theory, but in practice.

Youth were not equally likely to consider violence in every situation. Some scenarios were more likely to trigger a violent response than others. For example, when respondents heard a scenario in which an elder blocked all youth from attending a village meeting about a new well, or another where a villager gave bad advice to the chief that could harm their ethnic group's access to services, support for violence rose. In these cases, around 13 to 16 percent of respondents indicated they would consider a violent response when the option was included. But even in these more provocative scenarios, respondents in IBMN villages were less likely to choose violence than those in Youth Connect-only areas. While the differences are not large enough to be conclusive, the data suggest that IBMN helped temper support for violence, even in moments of tension where it might otherwise seem justified.

Taken together, the findings show that combining IBMN with the Youth Connect package helped reduce young people's support for violence. The clearest effects appear when asking respondents whether people in their community think violence is justified. But the results also hold when looking at individual attitudes and across different subgroups, including both direct beneficiaries and randomly selected youth. This suggests that IBMN's training-of-trainers approach helped diffuse its messages beyond those who directly participated. Across both direct survey responses and indirect experiments, the pattern is consistent: support for violence was lower in villages that received both IBMN and Youth Connect, compared to those that received Youth Connect alone. These findings align with our second hypothesis.

IBMN Had Stronger Effects in More Economically Disadvantaged Villages

We also examined a range of heterogeneous treatment effects.[11] Specifically, we applied machine-learning techniques to uncover patterns in how the effects of the intervention varied across different communities, such as certain geographic or socioeconomic characteristics. Using conditional average treatment effects (CATEs), we found that the IBMN intervention was more effective in reducing support for violence among respondents in more economically deprived areas, such as those with limited access to water or situated farther from water sources. These findings suggest that youth in more resource-constrained environments may have been more receptive to the IBMN approach. However, this pattern was not uniform. We also observed that the effects were weaker in villages with better access to market towns, which are typically considered more economically advantaged. This suggests a more complex relationship between economic opportunity and program impact, where different forms of deprivation (e.g., resource scarcity vs. market integration) may shape how youth engage with peacebuilding programming. Importantly, Youth Connect

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[11] The heterogeneous treatment effects were specified in the pre-analysis plan but others (on economic variability) were identified using a data-driven, non-parametric approach.

also had positive economic effects in treated areas (see Appendix), and the presence of economic activities may have bolstered program credibility and appeal. These patterns point to the importance of tailoring such interventions to local economic contexts.

We also explored whether the effect of receiving Youth Connect and IBMN varied across different identity groups or baseline levels of civic inclusion. One of the clearest differences emerged along ethnic lines. The effect of the intervention (Youth Connect plus IBMN) was consistent across most ethnic groups, except among Zarma (also known as Songhay-Zarma) respondents. In our survey sample, 52 percent of youth identified as Haoussa, 29 percent as Zarma, 10 percent as Peul (or Fulani), 9 percent as Touareg, and the remainder as other ethnicities. Among Zarma youth, IBMN training did not lead to a marginal reduction in support for violence relative to Youth Connect alone. This pattern is likely explained by geographic concentration: all Zarma respondents in our sample reside in Tillabéri, a region with greater exposure to violence due to its proximity to conflict-affected areas in Mali and Burkina Faso. We also tested for variation in treatment effects by autochthony status—whether respondents identified as native to their village or not. Here, we found no meaningful difference between autochthones and other groups. However, relatively few allochthones participated in the survey, limiting the statistical power to detect subgroup effects.

Finally, we examined HTEs based on respondents' reported experiences with community decision-making. In the pre-analysis plan, we hypothesized that IBMN training might be more effective for youth who already participated in or felt satisfied with local governance processes. To test this, we used five-point Likert questions that asked whether respondents felt they had opportunities to contribute to community decisions or felt their voices were heard. Yet, we found no evidence that IBMN's impact varied systematically based on these intermediate civic indicators.

Villages that Received IBMN May Have Experienced Fewer Violent Incidents

So far, we have shown that youth in IBMN villages expressed less support for violence. But did this change in attitude translate into reductions in actual violence? While this outcome was not part of our pre-analysis plan, we conducted an exploratory analysis using ACLED conflict event data to assess whether the intervention had any observable effects on real-world conflict events.[12]

We used ACLED to explore whether reported incidents differed between Youth Connect-only villages and villages that also received IBMN. Because IBMN was randomly assigned across Youth Connect villages, we rely on a straightforward difference-in-means approach: we compare the total number of ACLED-reported incidents occurring near Youth Connect-only villages versus those that also received IBMN over the post-intervention period. This provides an accessible way to assess whether patterns in reported incidents align with the attitudinal effects documented earlier. Results should be interpreted cautiously given the exploratory nature of the analysis and the limitations of event-reporting data in conflict settings.

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[12] While the ACLED analysis was not part of the primary pre-registered outcomes, we conducted an exploratory comparison of violent events to complement the survey analysis. We recognize that ACLED data may have inconsistencies, particularly in regions like Niger, and treat these results as suggestive rather than conclusive. Nevertheless, the alignment between reductions in support for violence and modest declines in recorded incidents supports the hypothesis that the intervention may have had real-world impacts.

Overall, reported incidents increased over time during a period of deteriorating security in Niger. Even in that context, estimates suggest modest differences in the overall count of reported incidents between villages that received Youth Connect plus IBMN and Youth Connect-only villages in the post period, though this overall result is weaker and less precisely estimated. By contrast, the largest and most consistent differences are concentrated in incidents where Jihadist groups are coded as the primary actor: villages that received both Youth Connect and IBMN show substantially fewer jihadist-coded incidents than Youth Connect-only villages. We do not observe a commensurate pattern for incidents involving government forces or local militias.

To assess sensitivity, we re-estimated the comparison using alternative post-intervention windows around the start of IBMN implementation. The direction of estimates is generally similar across a range of specifications, with the strongest and most consistent evidence continuing to appear for Jihadist-coded incidents. Given the exploratory nature of this analysis and the known constraints of conflict event data (including that many villages have few or no recorded incidents over short windows), we interpret these findings as suggestive triangulation rather than definitive evidence of program impact on violence. Why might IBMN reduce jihadist-linked violence? Jihadist organizations are highly mobile and operate across vast regions. This makes it unlikely that IBMN reduced violence by simply cutting off recruitment in treated villages. But these groups often exploit local disputes to insert themselves into community dynamics (Raleigh et al. 2021). In villages without strong internal conflict resolution mechanisms, small disputes can escalate and draw in external actors. By training youth in conflict prevention and mediation, IBMN may have reduced the number of small-scale disputes that escalate into wider violence. As a result, these villages offered fewer openings for jihadist groups to intervene or exploit existing tensions. In this way, IBMN may have helped reduce the overall footprint of violent incidents linked to these actors.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study tested whether pairing conflict management training with youth economic and civic engagement could reduce support for violence in fragile contexts. We conducted a randomized controlled trial across 118 villages in the Maradi and Tillabéri regions of Niger, including 41 villages that received Youth Connect, 41 villages that received Youth Connect and IBMN, and 36 villages that received neither, which served as the pure control group. We found that adding IBMN to a standard youth development program significantly reduced violence. Youth in villages that received both IBMN and Youth Connect were consistently less supportive of violence than those in villages that received Youth Connect alone. In villages that received both interventions, young people perceived lower community support for violence, and they themselves were less likely to support or justify the use of violence. Youth Connect on its own did not significantly shift attitudes toward violence.

The evidence suggests that Youth Connect's economic and civic engagement activities, implemented without IBMN training, did not produce measurable reductions in community support for violence. These findings highlight the limits of stand-alone economic or civic programs when it comes to shifting attitudes towards violence. However, the combination of Youth Connect with IBMN did lead to meaningful reductions, suggesting that complementary approaches may be needed to influence community norms around the use of violence. At the same time, IBMN had the greatest impact reducing support for violence in economically deprived areas; while we cannot conclusively attribute this to program complementarity, the pattern raises the possibility that economic interventions may create enabling conditions for peacebuilding efforts to gain traction. While economic programming alone may not directly change norms around violence, it can create a foundation to make youth more receptive to conflict resolution efforts or lay the groundwork for more

transformative peacebuilding efforts. Indeed, Youth Connect itself did have positive economic effects. Together, these results highlight the promise of integrated approaches: in fragile, conflict-affected regions like Niger, equipping young people with both livelihoods and the tools to manage disputes peacefully can reduce support for violence—and may help prevent conflict from escalating in the first place.

Beyond shifting attitudes, the IBMN intervention also appears to have reduced actual violence. Drawing on difference-in-means analysis of ACLED conflict data, we find that villages exposed to both Youth Connect and IBMN experienced fewer violent incidents than those that received Youth Connect alone. The largest reductions are concentrated in events initiated by Jihadist actors such as JNIM or AQIM. These groups often exploit local conflicts to gain entry into communities. By equipping youth and community leaders with skills to de-escalate disputes before they escalate or draw in external actors, IBMN likely disrupted this pathway to violence. The effects also appear to have spread: even youth who did not directly participate in IBMN, but lived in treated villages, expressed lower support for violence—suggesting broader community diffusion of the program's effects.

Taken together, this evidence indicates that IBMN is a light-touch, low-cost intervention that complements existing efforts to reduce vulnerability to violent extremism. In this study, we adapted a proven conflict management model (Reardon et al., 2021; Christensen et al., 2024) to engage youth, a group often excluded from formal mediation spaces but central to cycles of local conflict. By training youth to resolve disputes and mediate tensions within their communities, IBMN adopts a bottom-up approach to peacebuilding. In other words, the intervention's mechanism is youth participation: youth leaders are not only recipients of training, but multipliers who help diffuse conflict management practices through peer networks. These findings expand a growing evidence base on how layered interventions—combining economic support, civic engagement, and locally grounded mediation—can work in tandem to reduce support for violence and build community resilience.

The setting of this study, Niger, offers a particularly difficult test case. It is one of the world's poorest countries and faces overlapping risks: political instability, climate shocks, and insecurity spilling over from conflicts in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Nigeria. Porous borders also create an opportunity for armed groups to regroup and evade state forces. IBMN, layered atop Youth Connect, contributed to measurable reductions in both support for and incidence of violence in this context, suggesting that combining low-cost mediation training with broader youth-focused programming may offer a viable pathway to mitigate violence even in highly fragile settings. These findings offer important guidance for donors, implementers, and policymakers seeking to prevent violence and reduce support for violent extremism in fragile contexts.

Accordingly, we offer the following recommendations:

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

Adapt conflict resolution programs to engage youth as agents of peace. This study demonstrates that adapting mediation and dialogue tools to engage youth (a group often central to cycles of violence but excluded from decision-making) can be both feasible and effective. IBMN trained youth not only to de-escalate interpersonal disputes but also to mediate broader community tensions. This bottom-up approach appears to have contributed to reductions in both support for and the actual incidence of violence. Peacebuilding programs should expand access to mediation training among young people and view youth not merely as beneficiaries, but as capable peacebuilders within their communities.

Target areas of greater deprivation with conflict management tools. The effects of IBMN were strongest in areas with more limited access to water, a proxy for higher economic deprivation. This aligns with a broader evidence base suggesting that material insecurity may both heighten vulnerability to violence and increase openness to peacebuilding (Fearon and Laitin 2023; Duursma and Smidt 2023; Miguel et al. 2004). In this context, IBMN's impacts were stronger where there was more economic hardship, suggesting that layered interventions may yield greater returns in poorer, more remote communities. Implementers should use data-driven targeting strategies to prioritize areas where structural deprivation may amplify the value of conflict resolution training.

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

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

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