



In fragile situations, which interventions strengthen intergroup social cohesion?

Nearly a quarter of people in the world live in fragile contexts. In addition to being at greater risk of violence and psychological distress, they lag behind global averages on a range of socio-economic outcomes. As conflict and fragility continue to rise, many development agencies, including the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), have identified supporting fragile states as a key priority. In 2016, BMZ initiated the six-year Transitional Development Assistance (TDA) project with the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH to provide assistance for people in crises, disasters and conflicts and enhance the resilience of people and institutions.

A range of interventions seek to promote sustainable peace in fragile contexts by fostering social cohesion. To better inform their work to build sustainable peace through the TDA, GIZ commissioned 3ie to conduct a systematic review of intergroup social cohesion initiatives. The objective of the review was to identify which strategies are effective at building intergroup social cohesion, that is, improving the relationships between two or more social groups within a society, where tensions between the groups risk escalating into violence. The review, made possible through generous funding from BMZ, is based on data from 24 relevant rigorous impact evaluation studies. This brief summarises the findings and implications from the review.

Main findings

The review analysed the effects of interventions that aimed to build intergroup social cohesion on outcomes across five domains of social cohesion: trust, a sense of belonging, willingness to participate, willingness to help, and acceptance of diversity.

- Interventions aiming to strengthen intergroup social cohesion produced, on average, small positive effects.
- Alone, these interventions may be insufficient for building resilient social cohesion in fragile contexts without complementary interventions targeting underlying structural drivers of inequality and threats to human security.
- A failure to identify the specific local factors blocking intergroup social cohesion hindered the effects of some programmes, a problem which may be resolved by conducting conflict assessments beforehand.
- A disconnect between programme theories and evaluation measurements made it difficult to interpret some findings, especially given the complex chain of steps required to improve social cohesion.
- Smaller-scale interventions showed evidence of affecting direct programme participants, but not other members of their communities.



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An overview of interventions studied

All 24 studies in the review looked at interventions that aimed to improve social cohesion between two different social groups at risk of being in conflict. Many of them provided training to build relevant social, emotional and interpersonal skills for peace. Others increased the frequency or nature of intergroup contact. A majority were conducted in Africa, with smaller numbers in the Middle East and Asia. These interventions were often combined with additional components, such as economic support, as part of a package adapted to local needs. Our analysis identified five distinct types of interventions:

- **School-based peace education interventions (four studies):** These interventions aimed to build intergroup social cohesion among children at school through mechanisms of ‘seeing the other’, a form of indirect intergroup contact through peace education. Sometimes children also talked to or worked with children from the other group. The idea was to increase understanding between different groups and promote an acceptance of diversity. For example, a programme in Turkey focused on building perspective-taking skills in children in schools that had received large numbers of Syrian refugee children.
- **Collaborative contact interventions (four studies):** These interventions incorporated mechanisms of ‘working with the other’ that brought different groups together to work

collaboratively as a team or in groups on shared projects. Whether implicitly or explicitly, they provided exposure to other groups and opportunities to collaborate, thereby aiming to reduce anxiety around interacting with out-group members in line with research on positive contact. For example, one programme in Iraq worked with a football league to ensure that certain teams had a mixture of Christian and Muslim players.

- **Intergroup dialogue interventions (six studies):** These interventions were primarily based on mechanisms of ‘talking with the other’, in which participants were guided in conversations to find common ground and work through points of tension. A few projects also incorporated elements of ‘seeing the other’ through peace education components and ‘working with the other’ through collaborative projects. These interventions aimed to increase social cohesion by supporting dialogue between different groups, by building a better mutual understanding. For example, a programme in Ethiopia undertook a process of ‘sustained dialogue’, comprising weekly dialogue sessions between students on a campus on which violence had broken out.
- **Interventions combining workshop-based peace education with intergroup contact and economic support (five studies):** These interventions aimed to trigger

three mechanisms to build intergroup social cohesion: ‘seeing the other’, ‘talking with the other’ and ‘working with the other’. Compared to other groups, interventions included in this category tended to be of larger scope, both in geographic coverage and in intensity of the interventions. The peace education component was typically delivered through workshops or training sessions to adult community members, often targeting local leaders. As participants build skills designed to strengthen intergroup cohesion, the interventions then provide platforms through which intergroup contact and dialogue may be facilitated. Finally, the interventions provide a form of economic support to trigger ‘working together’, in which both groups are given the opportunity to collaboratively design and implement projects that will support both communities, such as small infrastructure projects.

- **Media for peace interventions (five studies):** These interventions aimed to trigger mechanisms of ‘seeing the other’ through radio dramas or messaging campaigns. There was a key distinction, however, between the four studies of radio dramas, which focused on triggering social and behavioural changes through ‘edutainment’, and the fifth study of a messaging campaign promoting counter-narratives to violence.

Findings by intervention type

School-based peace education interventions produced small, positive effects on the children and adolescents who participated in the programmes on trust, willingness to participate, willingness to help, and acceptance of diversity in some studies. We were unable to run meta-analyses for outcomes in this group because of measurement differences. However, individual effects on a sense of belonging were null or negative. One study also identified negative effects on measures of students' sense of self-efficacy, particularly for girls. Qualitative evidence suggested that the intervention had opened students' eyes to the harm of discrimination without making them feel empowered to address it. Finally, one study found no indirect effects on parents who did not participate in school-based peace education activities.

Collaborative contact interventions yielded a small positive effect on willingness to participate, as identified by the review's meta-analysis. Also, two

studies reported positive and significant effects on a sense of belonging. Effects on trust and willingness to help were typically mixed, although three studies produced a positive effect on at least one measure of willingness to help, primarily where the measure related directly to the intervention activities.

Intergroup dialogue interventions yielded mixed results. Two meta-analyses identified negative effects on trust and acceptance of diversity, but these were primarily driven by a study with a high risk of bias in its design and analysis. With one other exception, however, effects across interventions in this category were mixed or null. The exception was a truth and reconciliation intervention in Sierra Leone, which found positive effects on trust, willingness to participate and willingness to help.

Workshops-contact-econ interventions produced a small positive effect on trust, according to the review's meta-analysis. Studies

also reported positive effects on participants' willingness to help and sense of belonging, but the meta-analysis results were not statistically significant. Few studies measured effects on willingness to help or acceptance of diversity, but effects were mixed where reported.

Media for peace interventions produced a small positive effect on trust, according to the review's meta-analysis of studies of the radio drama interventions. The radio dramas did not yield significant effects on acceptance of diversity on average, yet the heterogeneity and null results in the meta-analyses were driven by a single study. The study that identified primarily null or negative effects was implemented in a context of ongoing conflict. In contrast, studies reporting positive effects were implemented in post-conflict contexts. The radio drama interventions in contexts of latent conflict appeared particularly effective at changing perceptions of norms, including the acceptability of intergroup marriage.

What factors may explain these effects? Additional findings from qualitative synthesis

- Programmes that accurately identify local bottlenecks to intergroup social cohesion may have larger and more positive effects. We identified multiple instances in which the bottlenecks to social cohesion targeted by the interventions appear to have been misaligned either with the context or with the population. This failure may be a result of the failure to conduct conflict assessments that identify drivers of intergroup tensions, needs of different stakeholders, and windows of opportunity – only one of the interventions in the review stated that it was based on an in-depth conflict assessment.
- Intergroup social cohesion interventions may not be sufficient for sustainable social cohesion without structural changes addressing underlying threats to human security. The effects identified in this review overall are small, which suggests that there are limits to the effects that can be expected from intergroup social cohesion interventions alone. Threats to human security, such as poor access to services, threats from climate change or natural disasters, high levels of crime and violence, or limited economic opportunities, are often seen as drivers of fragility and intergroup tensions. To support sustainable social cohesion, long-term efforts that do address systemic drivers of conflict are likely necessary.
- Smaller-scale interventions may not provide sufficient intensity of treatment to have effects beyond direct participants. Many of the studies in this review that found nil or negative effects were those which evaluated the effects of interventions on people who were not direct participants.
- Improving social cohesion is a long, complex process which may require stepping backward before stepping forward – people may first need to recognise the seriousness of a problem before they can learn to fix it. For example, in an intervention in Kyrgyzstan, authors found a negative effect on participants' sense of belonging and confidence. They interpreted this finding as being a result of having successfully taught students to recognise bias, inequality and prejudice in their communities, but not having had time to teach them how to improve the situation. Interpreting results about these complex, uneven trajectories was more difficult in some studies because evaluation measurements did not map clearly onto the steps of interventions' theories of change. In particular, few studies reported effects on intermediate outcomes that may emerge sooner, and may be required to achieve effects on social cohesion outcomes.
- More than half of included studies made no mention of ethics.

Conclusions and implications

The small, positive effects identified in this review are perhaps not surprising. The factors contributing to low levels of social cohesion are often multiple, complex and long-standing. The interventions discussed in this review typically address only one of the drivers of low levels of social cohesion: a lack of interpersonal engagement or understanding between members of different groups.

We identify the following key implications for policy and practice:

- Though the isolated effects are small, it is possible to improve social cohesion outcomes through targeted intergroup interventions – but they are only one piece of the puzzle to build sustainable peace.
- Intergroup social cohesion interventions alone may be insufficient for building resilient social cohesion in fragile contexts. More complex interventions with complementary strategies addressing key household needs, structural barriers to human security, and socio-behavioural factors may be needed. However, more theory building work is required to understand how the different strategies interact.
- Realistic timeframes are needed to allow substantive changes to social cohesion to materialise, taking into account the duration and intensity of the intervention. Where higher-level impacts may not be expected, evaluations should focus on identifying and measuring effects on intermediate outcomes.
- Future interventions should be designed based on conflict assessments, which identify local bottlenecks to intergroup social cohesion, to ensure intervention activities are aligned with the local context and respond to target groups' needs.
- Theories of change for intergroup social cohesion interventions should receive much more attention. Middle-range theories should be developed that provide a common framework onto which locally relevant indicators can be mapped. These should include both intermediate and final outcomes and comprise measures of all five dimensions of social cohesion: trust, a sense of belonging, willingness to participate, willingness to help, and acceptance of diversity.
- Appropriate procedures for addressing ethics, through formal review and ethics approval, are essential to ensure interventions and research do no harm.

Limitations of the evidence

These results should be interpreted with some caution. The evidence base is relatively limited and fragmented, with a small number of studies available for each intervention type. Few existing studies address moderating factors like implementation evidence, or include evidence on cost. For an area where there is evidence to suggest that interventions can do harm, it is worrisome that over half of the included studies do not mention ethics. Well-designed rigorous impact evaluations integrated into new programmes, which can measure locally relevant indicators across all five domains of social cohesion, could help improve our knowledge about how to more effectively intervene to build resilient intergroup cohesion in fragile contexts in the future.





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About this review

The findings in this brief are drawn from the technical report, Strengthening intergroup social cohesion in fragile situations: A systematic review, by Ada Sonnenfeld *et al.* (forthcoming).

About this brief

This brief was authored by Ada Sonnenfeld and Paul Thissen. They are solely responsible for all content, errors and omissions.



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