

# Social Cohesion Resilience in Protracted Crises Roundtable

## Notes

Dec. 7 2021, 08:30-10:00 am ET

[\(Link to other event materials\)](#)

### Panelists:

- Jessica Anderson, USAID
- Lisa Inks, Mercy Corps
- Ryan Sheely, Director of Research for Conflict and Governance, Mercy Corps
- Siaka Millogo, Director of Programs for Mercy Corps Niger/Burkina Faso.
- Ifeoluwa Olawole, Quantitative research specialist for peace, conflict and governance with Mercy Corps

### Moderated discussion

Siaka Millogo, Director of Programs for Mercy Corps Niger/Burkina Faso.

**Q1: When you look at Niger, and the Sahel more broadly, why is building social cohesion so important? How do you see it fitting into other development outcomes that your team is working toward in the region?**

**A1:** The situation in the Sahel is characterized by the traditional effects of climate change, like more frequent floods and droughts, but also conflict around natural resource management. In Niger, 80% of the population is less than 35 years old. These young people also need land and access to natural resources, which has led to conflict. Some cultural practices and values are no longer promoted in communities, which is leaving some young people with less feeling of belonging and has in turn increased insecurity, violent extremism, and displacement in the Sahel. As discussed in the presentation, trust is important to building social cohesion. Lack of trust among communities is creating more fragile communities and leading to violence. The PEACE program has helped to build horizontal (between ethnic groups) and vertical (between communities and states) social cohesion. Our vision right now is to scale up the findings from the PEACE program.

**Q2: What are some of the specific challenges of building social cohesion in this conflict-affected context in Niger and the Sahel? How has Mercy Corps tried to address these challenges?**

**A2:** There are 4 challenges to implementation. The main one is accessing the communities, especially through face-to-face communication. We often only have a limited amount of time in the communities, which can limit the amount of trust built. Second, women's participation is challenging in this context. A third challenge is communicating your role in the community, which is not to replace the state, but to support it and to work closely with it to ensure sustainability. A fourth challenge is our inability sometimes to meet the basic needs of the communities we go to. While we go to communities to talk about social cohesion, communities may tell you that they need food and water, which are maybe not planned in your project and can be tricky for us, especially in the PEACE program in the Sahel where water is a source of conflict.

In terms of mitigation measures that we have taken to be able to conduct this project and achieve the desired results, the first is the establishment of community action committees. These have been established by Mercy Corps taking into account ethnic and social diversities to be representative of the community. Although we have a limited amount of time we can spend in the communities, the community action committees provide vital information to us to understand the communities' perspectives and to plan for implementation with them. The second mitigation method is to build synergies internally within Mercy Corps. For example, if we are implementing social cohesion activities in the same area as another Mercy Corps intervention, then we can use the community action committees to move forward in implementation of both. We are also trying to create more partnerships with other NGOs and state and local services to better respond to the expressed community needs.

## Ifeoluwa Olawole, Quantitative research specialist for peace, conflict and governance with Mercy Corps

**Q3: Ryan mentioned different aspects of social cohesion like trust, collective action norms, and the nature of perceptions about and behaviors towards other groups. How do these aspects of social cohesion relate to each other in contexts other than Niger? And can we assume that each dimension influences violence in similar ways?**

**A3:** We shouldn't automatically assume that these dimensions of social cohesion overlap with one another. Social cohesion is a composite of several different attitudes and behaviors that should be taken into consideration in programming, especially in their relationship with conflict and violence. Mercy Corps' approach to social cohesion programming identifies these different dimensions that include trust, belonging, shared identity, attitudes towards out groups, collective action norms, and civic engagement. Components have varied strengths and weaknesses within communities. One example of this are the weak correlations between trust, cooperation, and collective action. This finding comes from a representative dataset (Afrobarometer), so we can generalize the findings. These different underlying components of social cohesion can have different effects on violence and peace. We saw trust and incorporation and interactions influence violent behavior differently. This is important to keep in mind as we tailor programs to local conditions. In the Niger data, for instance, identity has a strong influence on violent behavior. Identifying with an ethnic group correlated higher with violence than identifying with the national identity. Trust in elected leaders and institutions is more associated with violent activity and behavior. These relationships were not necessarily the same for the larger aggregate dataset from across Africa.

**Q4: From your research, what do you see as the big-picture role that social cohesion plays in reducing violence? And why is social cohesion important for violence prevention?**

**A4:** In general, in regions in Africa with more social cohesion, there is less likelihood of violent events occurring. A specific example from our research in Mali is the negative association between dimensions of social cohesion and incidences of violence where those with higher social cohesion were less likely to have used violence and less likely to report that conflict had occurred in their community. Other research at Mercy Corps in Nigeria showed the need to forge positive interactions between different social groups, not just to reduce negative stereotypes and discrimination, but to alter people's attitudes about violence. There is surprising nuance within findings from other countries, highlighting the need to be context-sensitive.

Lisa Inks, Mercy Corps

**Q5: What do these findings tell us about the relationship between social cohesion, peace, and resilience? How does Mercy Corps fit these pieces together in conflict-affected contexts?**

**A5:** In terms of the relationship between social cohesion and peace, some components are correlated with reduction in violence and some are not. We have to be careful to not conflate social cohesion with peace. Different factors we normally associate with services at large, those are also associated with larger social cohesion. We recognized that these social cohesion and peace approaches are heavily linked, but different. Stronger relationships between groups formally in conflict helped communities withstand conflict in Ethiopia, for example. We are trying to better hone our ability to help communities become climate resilient while also building social cohesion.

**Q7: Where is your programming around social cohesion heading?**

**A7:** We are in the process of finalizing a social cohesion toolkit to guide our teams in a 3-step process. The first step is to understand why you would want to intentionally include social cohesion in programming (resilience or peace, for example). The second step is to identify the social cohesion components that are more relevant for the goal. The third step is to decide on the approach: improving relationships/trust, resource management, inclusion of marginalized groups, or relationships between relationships and governments.

Ryan Sheely, Mercy Corps

**Q8: What do we still not know about social cohesion and fragility?**

**A8:** We don't know a lot. I will highlight 3 main evidence gaps and some of our ongoing efforts to fill them. First, there is a need to focus on and understand how the underlying dimensions of social cohesion vary across contexts. This kind of descriptive and diagnostic analysis is needed, especially in the short run, to better understand how these patterns of local variation vary across countries and across contexts that have different trajectories of fragility and conflict.

The second big evidence gap is the central "What works?" question in terms of the effectiveness of various programming approaches that attempt to strengthen social cohesion. There is a recent systematic review of impact evaluations on social cohesion published by 3IE that highlights a relatively small set of rigorous evaluations (about 31 interventions). The systematic review highlights that these interventions had relatively small and isolated effects on social cohesion and the authors attribute this in part to a lack of programs that were explicitly designed using context-specific diagnostic assessments of social cohesion and conflict. There is a need to broaden the pipeline of rigorous evaluations, while also paying attention to the differential effects of interventions across gender lines, as suggested by some of our findings in the study and some of Siaka's remarks on challenges.

Finally, the third evidence gap is around the relationships between social cohesion and violent conflict and resilience. This is a question that our resilience colleagues at Mercy Corps kept asking as we were working on the brief that we presented today and which we couldn't really answer because the PEACE program and its research agenda weren't explicitly set up for this. We are starting to explore these a bit more deeply via research in Mali for a program that focuses on natural resource management.

## Q&A Session

**Q9: What are the major challenges for development and humanitarian actors when looking at social cohesion?**

**A9: Siaka:** Adding onto what I already said about challenges, collaboration is important. The results of the PEACE program can offer a road map of where to start. The context of the Sahel right now has caused us to take into account social cohesion and to look for synergies, since we can't do everything alone to respond to community needs. Based on the findings of the PEACE program, collaboration is key to added value within the nexus. Strong collaboration should be supported through integration and learning. There are so many development actors who should be looking for synergies and ways to work together, since the situation impacts all of us and we need to come together to be stronger.

**Q10: Social cohesion can take years and programming is usually short term. Can short term program activities move the needle? Have you seen anything especially promising in short term programming?**

**A10: Ryan:** I don't have a firm answer. This is another question where there are evidence gaps. We do know that it is important to start from the bottom up and thinking about the specific behaviors, attitudes and norms that contribute to social cohesion in context is important. With this focus, there is evidence of cascading social change in programs. This question shows the need for integration and layering of programs and thinking longer-term beyond a single program.

**Q11: Can you give an example of social norm change?**

**A11: Ryan:** Changes of social norms around littering. Littering was at one point not seen as a danger, but a series of campaigns in the US helped change the attitudes and norms around littering.

**Q12: This seems to argue for more time and attention to ethnographic research at USAID.**

**A12: Ifeoluwa:** One of the benefits of diverse methodologies is better understanding and evaluating complex dynamics. The mixture of qualitative and quantitative data collection allowed us to better understand these psychosocial and community dynamics. Earlier I mentioned the CREATE ([Mercy Corps'] Collective Resilience Against Extremism) program that looked at the role of social and economic interventions when it comes to reducing vulnerability amongst high-risk individuals. Some interventions looked at community healing, trauma and counseling. Although we cannot define causality, we found that participants were less likely to be vulnerable to violent extremism.

**Siaka:** The PEACE program is a starting point for us.

**Ryan:** One of the challenges we faced within research on peace is that the local security context made long stays in the village and in-depth ethnography really challenging. We were able to get some qualitative snippets, but no in-depth social observation. There needs to be innovation in methods for rapid ethnography or participatory research that thinks of communities as partners in designing and implementing research.

**Q13: What do social justice mechanisms look like at the local level?**

**A13: Ifeoluwa:** The perception of justice and treatment from the government relates to the role of identity. As I mentioned earlier, the attachment to specific identities can influence attitudes and behavior that are related to violence. We found that those who identify with an ethnic group, rather than a nationality, are more likely to support violence. If those that are very attached to their ethnic groups perceive unfair treatment from the government or injustice, then their attachment to their ethnic identity is even more

pronounced, as is their support for violence. This underscores the importance of fair treatment of all groups, especially sub-national groups and issues. There is a lot of conversation about cohesion within and amongst groups, and this underscores the important role for leaders and authorities towards the goal of violence prevention and peace. These findings are consistent with previous research that show a link between horizontal inequalities and violent mobilization.

**Siaka:** In the PEACE program, community action committees were a way to reduce justice issues, since they include youth leadership. Transparency can be a bit difficult when it comes to chosen leaders of these groups (for instance, the head of the women's group may be a wife of the chief of the village). However, these groups help take into account the ethnic and social diversity in communities to hopefully lead to more transparency and represent diverse interests.