RESILIENCE RAPID LEARNING BRIEF

HARNESSING LOCAL SOURCES OF SOCIAL COHESION IN NIGER

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REAL
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REAL is a consortium-led effort funded by the USAID Center for Resilience. It was established to respond to growing demand among USAID Missions, host governments, implementing organizations, and other key stakeholders for rigorous, yet practical, monitoring, evaluation, strategic analysis, and capacity building support. Led by Save the Children, REAL draws on the expertise of its partners: Food for the Hungry, Mercy Corps, and TANGO International.

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ABOUT THE RESILIENCE RAPID LEARNING SERIES

LESSONS FOR BUILDING RESILIENCE IN PROTRACTED CRISES AND CONFLICT-AFFECTED SETTINGS

REAL's Resilience Rapid Learning Series is designed to provide the practitioner and donor community with insights and emerging evidence on how to build resilience in protracted crises and conflict-affected settings. The series documents promising program approaches and contextual insights through rapid research, case studies, and technical analysis. This series was inspired by a Conflict and Resilience Roundtable in June 2020, organized by the REAL Award and the USAID Center for Resilience, and framed by Mercy Corps' paper *Towards Resilience: Advancing Collective Impact in Protracted Crises*. This paper calls for humanitarian, peacebuilding, and development action to align behind a resilience agenda to protect current and future well-being in conflict settings.

Research questions for each brief in this series align with the framework presented in the *Towards Resilience* paper, calling for collective action around three practice areas to drive resilience:

1. Rapid, real-time analysis of risk factors that drive and perpetuate fragility.
2. Support to local market and social systems to strengthen sources of resilience to the shocks and stresses defining protracted crises.
3. Short-term violence prevention paired with efforts to transform the structural drivers of conflict.

The roundtable discussion validated a desire for practitioner and donor communities to work differently at the intersection of peacebuilding, humanitarian aid, and development, and to include resilience perspectives in program design and implementation. To further this agenda, participants called for documentation of promising program practices for building resilience among conflict-affected communities through rapid (light-touch) learning briefs.

The first brief in this series explores how local social and political factors shape social cohesion, and how development and humanitarian programs can increase social cohesion in support of strengthening long-term peace and resilience outcomes.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Hypothesized to reduce violence, social cohesion is a necessary component for building resilience and improving long-term well-being outcomes.[1] Understanding what helps strengthen social cohesion improves the ability of humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding programming to build resilience in areas prone to ongoing conflicts, natural disasters, and other shocks and stresses.[2] This brief uses baseline survey data from USAID's Preventing violent Extremism Actions through increased social Cohesion Efforts (PEACE) program in the Tillabéri region of Niger to examine which factors contribute to **local-level variation in social cohesion** in order to shape improved programming. The survey measures six dimensions of social cohesion: trust, tolerance, inclusion, cooperation, interactions between groups, and collective action. Additionally, the survey analyzes contextual factors like governance, the participation of women and youth in conflict management and peacebuilding, and patterns of peace and security within the community, which are associated with variations in local social cohesion.

Key findings from Niger provide examples of both strong and weak dimensions of social cohesion and demonstrate the variations in these relationships across villages:

- Higher levels of collective action and collaboration with other groups do not necessarily increase intergroup trust — but positive interactions do.
- The relative strength of different components of social cohesion varies considerably across villages.
- Some dimensions of social cohesion differ by gender, but not by age.
- There is no clear relationship between trust in leaders and social cohesion.
- Higher levels of access to public services are associated with increases in social inclusion.
- Conflict management mechanisms can help facilitate inclusion, but they may not contribute to other dimensions of social cohesion.

Below are summary recommendations for how development and humanitarian programs can increase social cohesion in support of strengthening long-term peace and resilience outcomes.

Processes	Technical Interventions
• Carefully design and leverage an inclusive, participatory process to identify, design, and implement joint projects to model and reinforce social cohesion. • Create flexibility to tailor specific activities to the realities of individual villages.	• Support positive interactions across groups to build trust and tolerance. • Promote the inclusion of women to contribute to better outcomes. • Layer intergroup contact and other activities onto governance-strengthening activities. • Pair efforts to strengthen inclusive and legitimate conflict management mechanisms with other approaches.

1 Petryniak et al. (2020)
2 Petryniak et al. (2020)

CONTENTS

CONTEXT

Existing research has demonstrated a number of ways in which social capital and social cohesion build community and household resilience to shocks and stresses. Social capital contributes to resilience by enabling households to rely on individuals within their network during times of hardship and facilitating local collective action to address shared challenges.[3] Additional evidence suggests that bridging social capital between groups is an important factor for building intergroup social cohesion, which in turn can strengthen household and community resilience to risks such as flooding and conflict.[4] This dynamic is especially important for mobile communities that share resources with other groups. While social capital and social cohesion are closely related, this brief focuses specifically on social cohesion. When intergroup social cohesion is strong, pastoralist and agropastoralist households can more effectively navigate access to resources even in the face of economic and environmental shocks, therefore strengthening resilience in communities.[5] In addition to strengthening resilience, social cohesion has been hypothesized to reduce violence.

Despite the growing body of evidence about the relationship between social cohesion and its contribution to resilience and peace, there are still major gaps in theory and evidence on the **mechanisms behind local-level variation in social cohesion**. In particular, there is relatively little existing evidence about how local social and political factors shape different aspects of social cohesion, which include trust, collective action norms, and the nature of perceptions about and behaviors toward other groups.[6] Without understanding how local social structures and institutional quality shape specific aspects of social cohesion, programming interventions may misdiagnose underlying problems and can miss opportunities to develop creative and contextually grounded interventions.

Figure 1: Niger's Tillabéri region

Filling these evidence gaps will help ensure that humanitarian and development assistance can be more effectively leveraged to build social cohesion and therefore promote peace and resilience. This brief uses analysis of baseline data from Mercy Corps' USAID-funded Preventing violent Extremism Actions through increased social Cohesion Efforts (PEACE) program, which aims to build social cohesion in the Tillabéri region of Niger and ultimately increase resilience to violent extremism.

Hindered by poor service delivery, weak governance, and corruption, the Tillabéri region of Niger is an epicenter of multiple conflict drivers: an ongoing socio-economic crisis; environmental impacts restricting the availability and quality of land and water; land disagreements between pastoralists and agriculturalists that contribute to inter-ethnic grievances and banditry across the region; and increased insecurity resulting from a spillover of conflict, including violent extremism, from neighboring Mali. As environmental stressors reduce the availability of natural resources, violent extremism

3 Aldrich (2012); Kim, Humphrey, Marshak, Gathuoy, Krishnan (2020)
4 Adger (2009); Mitra et al. (2017); Patel and Gleason (2018)
5 Kurtz and McMahon (2015)
6 These components of social cohesion come from Mercy Corps' and the World Bank's Social Capital and Social Cohesion Measurement Toolkit. See Kim, Schmidt, and Sheely (2020)

compounds the issue by further restricting pastoralists' movement and access to land and water resources. The threat of losing already limited resources negatively impacts both pastoralists' and agriculturalists' livelihoods, fosters economic and physical insecurity, and increases tension and conflict between livelihood groups often along ethnic lines. Tensions between groups and the threat of banditry and violent extremist organizations increase reliance on ethnic self-defense groups and correspondingly increase the prevalence of arms and potential for violence in the region. Violent extremist organizations capitalize on deepened societal cleavages to increase recruitment, completing a vicious cycle through which increased violence further limits access to resources, erodes resilience by decreasing livelihood capacities, and deepens food insecurity.[7]

OVERVIEW: THE PEACE PROGRAM

Guided by rigorous research, the **Preventing violent Extremism Actions through increased social Cohesion Efforts (PEACE)** program utilizes Mercy Corps' Communities Acting Together to Advance Linkages Yielding Social Engagement (CATALYSE) approach, working with communities to design, implement, and monitor projects intended to build social cohesion in the Tillabéri region of Niger.

The PEACE program builds on innovative research conducted by Mercy Corps through the USAID-funded **Vulnerability and Resilience Assessment Initiative to Counter Violent Extremism (VRAI)** program (2016-2018) in Niger and Burkina Faso. VRAI aimed to design a set of replicable data collection tools, which will enable national, regional, and local level state and civil society practitioners to identify communities most vulnerable to recruitment by violent extremist groups.

DATA AND METHODS

This brief draws on baseline survey data for Mercy Corps' PEACE program, in which 12–15 individuals were surveyed in each of the 40 villages where the program operates for a total sample of 575 respondents.[8] The sample size for some questions is lower due to differences in response rates across questions. The survey included questions that measured six underlying aspects of social cohesion: trust, tolerance, inclusion, cooperation, interactions between groups, and collective action.[9] The survey also collected data on a number of other contextual factors, including governance, participation of women and youth in conflict management and peacebuilding, and patterns of peace and security within the community.

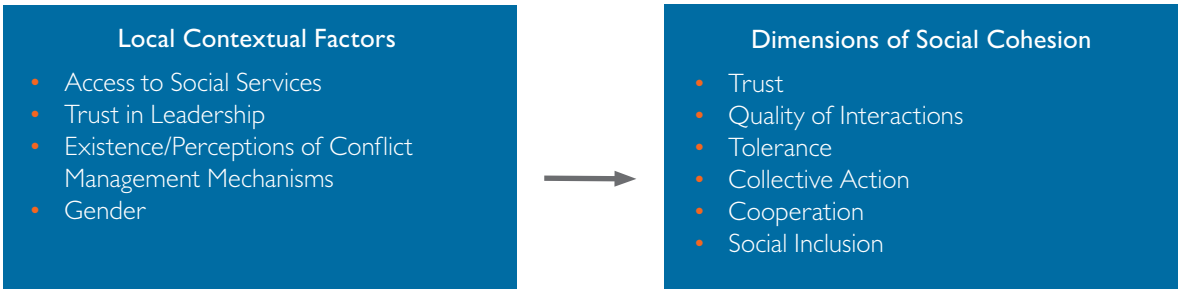
The baseline looks at local social and governance-related contextual factors and examines to what extent they influence key dimensions of social cohesion (see Table 1).

7 Mercy Corps (2015)

8 This baseline study is the first step of a randomized phase-in evaluation of the PEACE program's community mobilization intervention. Communities were randomly assigned to one of two implementation phases. Twenty-two communities were randomly assigned to implementation in Phase 1 (August 2020 - February 2021) and 13 communities were randomly assigned to implementation in Phase 2 (April 2021 - October 2021). The next wave of surveying will take place between implementation for Phase 1 and Phase 2, which will make it possible to treat the Phase 2 communities as a control group for the purposes of assessing the effects of the intervention on social cohesion and violence outcomes. Five other villages will also be part of implementation in Phase 2, but will not be included in the evaluation because restricted seasonal accessibility made it impossible to randomly assign them to an implementation phase.

9 Mercy Corps developed this six-dimension framework for social cohesion in 2016 with a particular emphasis on intergroup social cohesion. These factors seek to capture indicators along three axes of social cohesion: relationships between groups, behaviors, and attitudes. Mercy Corps is currently updating its social cohesion framework and guidance, building on the definitions and measurement strategies used in Kim, Schmidt, and Sheely (2020).

Table 1: Local Contextual Factors' Influence on Social Cohesion



CORE CONCEPT: SOCIAL COHESION

Mercy Corps defines social cohesion as "a sense of shared purpose and trust among members of a given group or locality and the willingness of those group members to engage and cooperate with each other to survive and prosper."

In the current study, Mercy Corps uses the following six survey questions to measure social cohesion:

Trust. Do you trust members of other groups with whom you do not have a good understanding? Do you feel at ease having a member of these groups (a) watch your animals, (b) work in your field, (c) trade with you, and/or (d) marry a close relative?

Interaction. What is the level of interaction between you and members of other groups? (positive, negative)

Tolerance. What is your general perception of members of other groups? Are you able to accept an idea/principle/advice from other groups that differ from your rules or principles?

Collective Action. Are you willing to work on an activity of common interest in the community with a member of other groups?

Cooperation. Do you believe there are benefits to cooperating with all the groups that exist in your community?

Social Inclusion. Are you in the habit of providing input in community decision-making?

For additional discussion on alternative approaches to measuring social cohesion, see Kim, Schmidt, and Sheely (2020).

KEY INSIGHTS

Preliminary data analysis shows there is substantial variation across villages and identifies both strong and weak dimensions of social cohesion in communities surveyed.

Further analysis of the survey results yielded the following findings and takeaways, which highlight the most compelling statistically significant relationships as well as several surprisingly non-significant findings.[10]

10 The findings are based on correlational analysis and therefore cannot be claimed as causal.

FINDING 1. HIGHER LEVELS OF COLLECTIVE ACTION AND COLLABORATION WITH OTHER GROUPS DO NOT NECESSARILY INCREASE INTERGROUP TRUST—BUT POSITIVE INTERACTIONS DO.

In general, respondents reported high levels of collective action, cooperation, and social inclusion, but low levels of trust. More than three-quarters of respondents saw benefits to intergroup cooperation and were willing to work on activities of common interest with other groups. Yet less than half expressed trust in other groups, such as feeling at ease allowing other group members to watch their animals. While there is no clear link between cooperation, shared interest, and trust, respondents who reported experiencing positive interactions with other group members were more likely to be trusting and tolerant of these groups. This is consistent with contact theory[11] and points to the importance of facilitating positive, quality interactions in improving other aspects of social cohesion.

Key Takeaway: Interventions designed to strengthen collective action may not automatically build trust. Programs should also foster increased positive interaction and monitor how perceptions are changing in response to activities promoting collective action.

FINDING 2. THE RELATIVE STRENGTH OF DIFFERENT SOCIAL COHESION COMPONENTS VARIES CONSIDERABLY ACROSS VILLAGES.

In some communities, respondents reported higher levels of trust and tolerance but lower levels of collective action and cooperation, while other villages exhibited the opposite trend. This indicates that social cohesion dynamics can differ widely within the same region, and therefore improving social cohesion needs to be village-specific.

Key Takeaway: Programs designed to strengthen social cohesion must consider how components of social cohesion differ across contexts and tailor interventions accordingly.

Sisters walk alongside their goats in Zinder, Niger. Sean Sheridan/Mercy Corps, 2016.

11 Contact theory states that intergroup attitudes will improve and prejudice will decrease if people get to know one another under defined conditions. Allport (1954); Addison-Wesley, and Pettigrew (1998)

FINDING 3. SOCIAL COHESION DIMENSIONS VARY BY GENDER, BUT NOT BY AGE.

Women generally reported higher levels of tolerance and collective action with other groups, as they were more willing to work on an activity of common interest with them. However, they were less likely than men to be in the habit of providing input to community decision-making. Age does not seem to have as much of an influence as gender. Analysis of the survey data found no relationship between the age group of respondents and indicators of social cohesion. This indicates that barriers to community engagement for women, but not youth, hinder some aspects of social cohesion and that social norms surrounding gender can generate different outcomes for social cohesion between men and women. Examining how dimensions of social cohesion differ across groups in society is therefore crucial, as is ensuring that strategies to increase social cohesion address gender gaps and capitalize on each gender's perceived strengths in promoting social cohesion.

Key Takeaway: Programs should seek to address disparities in participation between women and men when designing and implementing interventions to increase social cohesion, focusing on elevating women's inclusion in decision-making processes to maximize social cohesion outcomes.

A woman in Baleyara, Niger cleans a basket of moringa in front of her home. Ezra Millstein/Mercy Corps, 2018.

FINDING 4. THERE IS NO CLEAR RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TRUST IN LEADERS AND SOCIAL COHESION.

Greater trust in government and community leaders and the belief that the government includes community members in its decision-making had little bearing on measures of social cohesion. This finding suggests that strengthening "vertical" cohesion (between state and society) may not be sufficient to improve "horizontal" cohesion (between different groups within society), and vice versa. Improving vertical cohesion may still be important, however. Based on qualitative findings, issues of leadership and legitimacy in the Tillabéri region are closely linked to conflict dynamics, indicating that more localized analysis is required to understand the relationship between trust in leaders and intergroup cohesion.

Key Takeaway: Building trust in leaders may not automatically lead to better social cohesion outcomes; programs should focus on strengthening cohesion across identity groups while investing in localized analysis to understand the types of trust-building exercises between citizens and leaders that might contribute to improved outcomes.

FINDING 5. HIGHER LEVELS OF ACCESS TO PUBLIC SERVICES ARE ASSOCIATED WITH INCREASES IN SOCIAL INCLUSION.

Those who reported access to more services — including water, education, healthcare, and security — also tended to provide greater input in community decision-making. It is unclear, however, whether access to services spurs greater civic participation or whether those who are more engaged in their communities tend to receive more services. However, access to specific services had little impact on intergroup trust, tolerance, and cooperation. This finding could indicate that better service delivery can provide opportunities and motivation for greater community engagement, but is insufficient to improve other aspects of social cohesion.

Key Takeaway: Better service delivery on its own will not improve social cohesion, so programs should adopt additional strategies to improve intergroup cohesion, such as facilitating opportunities for positive interactions and increasing inclusion in decision-making.

FINDING 6. CONFLICT MANAGEMENT MECHANISMS CAN HELP FACILITATE INCLUSION, BUT THEY MAY NOT CONTRIBUTE TO OTHER DIMENSIONS OF SOCIAL COHESION.

This finding suggests that the existence of conflict management/prevention mechanisms in the community encourage community participation and empower individuals to provide their opinions in community decision-making. While the existence of these mechanisms is associated with higher perceived levels of social inclusion, they are also associated with decreased trust and less positive interactions with other groups. This could be explained by reverse causality: where there is less trust and people have experienced negative interactions with other groups, conflict prevention/management mechanisms are more likely to be needed. Qualitative findings suggest that another explanation could be that many conflict prevention mechanisms are managed by the village chief, who may or may not be seen as legitimate or neutral to all identity groups in a geographic area. Such judgements may be contentious or informed by traditional customs regarding the right to certain resources (e.g., land), which may not resolve underlying issues of unequal access to resources and/or services.

Key Takeaway: Programs that seek to establish or strengthen conflict management mechanisms should take pains to ensure conflict sensitivity and analyze perceptions of local leaders' legitimacy to inform participant selection and program design. More research on the relationship between social cohesion and conflict management mechanisms will help fine-tune interventions.

LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings from the PEACE baseline study point to clear recommendations for implementing development, humanitarian, and peacebuilding programs designed to increase social cohesion and/or peace specifically, as well as programs in which resilience and long-term well-being outcomes would be strengthened by increased social cohesion. These recommendations fall into two categories: process and technical interventions.

PROCESS RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Carefully design and leverage an inclusive, participatory process of identifying, designing, and implementing joint projects to model and reinforce social cohesion.** Drawing on the CATALYSE approach for inclusive and participatory community engagement, Mercy Corps developed a project implementation guide for use across PEACE sites. CATALYSE builds a community's capacity to identify and organize around collective priorities, mobilize resources, implement projects, and influence leaders. It fosters peaceful, community-led change, empowering

diverse community members to work together to address their common challenges, which is essential in conflict-affected areas like those targeted by PEACE. Supporting tailored projects requires both a thorough, participatory analysis of site-specific baseline data and ongoing and inclusive discussions within project sites.

2. **Create flexibility to tailor specific activities to the social cohesion realities of individual villages,** while maintaining a consistent and transparent process across all intervention sites. The baseline study demonstrated significant variation across project sites around aspects of social cohesion that were stronger or weaker in each community. Programs should account for these differences by encouraging community participants to design projects that strengthen specific components of social cohesion. The PEACE implementation guide includes approaches for implementing joint projects against specific theories of change that outline how types of projects—for example, centered on natural resource management or building positive interactions across identity groups—seek to address different social cohesion challenges and outcomes.

TECHNICAL INTERVENTION RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Support positive interactions across groups to build trust and tolerance.** The baseline study found that within social cohesion indicators, positive interactions across groups were linked to higher intergroup trust and tolerance. This supports PEACE's implementation model, based on the contact hypothesis that facilitating interaction under defined conditions will improve intergroup attitudes and decrease prejudice. This encourages frequent facilitated interactions across social groups in which members work toward a common goal. Another Mercy Corps impact evaluation in Nigeria demonstrated increased levels of trust between communities and decreased support for violence.[12]

2. **Promote the inclusion of women to contribute to better social cohesion outcomes.** Project facilitation should capitalize on higher levels of tolerance and support for collective action among women by ensuring they play a role in leading projects aimed at improving social cohesion. Such participation will simultaneously seek to address the lower levels of decision-making reported by women and support the foundations for longer-term social cohesion in their communities. Planning for project implementation should account for local gender dynamics and incorporate consultation with both men and women to ensure that increased women's participation does not increase risks to women or negatively impact intra-community cohesion.

3. **Layer intergroup contact and other activities on top of governance strengthening activities for increased social cohesion.** Contrary to expectation, higher perceptions of governance efficacy was not correlated to higher levels of social cohesion. Thus, strengthening good governance (vertical cohesion) is likely insufficient to build intergroup cohesion (horizontal cohesion). While strengthening governance services and mechanisms, and therefore improving perceptions of formal and informal leaders' effectiveness, is important for peace and resilience outcomes, programs must go beyond governance activities to deliberately build horizontal connections and lasting relationships as outlined above.

4. **Pair efforts to strengthen inclusive and legitimate conflict management mechanisms with other approaches to build social cohesion.** The presence of conflict management mechanisms, like local peace committees, was correlated with greater inclusion and is essential to long-term peaceful management of disputes. However, negative correlations between conflict management mechanisms and trust and positive interactions indicate the need to strengthen those mechanisms in ways that will foster continued peaceful interaction and receive buy-in across disparate groups within a community.

12 Dawop et al. (2019)

A man pumps water in Zinder, Niger. Sean Sheridan/Mercy Corps, 2016.

IMPLICATIONS

The above findings provide specific implications for building social cohesion, but these lessons go beyond peacebuilding programs. In addition to the positive cumulative effects that social cohesion can have on resilience and long-term well-being outcomes, incorporating social cohesion considerations across programs enables implementation to be more inclusive and better target social cleavages. Development programs can leverage tools like those developed by VRAI and PEACE to deliberately measure social cohesion and develop context-specific strategies to increase it. Involving all community groups in the selection, planning, and implementation of projects can build sustainability through community ownership and lay the foundation for long-term peace and resilience.

DEFINITIONS

Social Capital

Mercy Corps defines social capital as "the quantity and quality of resources, trust, and norms in individuals' relationships within groups (bonding social capital), between groups (bridging social capital), or with people or groups in positions of power (linking social capital).

Social Connections

Social connections are the sum of people's social linkages: the social networks they can draw on, the extent and strength of those networks and the resources available within them, the nature of obligation that such networks carry, and the reciprocity presumed in terms of collective risk and mutual support.[13]

Mercy Corps measures six dimensions of social connectedness to capture the complexity noted above. Social connections are not just the number of people that an individual or household can call on in times of need, but also how diverse these connections are (diversity); an individual's—or household's— confidence in their ability to mobilize resources from their connections (reliability); and if these forms of support are reciprocal (reciprocity) i.e., individuals or households not only receive support from their connections, but equally are called on to provide support.

Social Capacities

Social capacities refer to sources of resilience linked to social systems. These include dimensions of social connections noted above and psychosocial resilience capacities—self-efficacy, agency, and confidence in the future.

Protracted Crises

Protracted crises are defined as contexts where a significant portion of the population is "acutely vulnerable to death, disease and disruption of livelihoods over prolonged periods of time." These contexts share a few common features—natural disasters and/or conflict are recurrent; livelihood systems break down, which in turn contribute to malnutrition and mortality and can fuel conflict over resources; and the state has limited capacity or lacks the political will to support and protect its citizens.[14]

13 Maxwell et al. (2016)
14 FAO (2010)

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