Promoting Peace Amidst Group Conflict: An Intergroup Contact Field Experiment in Nigeria - Introduction

Christopher Grady, Rebecca Wolfe, Danjuma Dawop, and Lisa Inks

June 08, 2019

0.1 Introduction

Intergroup conflict is responsible for many of the worst displays of human nature. In Nigeria's Middlebelt, intergroup conflict between sedentary farmers and semi-nomadic pastoralists is causing dire consequences: 7,000 deaths in the past five years, 300,000 internally displaces peoples from their homes in 2018, and $13 billion of lost economic productivity annually (Akinwotu 2018; Daniel 2018; Harwood 2019; McDougal et al. 2015). In the most recent conflict escalation beginning in the 2010s, groups of anti-pastoralist vigilantes have mobilized to preempt pastoralists from encroaching on land claimed by farmers (Duru 2018; McDonnel 2017). These groups, dubbed the "livestock guard", ransack pastoralist settlements and violently drive pastoralists from their homes, often with the assistance of the local farming community. Likewise, pastoralist groups enact vigilante justice, raiding and burning down farming villages seen to encroach on land claimed by pastoralists.

Though farmer-pastoralist conflict is widespread, mass violence between these groups has not broken out in all Middlebelt communities, and some farmers and pastoralists even defend each other. When a group of livestock guard came for one pastoralist settlement, the neighboring farming village arrested them to protect the pastoralists. After the arrest, farmers and pastoralists convened to decide what should be done with the prisoners. They agreed that the group of livestock guard should not be punished, but should be disarmed and released home – a proposition proposed by *the pastoralists*. These farmers and pastoralists had struggled with conflict, and people on both sides had died in past violence over farmland and grazing land. But their recent disagreements had not escalated to the point that each side wanted the other removed by any means necessary. The groups had created structures and relationships that allowed them to settle disputes, and the same structures and relationships allowed them to reach a solution about the livestock guard.

Why were some farmer and pastoralist groups able to keep peace whereas others were consumed by the escalating conflict? Why were some communities able to overcome their disagreements whereas others were destroyed by them? These questions are not unique to Nigeria – similar intergroup dynamics plagued South Sudan, Myanmar, and Bosnia before those conflicts escalated into war. To understand why disagreements between groups devolve into violent conflict, we use the framework of intergroup conflict as a bargaining failure, which highlights trust problems as the primary obstacle to peace between groups. Groups in conflict have few opportunities to build trust and many to degrade it. We argue that providing opportunities for trust-building through cooperative intergroup contact improves the prospects for peace. Intergroup trust ameliorates bargaining problems and increases the likelihood of the groups resolving disputes through bargaining instead of violence.

Treating intergroup conflict as a bargaining failure is common in conflict studies (Fearon 1994; Powell

2006). Both groups want some resource – land, power, etc – and must decide how to distribute that resource. Groups can either bargain and split the resource, or groups can fight to claim all of the resource or to increase their later bargaining position. Fighting is costly, so both groups are better off finding a bargained solution than fighting. However, bargaining fails if neither group trusts the other side to be truthful or to honor bargained agreements (Kydd 2000; Rohner, Thoenig, and Zilibotti 2013, 2013). Without a reason to trust in the other side, groups are likely to fight despite the costs to both sides.

A number of psychological mechanisms make intergroup trust amidst conflict rare. First, conflicting groups have biased perceptions of their own behavior and the behavior of the other side (Ward et al. 1997). Groups perceive their own belligerent actions as defensive and justified, and perceive the defensive actions of the other side as belligerent and gratuitous. Second, groups over-generalize negative behaviors of outgroup members as representative of the entire outgroup and under-generalize positive behaviors as exceptional to the outgroup (Hewstone 1990). These over and under-generalizations create and reinforce negative outgroup stereotypes. Together these two psychological mechanisms sabotage intergroup bargaining by causing the groups to have inaccurate beliefs about each other and each other's willingness to make peace.

Many peacebuilding organizations utilize peacebuilding approaches focused on improving intergroup attitudes. One such approach, intergroup contact theory, hypothesizes that interactions in which group members cooperate to achieve shared goals will improve intergroup attitudes. Cooperative contact provides positive personal experience with the outgroup, and those experiences reshape outgroup attitudes (Allport 1954; Pettigrew and Tropp 2008). This type of structured face-to-face contact also provides groups the opportunity to send costly signals about their trustworthiness and preference for peace (Kydd 2000; Lupia, McCubbins, and Arthur 1998; Rohner, Thoenig, and Zilibotti 2013). Intergroup contact is especially good at reducing intergroup conflict when groups cooperate to achieve superordinate goals – goals that require the cooperation of both groups and benefit both groups – because groups experience the material benefits of cooperation (Gaertner et al. 2000; Sherif 1958).

Although research shows support for intergroup contact theory generally (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006), its efficacy to reduce animosity amid real-world conflict is an open question (Ditlmann, Samii, and Zeitzoff 2017). Negative experiences with outgroups worsen intergroup relations, and individuals with the most negative attitudes are most likely to interpret intergroup contact negatively (Gubler 2013; Paolini, Harwood, and Rubin 2010). Its impact on interracial and interethnic attitudes has also been challenged by recent reviews (Paluck, Green, and Green 2017). Despite a lack of evidence about the effects of contact-based peacebuilding programs in violent contexts, and the risks of programs going badly, peacebuilding organizations implement numerous contact-based interventions in violent contexts each year (Ditlmann, Samii, and Zeitzoff 2017). These peacebuilding programs might defuse intergroup conflict, but these programs also might do more harm than good.

To determine if a contact-based peacebuilding interventions improves intergroup trust, we conduct a field experiment with conflicting farmer and pastoralist communities in Nigeria. We randomly assigned communities with ongoing farmer-pastoralist violence to receive the peacebuilding intervention or serve as a control group. The intervention formed mixed-group committees and provided them with funds to build infrastructure that would benefit both communities; committees then collaboratively chose and constructed infrastructure projects.[1] The program also provided mediation training to each community's leaders and held forums where the groups discussed the underlying drivers of conflict. To measure the effects of the intervention, we conducted pre- and post-intervention

[1]The communities built boreholes, market stalls, primary health care facilities, etc.

surveys, a post-intervention natural public goods behavioral game,[2] and twelve months of systematic observations in markets and social events during the intervention.

We find that the program increased intergroup trust, intergroup contact, and perceptions of physical security. Compared to the control group, the treatment group expressed more trust in outgroup members and more willingness to interact with outgroup members. The treatment group was also less affected by violence and more able to engage in routine tasks, such as working, going to the market, and getting water. We see signs of the positive effects in fieldwork as well as in the data – the opening story in which farmers defended pastoralists from the livestock guard was a treatment site. The results also show that the intervention affected communities as a whole, not just community members directly involved in the intergroup contact. Individuals who directly engaged in intergroup contact changed the most positively from baseline to endline, but we also observe positive spillovers of trust to group members for whom we did not exogenously increase intergroup contact.

This study expands our knowledge about intergroup conflict in several ways. First, this study teaches us about the capacity of contact-based peacebuilding programs to improve intergroup relations. To our knowledge this is the first field experimental test of a contact-based peacebuilding program implemented during an active conflict. Each of the groups in our study were part of an active and escalating conflict, with members of each side being killed within one year of the intervention's onset. We evaluated the program's effects on both attitudinal and behavioral outcomes. The results suggest that contact-based peacebuilding programs can effectively improve relationships between conflicting groups and is especially relevant to conflict resolution in the cases of intergroup and intercommunal conflicts.

Second, we contribute to the literature about the role of social diffusion and informal institutions in shaping attitudes and behaviors. This peacebuilding intervention sought to provide a structure in which groups can solve their own conflicts, and those structures are informal rather than formal. Understanding how those informal structures form and shape attitudes, norms, and behaviors of the wider population addresses the questions of scale for these programs.

Third, this paper teaches us about settling disputes between sedentary peoples and nomadic peoples. Violent conflict between settled peoples and nomadic peoples is on the rise throughout the world [chris: need cite]. This study focuses on the Fulani, the largest semi-nomadic people on Earth. Their way of life makes them targets for violence throughout Africa. Along with this conflict in Nigeria, Fulani in Mali have been the targets of violence so severe that researchers at Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project called it "ethnic cleansing" (Economist 2019). Understanding how to prevent violent conflict between Fulani and settled peoples can help prevent violence that targets other nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples, such as the Tuaregs in West Africa, Uyghurs in Central Asia, Kochi in Afghanistan, and Khoisan of Southern Africa. Preventing such violence could help preserve a dying way of life.

In the next section we provide a theoretical framework for how and why opposing groups struggle to solve their disagreements through bargaining and negotiation, and elucidate how contact-based peacebuilding interventions help these groups resolve disagreements by improving intergroup trust. We then discuss Nigeria's farmer-pastoralist conflict, our experimental intervention, and two designs to evaluate the effect of the intervention. Last we present the results of the study and conclude by

[2] In a public goods game (PGG), research subjects are given money and told they can keep the money or donate it to a public fund. Money donated to the public fund is multiplied by some amount and then shared with all subjects. Our PGG is *natural* because it was conducted in a natural setting, rather than a lab. The funding for the PGG came from the National Science Foundation under Grant No. 1656871.

connecting these findings to psychological and economic theories of group conflict.

References

Akinwotu, Emmanuel. 2018. "Nigeria's Farmers and Herders Fight a Deadly Battle for Scarce Resources." *New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/25/world/africa/nigeria-herders-farmers.html.

Allport, Gordon. 1954. "The Nature of Prejudice." *Garden City, NJ Anchor*.

Daniel, Soni. 2018. "Anti-Open Grazing Law: Nass, Benue, Kwara, Taraba Tackle Defence Minister." *Vanguard*. https://www.vanguardngr.com/2018/06/anti-open-grazing-law-nass-benue-kwara-taraba-ta

Ditlmann, Ruth K, Cyrus Samii, and Thomas Zeitzoff. 2017. "Addressing Violent Intergroup Conflict from the Bottom up?" *Social Issues and Policy Review* 11(1): 38–77.

Duru, Peter. 2018. "Court Stops Inspector General from Proscribing Benue Livestock Guard." *Vanguard*. https://www.vanguardngr.com/2018/11/court-stops-ig-from-proscribing-benue-livestock-gua

Economist, The. 2019. "Malicious Malitias: States in the Sahel Have Unleashed Ethnic Gangs with Guns." *The Economist*. https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2019/05/04/states-in-the-sahel-have-unleashed-ethnic-gangs-with-guns.

Fearon, James D. 1994. "Ethnic War as a Commitment Problem." In *Annual Meetings of the American Political Science Association*, 2–5.

Gaertner, Samuel L et al. 2000. "Reducing Intergroup Conflict: From Superordinate Goals to Decategorization, Recategorization, and Mutual Differentiation." *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice* 4(1): 98.

Gubler, Joshua R. 2013. "When Humanizing the Enemy Fails: The Role of Dissonance and Justification in Intergroup Conflict." In *Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association*,

Harwood, Asch. 2019. "Update: The Numbers Behind Sectarian Violence in Nigeria." *Council on Foreign Relations*. https://www.cfr.org/blog/update-numbers-behind-sectarian-violence-nigeria.

Hewstone, Miles. 1990. "The 'Ultimate Attribution Error'? A Review of the Literature on Intergroup Causal Attribution." *European Journal of Social Psychology* 20(4): 311–35.

Kydd, Andrew. 2000. "Trust, Reassurance, and Cooperation." *International Organization* 54(2): 325–57.

Lupia, Arthur, Mathew D McCubbins, and Lupia Arthur. 1998. *The Democratic Dilemma: Can Citizens Learn What They Need to Know?* Cambridge University Press.

McDonnel, Tim. 2017. "Why It's Now a Crime to Let Cattle Graze Freely in 2 Nigerian States." *National Public Radio (NPR)*. https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2017/12/12/569913821/why-its-now-a-crime-to-let-cattle-graze-freely-in-2-nigerian-states.

McDougal, Topher L et al. 2015. "The Effect of Farmer-Pastoralist Violence on Income: New Survey Evidence from Nigeria's Middle Belt States." *Economics of Peace and Security Journal* 10(1): 54–65.

Paluck, Elizabeth Levy, Seth Green, and Donald P Green. 2017. "The Contact Hypothesis Revisited."

Paolini, Stefania, Jake Harwood, and Mark Rubin. 2010. "Negative Intergroup Contact Makes Group Memberships Salient: Explaining Why Intergroup Conflict Endures." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 36(12): 1723–38.

Pettigrew, Thomas F, and Linda R Tropp. 2006. "A Meta-Analytic Test of Intergroup Contact Theory." *Journal of personality and social psychology* 90(5): 751.

———. 2008. "How Does Intergroup Contact Reduce Prejudice? Meta-Analytic Tests of Three Mediators." *European Journal of Social Psychology* 38(6): 922–34.

Powell, Robert. 2006. "War as a Commitment Problem." *International organization* 60(1): 169–203.

Rohner, Dominic, Mathias Thoenig, and Fabrizio Zilibotti. 2013. "War Signals: A Theory of Trade, Trust, and Conflict." *Review of Economic Studies* 80(3): 1114–47.

Sherif, Muzafer. 1958. "Superordinate Goals in the Reduction of Intergroup Conflict." *American journal of Sociology* 63(4): 349–56.

Ward, Andrew et al. 1997. "Naive Realism in Everyday Life: Implications for Social Conflict and Misunderstanding." *Values and knowledge*: 103–35.