This paper provides evidence that intergroup contact can improve intergroup relations, even in dire

circumstances. We tested the effects of a programmatic contact intervention in an active and escalating

conflict between farmers and pastoralists in Nigeria. The persistent violence of this context and personal

involvement of the research subjects poses a stringent test for contact to improve intergroup relations. The

violence provides grievances that feed outgroup animosity and reinforce group differences, strengthen

social and psychological barriers to improving attitudes, and reinforces the perception that groups’

material incentives are opposed. Despite the difficult context, the program improved intergroup

trust, fostered more intergroup contact, and decreased feelings of insecurity in these communities.

This study also provides indicative evidence that programs that target a few people can spillover to others in the community. We find that those who were not direct participants in the program felt outgroup affect toward the outgroup, more so than those who were not exposed to the program at all. It appears that the reason for this spillover cannot be explained by increased contact in the community alone. While we see in the individual-level panel data that those in the treatment communities had more contact than those in control, when only comparing the indirect participants to controls, we see little difference in the amount of contact. As a result, we believe that some of the change in outgroup affect is due to a spillover effect. By examining both direct and indirect participants, we are able to address a main critique of many contact-based and peacebuilding interventions that even if these interventions change individuals, it is often not clear whether this change is scalable and will lead to societal change (Ditlmann, Samii & Zeitoff, 2017).

We are not able to determine why this spillover from direct to indirect participants occurred. Contact could have helped establish cooperative norms and institutions in a number of ways. The intervention established project committees—informal institutions—of both farmers and pastoralists. These committees consisted of about 12-15 people. The rest of the community may have witnessed these committees cooperating on how to address issues for the community. The rest of the community may have also benefited from the results of the project committees, which often meant improved infrastructure. Both of these mechanisms may have shifted people’s perceptions of how the two groups can and should interact. The project committees, improved conflict resolution structures and dialogue forums—all forms of informal institutions--also gave community members opportunities for interaction and to learn about one another. For example, farmer and pastoralist leaders would work together to mediate intergroup disputes, such as cows caught grazing on farmland. Our research partners on the ground noted that these structures helped treatment communities because pastoralists became more aware of the financial value of the crops destroyed by cows and farmers became more aware of the difficulty of controlling and corralling thousands of cows.18 Lastly, contact could also encourage ingroup policing: ingroup members punishing other ingroup members who violate the rights of outgroup members (Ditlmann and Samii 2016; Fearon and Laitin 1996). As leaders and the project committees established intergroup relations, they may have policed their own group if they spoke against the other group, or did anything that would hamper the benefits of cooperation. If groups “punish [their own] miscreants” (Fearon and Laitin 1996, 722), in a way that is visible to the other side, then the other side does not need to retaliate against the transgression. Visible ingroup policing shows each side that the other can be trusted, alleviating commitment problems related to whether each group will act in ways that benefits the collective.

This paper also contributes to the growing number of field experiments testing contact theory. One of the major questions emerging from this literature is whether these interventions shift attitudes, behaviors, or both. While Scacco and Warren (2018) and Mousa (2020) find changes in behavior but not attitudes, Paler et al (2019) find changes in attitudes, but not behaviors. A difference between these interventions is whether the peacebuilding elements of the program were explicit or implicit. Like Paler et al (2019), we test an explicit peacebuilding intervention. We find some changes in attitudes (e.g., outgroup affect) and some changes in behaviors (e.g., in contact—both self-reported and observational, but not in the public goods game). Unlike these other contact-based interventions which ranged from a one-shot meeting (Paler et al) to sixteen weeks (Scacco and Warren, 2018) ours lasted two years. That we were able to provide a stronger “dosage” may be one potential explanation why we were able to see changes in both.

Another difference between these other studies and ours, and perhaps why we see a spillover effect, is the public nature of the contact. In these other studies—vocational training, sports and dialogues—the contact was contained and not broadcasted to the larger community. Our treatment was much more public, with leaders holding open fora and the construction of community infrastructure as a result of joint committees. In some cases, maintaining the confidentiality of contact is a necessary security measure, as was likely in the case of Christian and Muslim soccer players in Mosul (Mousa, 2020). If the contact was revealed, those who are willing to meet with the other side may be considered traitors and targeted by less tolerant ingroup members. However, by keeping the contact private, there are fewer opportunities to shift norms of appropriate and accepted behavior between groups. This could be one reason why we see behaviors change outside the confines of the intervention—namely markets—and there is little evidence of a change in behaviors off the sports field in the Mosul.

This study also points to an opportunity for collaboration between scholars of intergroup contact and

scholars of conflict. These literatures are often concerned with the same end goal – reducing conflict

– but rarely speak to one another. Conflict scholars often see conflict as a bargaining problem, and

violence as a bargaining failure. The conflict literature points to a lack of trust as the primary cause

of conflict and usually posits a strong third party actor as one effective way of guaranteeing peace. Intergroup contact research hints that intergroup contact can create cooperative norms and institutions that serve the same function as a strong third party. Improving relations – especially improving trust – through

psychological interventions like intergroup contact can help groups overcome commitment problems

and reduce the likelihood of violence.

There remain several opportunities to learn about the effects of contact in conflict environments. First,

this study employed a design to test the hypothesis that contact would improve group relations in an

active conflict. Future studies can bring more causal evidence to the question of how contact improves group relations. For example, does contact make people more empathetic or able to take the perspective of the other group? Second, while we see evidence of spillover, we are unsure why it occurred. Future studies should examine how social norms and interpersonal discussion diffuse the positive effects of contact to other ingroup members without outgroup contact. Third, future work should more deliberately study the dosage of contact necessary to improve attitudes and behaviors.

Finally, contact interventions, explicitly or implicitly, involve the groups cooperating to achieve a joint

goal. This intervention was designed to benefit all communities by having the conflicting communities cooperate successfully. But what if contact is not successful and the goal is not achieved? Does contact itself still improve attitudes, or does contact work because groups begin to associate cross-group cooperation with good outcomes? In a similar vein, are Allport’s conditions necessary for contact to achieve its aims, or are they only needed insofar as they ensure the intergroup cooperation generates positive outcomes for both groups? Future studies should determine the necessity of Allport’s conditions and attempt to differentiate the fact of contact from the outcomes that group cooperation produces.