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 participants poses a stringent test for contact to improve intergroup relations. The violence provides grievances that feed outgroup animosity, reinforce group differences, strengthen social and psychological barriers to improving attitudes, and support the perception that each groups’ interests 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 the effects of contact programs, which typically involve only a small subset of a community, can spillover to others in the community. Respondents from intervention communities who did not directly participate in our intervention felt more outgroup affect toward the other side and felt more physically secure from violence than control respondents, who were not exposed to the program at all. These attitudinal and perceptual changes cannot be explained by increased contact alone. While contact in treatment communities increased more than contact in control communities, contact by nonparticipant and controls respondents increased at the same rate but outgroup affect and perceptions of physical security only increased for nonparticipants. As a result, we believe that some of the change in outgroup affect and perceptions of security are 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).

First, directly observing cooperation. Second, some nonparticipants learned about other side from interacting with participants. Second, generalized learning and community-wide norms, like ingroup policing. Third, benefit from result of cooperation.

We are not able to determine how this spillover from direct to indirect participants occurred, but we speculate that spillover occurred through three mechanisms. First, nonparticipant community members may have observed members of both groups cooperate to address shared issues. The intervention established project committees of about 12-15 farmers and pastoralists, and other members of each community may have learned from their example. Second, some nonparticipants may have learned about the other side from personal interactions with participants. Third, nonparticipants may have benefited from the work of the project committees, which improved infrastructure in the communities. The new infrastructure could have reduced resource-based drivers of conflict.

Lastly, and, we think, most importantly, the intervention may have caused knowledge and norms of cooperation to diffuse through each community. The project committees, improved conflict resolution structures, and dialogue forums—all forms of informal institutions— gave community members opportunities for cross-group interaction and learning. Our fieldwork suggests that learning about the other side assisted farmer and pastoralist leaders with mediating intergroup disputes, such as cows caught grazing on farmland. Our research partners on the ground noted that treatment communities were often able to resolve these disputes 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; no such learning occurred in control communities.18 The intervention could also have encouraged other informal institutions that encourage cooperation, like 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 publicly reprimanded ingroup members who spoke against the other side 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.

Any of these mechanisms could have shifted people’s perceptions of how the two groups can and should interact. One of the goal’s of the intervention was to motivate informal institutions – like the project committees – that would extend beyond participants and last beyond the intervention. These mechanisms are not mutually exclusive – knowledge about crop’s financial value and the difficulties of controlling cattle could help defuse disagreements and create cooperative norms.

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.