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 affect, 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 while 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.[[1]](#footnote-1) 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 how this spillover from direct to indirect participants occurred, but we speculate that spillover occurred through three mechanisms that could shift people’s perceptions of how the two groups can and should interact. 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 community members may have learned from their example. Second, some nonparticipants may have learned about the other side from personal interactions with participants. Third, and, we think, most importantly, the intervention may have caused knowledge about the other side and norms of cooperation to diffuse through each community. One of the goals of the intervention was to motivate norms and informal institutions that would impact the entire community and last beyond the intervention.

Our fieldwork suggests that communities learning about the other side assisted farmer and pastoralist leaders with mediating intergroup disputes, such as those caused by cows grazing on farmland. For example, our research partners on the ground noted that treatment communities were often able to resolve their 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 the formation of other informal institutions that support 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 cooperation, they may have publicly reprimanded ingroup members who spoke against the other side or did anything that would hamper the benefits of cooperation. Visible ingroup policing shows ingroup members that cooperation is the desirable action and shows outgroup members that they need not retaliate against the other side.

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 behaviors but not attitudes, Paler et al (2019) find changes in attitudes, but not behaviors. One 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” of contact may be one potential explanation why we were able to see changes in both attitudes and behaviors.

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 community leaders holding open fora and the construction of community infrastructure as a result of joint project committees. Several recent studies suggest that public information has a greater impact on attitudes and behaviors than private information (Grossman and Michelitch 2018; Arias 2019; Adida et al. forthcoming). 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). In those contexts, 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—increased contact in markets—while there is little evidence of a change in behaviors off the sports field in 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 trust 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 how 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.

1. Another possibility is that no spillover occurred, but rather nonparticipants benefited from the projects completed by the project committees. The project committees improved infrastructure useful to the farmer and pastoralist communities, which could have reduced resource-based drivers of conflict and influenced participants and nonparticipants. This is not spillover, though this is another way the intervention could have affected nonparticipants. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)