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 increased trust toward the outgroup, more so than those who were not exposed to the program at all. Since we do not see a reported change in contact, it does appear that the change in intergroup trust is due to a spillover effect. By examining both direct and indirect participants, we address a main critique of contact-based and peacebuilding interventions that even if these interventions change individuals, it is not clear that this change is scalable and will lead to societal change (Ditlmann, Samii & Zeitoff, XXXX).

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 could have witnessed these committees cooperating on how to address issues for the community and benefited from the results of the improved infrastructure, and as a result, shifted their perceptions of how the two groups should interact. Additionally, leaders in the communities worked together to improve conflict resolution structures.

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 became more effective in ECPN 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.

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, we test an explicit peacebuilding intervention. We find some changes in attitudes (e.g., trust but not cohesion) 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 eight 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.

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 necessary to guarantee 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. ECPN 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.