Building intergroup trust through personal transfers: a field experiment in post-war Liberia

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Abstract

The erosion of intergroup relations in war-torn societies has important consequences, leading to harmful behaviors ranging from outgroup avoidance to discrimination to physical attacks. Urgent policy responses are required to overturn these patterns. In this project, we offer a novel approach. We theorize that a fundamental mechanism that underlies cooperation across individuals and groups is positive reciprocity. Ethnic wars disrupt mechanisms of intergroup reciprocal trust by making individuals wary and suspicious of outgroup members, reinforcing patterns of intergroup prejudice and discrimination. Thus, we hypothesize that interventions that aim at shaping people's beliefs about the cooperative preferences of outgroup members are likely to be effective at building trust and cooperation across members of opposed ethnic groups in postwar settings. For this purpose, we design and evaluate the effectiveness of a novel kind of intervention in reducing group-based prejudice in postwar Liberia: inter-ethnic personal transfers. i.e., cash transfers between individuals of different ethnic groups.

Keywords

Cooperation, intergroup relations, inter-ethnic personal transfers, positive reciprocity, post-conflict development, social capital

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1 Introduction

Can personal transfers across group lines rebuild trust and cohesion after civil wars? Do grassroots interventions that increase generous donations among individuals of conflicting groups decrease prejudice, bias, and discrimination in post-war contexts? Civil wars are the most common wars of today (Pettersson and Wallensteen 2015), and they split nations along ethnic, social, political, and economic lines, inciting neighbors against each other. The Hutus, for example, went against the Tutsis during the Rwandan genocide, and illicit diamonds sustained the Sierra Leonean 1991-2002 civil war (Cilliers, Dube and Siddiqi 2016). These wars broke inter-ethnic social ties and led to outgroup prejudice. Outgroup prejudice has high behavioral stakes, leading to harmful behaviors ranging from outgroup avoidance to discrimination to physical attacks (Scacco and Warren 2018). Civil wars therefore wreck infrastructures and human resources, and their resulting devastation could destroy intergroup relations, causing a recurrence of violence and leaving nations in a low per capita income equilibrium (Collier et al. 2003). The prevalence of civil wars has heightened efforts to restore social cohesion and rebuild social capital as part of post-war recovery (Fearon, Humphreys and Weinstein 2009, 2015) with a focus on three major strategies: (a) Truth and Reconciliation programs; (b) community-driven development programs; and, (c) interventions based on social contact theory. We discuss the theoretical underpinnings, available evidence, benefits, and limitations of each strategy in turn.

Truth and Reconciliation programs have been a common process employed by countries to rebuild peace and foster social cohesion after civil wars (Wiebelhaus-Brahm 2010). Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRCs) hold forums at the community level where war victims detail atrocities and perpetrators confess to their crimes. Based on the principle that voicing out war-time grievances is pivotal to restoring common social ties, proponents of Truth and Reconciliation argue that the programs are effective in rebuilding social capital as well as fostering societal healing (e.g., Asmal, Asmal and Roberts 1997; Biggar 2003). However, there has been influential evidence pointing to both negative and positive consequences of post-war truth and reconciliation processes (Cilliers, Dube and Siddiqi 2016). Although TRCs lead to forgiveness of perpetrators and greater social capital, evoking painful war-time memories worsens victims' psychological health and leads to increased anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress disorder (Cilliers, Dube and Siddiqi 2016). The benefits of Truth and Reconciliation processes thus come at a substantial cost to individual well-being, which suggests a need for redesigning and restructuring existing programs for fostering social cohesion and developing alternative intervention programs.

Another popular approach to improving social cohesion and restoring social capital in post-war countries has been through community-driven development (CDD). CDD programs are viewed as an established policy instrument for supporting social cohesion, promoting collective actions, and reducing poverty in post-conflict nations (Fearon, Humphreys and Weinstein 2009). CDD programs have not only become the standard approach in post-war contexts, they have also become a key component of donor funding. To tackle the devastation brought by violent civil conflicts, international donors send huge sums in development aid into post-war nations. The World Bank, for instance, has injected about $85 billion in aids in only one decade (Mansuri and Rao 2012). A significant amount of these aids is invested through "community-driven reconstructions," which are geared towards establishing new local-level institutions that support social reconciliation. CDD programs support social cohesion through enforcing "community participation in decision making," allowing members of an otherwise divided community to come together to address their shared challenges (King 2013). The empirical literature suggests that the effectiveness of CDD programs is context-dependent (Beath, Christia and Enikolopov 2013; Fearon, Humphreys and Weinstein 2015): they improve intergroup relations in some settings (Fearon, Humphreys and Weinstein 2009) and not others (Casey 2018; Humphreys, de la Sierra and Van der Windt 2019; King and Samii 2014).

CDD programs draw on a theoretical framework known as the contact hypothesis, which has also inspired a wide and broad range of prejudice-reduction interventions around the world. The contact hypothesis posits that interpersonal contact across conflicting groups can reduce prejudice and foster intergroup friendships if it has a common goal, is supported by communal authorities, and is structured within a framework that is cooperative and egalitarian (Allport 1954). An enduring line of research has stemmed from the contact hypothesis to tackle discrimination in deep hostilities. Starting with its utilization in the 1950's desegregation of schools in the United States (Paluck, Green and Green 2019), the contact hypothesis has been viewed as a tool to reduce bias against minority and marginalized groups (Scacco and Warren 2018) and to curb intergroup hostility and prejudice in post-war contexts (Amir 1969; Mousa 2020). Despite enduring research on social contact, however, basic questions remain about the small magnitude of the effects (Paluck, Green and Green 2019), the dearth of evidence using ethnic and racial groups (Paluck, Green and Green 2019), their difficult scalability (Hsieh, Wickes and Faulkner 2021), and their uncertain long-term effectiveness (Scacco and Warren 2018). At the same time, most post-war social cohesion efforts (i.e., social reconciliation and CDD programs) have used international funding and have been implemented through international organizations in developing countries. However, it remains largely unknown whether

brief international support to rebuild local-level institutions impact long-run patterns of intergroup cooperation.

In this project, we offer a novel approach and perspective to the existing literature on intergroup cooperation with a focus on two main goals: (a) we highlight the potential of channeling aid via domestic organizations or the value of harnessing local philanthropy and engaging the concerned ethnic groups in post-conflict reconstruction efforts; and most importantly, (b) we test field experimental evidence for a new mechanism of restoring post-war intergroup cohesion, trust and cooperation through local transfers or donations. A long body of literature across several disciplines documents that humans respond psychologically to warfare by strengthening ingroup bonding and distancing themselves from members of antagonistic groups (Choi and Bowles 2007). In post-war settings, individuals, and especially victims of violence, are systematically more biased against and less pro-social towards ethnic outgroups (Mironova and Whitt 2018) as they remain wary and suspicious of members of wartime enemy groups, who are perceived as untrustworthy and uncooperative. We thus believe that a policy intervention that successfully shifts perceptions of ethnic outgroups' levels of cooperation and solidarity would update victims' beliefs and expectations about outgroups, leading to a reduction of interethnic prejudice, bias, and discrimination, and an overall improvement in social fabric even in war-torn settings.

2 Literature Review

An enduring line of research has drawn on the contact hypothesis to tackle discrimination and bias among hostile groups. Experimental studies abound examining the impact of intergroup social contact on the reduction of discrimination and prejudice. A field experiment evaluated the effect of sustained contact through an educational project—the Urban Youth Vocational Training (UYVT) program—on communal relations in conflict-prone Kaduna, north-western Nigeria, where severe communal violence was prevalent. The intervention assembled a sample of Muslim and Christian youth from disadvantaged communities for 16 weeks of computer training. To measure impact, the study ensured a randomized recruitment process and randomized assignments to a single or mixed religious classroom and a non-coreligious or coreligious learning classmate. The study found a reduction in discriminatory behaviors as a result of intergroup contact. By the end of the training period, students in mixed religious classrooms discriminated significantly less against outgroup members than students in homogeneous classrooms (Scacco and Warren 2018).

Moreover, a year-long field experiment on the role of mass media in reducing intergroup conflict, prejudiced behavior and belief yielded a puzzling result. Researchers tested the effect of a radio soap opera in two Rwandan communities, broadcasting messages on trauma healing and the reduction of intergroup prejudice and violence against a controlled group that listened to radio soap opera focused only on health. They found that the treatment group responded positively to the broadcast messages, evidenced by changed perceptions of social norms and behaviors regarding intermarriage, trust and empathy, open dissent, cooperation, and trauma healing (Paluck 2009). Although the radio program did not change the personal beliefs of listeners, it influenced emotion and group discussions among them. Overall, the study's finding has implications for "an integrated model" of reducing conflict and behavioral prejudice that employs communication of social norms instead of trying to change personal beliefs (Paluck 2009, 1).

In another experimental study of Muslims and Christians in post-ISIS Iraq, Salma Mousa (2020) randomly assigned ISIS-displaced Christian refugees to a team of all Christians and a team mixed with both Christians and Muslims for a two-month soccer tournament. The study found that this practice improved attitudes towards Muslim peers. Playing with Muslims on the same team had a positive impact on Christian players' behaviors and relations towards Muslims, although this effect was limited to the context of the soccer league and did not substantially affect behaviors in other non-soccer social contexts. Mousa's leagues met the criteria for actuating a successful intergroup contact as outlined by Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis. Communal local leaders endorsed the tournaments, which were structured such that players on the same team had to cooperate to achieve shared objectives and teammates "were subject to the equalizing effect of team sports" (Mousa 2020). However, the lack of generalization of its effect on non-intervention contexts implies that the building of strong and large-scale post-war social cohesion faces unique challenges.

As discussed in the introduction, community-driven development has been regarded as a major mechanism to foster social cohesion and reduce intergroup tensions in post-conflict settings. A study of the International Rescue Committee (IRC)'s Community Reconstruction Program randomly assigned villages to a program aimed at building "democratic, community-level institutions to make and implement decisions about local public goods" in northern Liberia. The authors "found that treatment villages showed a higher level of social cooperation than control villages" and that people in treatment villages demonstrated an increased level of anonymous contributions to the collective goods "after only a brief exposure to participatory processes" (Fearon, Humphreys and Weinstein 2009, 1).

Similar positive results were seen in the Impact Evaluation Report of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) Social Fund for Peace and Development Project—a major CDD program that was conducted in Mindanao, Southern Philippines, from 2003 to 2012. With funding from the World Bank, the Japan International Cooperation Agency and the Canadian International Development Agency, the project primarily constructed and rehabilitated small-scale facilities in selected disadvantaged villages in ways that involved members of the villages in the decision making about which facilities to construct. The project provided basic social services and improved income generation mechanisms in 358 targeted villages. Following the end of the project, the household and village-level impact assessment surveys conducted in the treatment (project) villages and controlled (non-project) villages found that the project was "effective in building social capital within and outside the community through collaborative work, releasing tensions among people, and creating a sense of security and peace" (Taniguchi 2012, 1). Furthermore, "even after the project ended, people were still interacting with each other, using the facilities, undertaking operations and maintenance, and sharing benefits" (Idris 2016, 3) — which is a strong, long-term impact of social cohesion that is missing in Mousa (2020) and many other experimental studies.

On the other hand, a London School of Economics and University of Oxford's research project that employed a randomized, rigorous experimental design to evaluate the impact of a well-executed community-driven development program on "local public goods and institutions in post-war Sierra Leone" found mixed results. While the CDD program yielded a positive impact on "development hardware" (i.e., stocks, quality of local public goods, village-level market activities and household economic welfare), the study found no evidence of any impacts or fundamental changes in the "software" parts of development — namely, collective action capacity, decision-making processes, and even social behaviors beyond the project's immediate scope (Casey, Glennerster and Miguel 2011). In northern Uganda, one quantitative study found the Vulnerable Group Support scheme, a component of the World Bank-funded Northern Uganda Social Action Fund (NUSAF), to have generated a negative effect on social cohesion (Golooba-Mutebi and Hickey 2010). Interviewees in almost 60% of Golooba-Mutebi and Hickey's 72 interviews in Nebbi municipality responded that the project had failed in their district. Many respondents lamented the outbreak of violent conflicts that regularly resulted from "the distribution of assets within beneficiary groups" (Mallett and Slater 2013, 7)

Meanwhile, Blattman, Fiala and Martinez (2011) did a mid-term evaluation study of the Youth Opportunities Program— another element of NUSAF— two years after its implementation.

The authors found improvements of 5-10% in community support and social cohesion and a dramatic 50% decrease in disputes and interpersonal aggression among males. The results were not generally positive as the authors also found a 50% increase in such disputes among women, although this faded after the fourth year of implementation (Blattman, Fiala and Martinez 2013). On a parallel note, a 2012 impact evaluation of the Tuungane project, an extensive UK-funded community-driven reconstruction program (CDR) in Eastern DRC, found no evidence that the interventions led to any changes in behavior or cohesion (Humphreys, Sanchez de la Sierra and van der Windt 2012).

In Liberia, analysis of the outcomes of the Kokoyah Millennium Villages Project (KMVP), a community-led and community-based rural development initiative in Bong County, north-central Liberia, "found that the project increased social cohesion without any adverse effects" (King 2013). The KMVP included various interventions focusing on sectors from education, health and agriculture to water, community development and local governance. The analysis of the project's results showed it improved social cohesion even before people's perceptions of wellbeing from the project had increased. While the research also indicated that social cohesion might have been already high at the baseline in Bong County, much remains to be done to reduce prejudice, lessen intergroup tensions, and improve cohesion in other parts of war-ravaged Liberia.

3 Research Context: Liberia

The Liberian civil war began as a brutal ethnic conflict (Young 2008). A large-scale population survey on attitudes about dispute resolution, security and post-conflict reconstruction in 2011 found that 40% of Liberians identified ethnic division as the root cause of the civil war (Vinck, Pham and Kreutzer 2011). This makes Liberia a unique case study for a field experiment aiming to provide proof of concept for improving intergroup cohesion in a post-conflict context. Between 1989 and 2003, Liberia experienced a brutal civil war that claimed over 300,000 lives and displaced thousands of Liberians, including children and women (Ballah and Scholar 2003). The war heightened ethnic tensions, political instability, and socioeconomic decline. Liberian scholars offer a range of explanations for the war, from the predatory abuse of power and corrupt political systems to the economic disparities and discrimination that resulted from the elite capture of a small group of Americo Liberians (Dolo 1996; Ballah and Scholar 2003). Despite various accounts of the civil war, however, ethnicity has remained a prominent explanation (Vinck, Pham and Kreutzer 2011). The Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission identified tribalism or ethnic division among the three major causes of the civil war (Liberian TRC Final Report 2009). Ethnicity was also

manipulated during the Liberian civil war for political and economic objectives (Reno 1998; Oustram 1999).

We evaluate the extent to which the implementation of the personal transfers program improves intergroup prejudice, trust, and cooperation in Nimba County. Located in northeastern Liberia, Nimba County faces long-standing problems of interethnic tensions and conflicts, property and land disputes, and inter-generational disharmony resulting from the civil war (International Peacebuilding Alliance - Interpeace 2008). In this county, we can safely assume that, to some extent, individuals have been exposed to ethnic violence.

Our main war-time relevant ingroup and outgroup are the Mandingo and the Gio. Although officially recognized as one of the 16 ethnic groups of Liberia, the Mandingo ethnic group has been largely alienated in Liberian society (Konneh 2013). Their religious and cultural practices as Muslims generally differ from those of the remaining predominantly Christian Liberians, and it is quite normal in everyday life for the Mandingoes to be classified as "non-Liberians" by members of other ethnic groups, including the Gios.

Beyond this historical pattern and long-standing cleavage along ethnic-religious lines, further enmity exists between the Mandingo and the Gio ethnic groups resulting from their supports for different war-time factions. The National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), the initiating rebel group of the Liberian civil war, led by warlord Charles Taylor, was composed of ethnic Gio and Mano. The Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), a major rebel group and the warring faction that fought against Charles Taylor, was made up of the Mandingo and Krahn ethnic groups. LURD later split, with the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) emerging as a break-away faction consisting of the Krahn, while the Mandingoes continued fighting in LURD. Thus, the two major factions of the Liberian civil war — NPFL and LURD— were made up of Gios and Mandingoes on opposing ends. In mid-2008, the Joint Program Unit for UN-Interpeace Initiatives – Liberia Project reported increased tensions, confrontation, and riots between the Gio and Mandingo ethnic groups in Ganta, Nimba County. The confrontations "resulted from the refusal of Gio individuals to turn over the property of Mandingoes returning from exile which had been occupied during the war years" (The International Peacebuilding Alliance - Interpeace 2008). Simply put, eighteen years after the Liberian civil war, with truth and reconciliation and various post-conflict reconstructions, studies continue to show evidence of the salience of ethnic differences in Nimba. In particular, the tensions between the Gio and Mandingo ethnic groups continue to persist.

Our intervention is geared towards moderating these interethnic tensions through a personal transfers program. We aim to solve the ethnic hatred generated during the war by creating greater positive attitudes towards non-coethnics and, more broadly, to provide experimental evidence and proof of concept for enhancing post-war cohesion through domestic transfers across conflicting ethnic groups.

4 Experimental Design

Our study designs and evaluates the effectiveness of *inter-ethnic personal transfer programs* in reducing prejudice in post-conflict settings. We define inter-ethnic personal transfer programs as unconditional cash transfers between residents of different ethnic groups conditional in return for fulfilling some particular behavior such as being up-to-date in a vaccination schedule, visiting health care facilities, or children's school attendance. Together with Educate Children,[3] we will conduct and evaluate a randomized control trial of a year-long intergroup donation in post-conflict Liberia.

Funds for cash transfers will be raised from fellow Liberian citizens, who will be recruited through the regular organizational outreach channels to participate in a donation program. Recipients will be randomly assigned to receive a cash transfer from either a fellow coethnic or a non-coethnic belonging to a wartime antagonistic outgroup. Using pre-treatment and several post-treatment surveys, we will assess whether receiving a personal transfer from a member of the outgroup reduces prejudice, bias, and discrimination against wartime relevant outgroups relative to receiving a transfer from a fellow coethnic or no transfer at all. Our unit of analysis—and, hence, the targets of our treatments as well as the survey respondents—will be the parents of the children being sponsored.

4.1 Sample

In a recruitment survey, the NGO contacted individuals who might be interested in participating in the sponsorship program by sending enumerators to Nimba county. Subjects who fulfill certain need-based eligibility criteria were selected to participate in the program. The initial target was 70 households with children to be randomly assigned to a treatment group (outgroup sponsorship), or a control group (ingroup sponsorship) in Nimba county. We plan to scale up the project if our

[3] Educate Children is a grassroots, non-profit organization I co-founded that is geared towards enrolling and improving the quality of primary education for children in Liberia's slum and remote communities. In the context of this research, we use Educate Children for Sampling.

research budget allows this until 500 households over the course of 2-3 years. The 70 parents who are selected for the program are those who show an interest in participating in the program and who meet the NGO's eligibility criteria.

4.2 Intervention

Subjects who are selected to participate in the sponsorship program will receive a cash transfer equivalent to an annual school tuition fee per child. Both the treatment and the control groups will receive the yearly tuition of their children. Under complete randomization, subjects are randomly assigned to receive their transfers from either outgroup or ingroup sponsors. Among the Mandingoes who are assigned to receive a transfer from non-coethnics, we randomly assign whether they will receive it from a Gio or a Mano donor since both the Gios and Manos are war-time relevant opposing ethnic groups.

The payment is realized through four installments throughout the academic year. The payment structure will aim to build a sense of continuous support between sponsors and beneficiaries. To ensure this, the tuition payments will be made to the children's parents who will then pay the schools. Along with each of the four installment payments, the parents will receive an informational treatment in the form of a leaflet with the name, ethnicity, sum of money donated, and other relevant details of the sponsor. There will, however, be no contact between the sponsors and beneficiaries or parents of the children. This is to disentangle the effect of our transfer program from other factors — possibly resulting from interactions—that might influence out outcome variables.

Figure 1 shows a sample leaflet of our condition **Gio tribe, female**.

Figure 1: Leaflet created for one of the female sponsors of the program from the Gio tribe

Source: authors

4.3 Hypotheses

We hypothesize that generous donations among individuals of conflicting ethnic groups will reduce prejudice, foster trust, and enhance cooperation.

4.4 Outcome measures

The first outcome of interest is a set of prejudice and group evaluations items that are asked about their coethnic and their noncoethnics. The difference of evaluations between these groups will be used to create a *Prejudice Index*. Table 1 shows the items that will be used in the survey.

Table 1: Prejudice and Group Evaluations Items

Negative Attributes	Positive Attributes	Group evaluations
Arrogant	Dependable	Lazy - Hardworking (in-group & out-group)
Fanatical	Responsible	Ignorant - Wise (in-group & out-group)
Dishonest in business dealings	Good citizens	Ungenerous - Generous (in-group & out-group)
Ungrateful	Peaceful	
Unreasonable	Friendly	
Lazy	Intelligent	

Source: authors

To evaluate the impact on behavioral discrimination, we added to the survey a dictator game. Payments for the dictator game are transferred to the participants through mobile money at the end of the survey. The dictator game is played 10 or 15 times depending on the subjects' ethnicity. Mano and Gio subjects play the game 5 times with coethnics and 5 times with non-coethnics (Mandingoes). Mandingoes play the game 5 times with coethnics, 5 times with Gio individuals, and 5 times with Mano individuals. The order of the tasks is random.

We implement recent advice on increasing precision in experiments without introducing bias (Clifford et al. 2021) by measuring all outcomes in a baseline survey and in several posttreatment surveys. Given the costly nature of the experimental intervention, this is essential to empirically assess the effectiveness of the intervention on our outcomes of interest with sufficient precision.

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