Sustaining Social Cohesion:

"Project Institutions" as Conditions for Long-term Peacebuilding[1]

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Abstract:

This paper examines how "project institutions"—rules and organizations created by implementers and participants in the context of people-to-people (P2P) peacebuilding interventions—can sustain positive intergroup attitudes and cooperation beyond project closure. While existing literature on contact theory focuses on studying intervention outcomes in the short-term, pathways towards long-term impact remain understudied and undertheorized. Leveraging institutional theory and a qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) of ten USAID-funded P2P activities in Colombia, Nigeria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Zimbabwe, this paper identifies project institutions as a key condition towards enduring social cohesion and specifies the mechanisms by which said organizations and norms continue to operate in intervention communities. Findings suggest that institutions created during interventions are sustained through positive feedback mechanisms, including coordination with local entities, high setup costs that foster their continued use, and low-cost upkeep enabled by communication technologies. By bridging contact theory with mixed-methods research on micro-level institutions, this paper develops pathways for further study which may enable the engineering of resilient norms, organizations, and community cohesion in the Global South.

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1. Introduction

Across the social sciences, understanding and addressing increasing ethnic, religious, and partisan cleavages across populations has become an utmost priority. This stems from the findings that intergroup divisions can threaten the maintenance of key democratic and developmental outcomes by incentivizing actors to engage in autocratizing and violent behavior.

For democracy scholars, "pernicious polarization" or the division of society into mutually distrustful political identities of "Us versus Them" has been identified as a key driver of democratic backsliding at both the elite and population levels. In a highly polarized context, political parties are often tempted to engage in a self-defeating tit-for-tat strategy out of the indignation of their leaders, or alternatively thanks to pressure by their angered bases. The incentivized behaviors can range from the denigration and demonization of parties and their supporters, to attempts at incumbent removal, risking increasing repression and even regime change (Somer et al., 2021). Conflict and peace researchers have similarly noted that conflicts can be internalized by participants at a level of deep social identity, leading to the persistence of interpersonal violence at the local and communal levels even after high-level hostilities have ended via negotiated agreements (Peterson et al., 2025). Persistent intergroup violence can in turn lead to death, forced displacement, and dwindling food supplies in the societies where it remains unresolved (Grady et al., 2023).

Improving and sustaining positive intergroup relations over the long-term, is therefore essential to maintaining a host of developmental gains, from democratic institutions (Putnam, 2000) to nutritional and psychological wellbeing (Grady et al., 2023). And yet our understanding of how to design and implement concrete interventions to sustain these relations, from positive attitudes to intergroup cooperation, is limited by a lack of follow-up, long-term studies (Paluck et al. 2021). A concrete example of this dynamic is the case of people-to-people (P2P) peacebuilding activities (USAID, 2024), a tool which scholars, practitioners and development agencies consider to be one of the most effective interventions for improving individual attitudes and behaviors towards an outgroup (Grady et al., 2023). P2P interventions are based on the premises of contact theory, which posits that under the right conditions, activities involving participants with opposing identities can develop positive attitudes towards each other (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew 1998). While these activities are widely implemented by funders internationally via short-term projects, little empirical evidence exists on the potential long-term impacts that individual P2P projects "leave behind" after closure. Indeed, a meta-evaluation of contact theory interventions found that out of over 500 studies, only eight employed a rigorous design, and some waited only one day after treatment to measure outcomes (Paluck et al. 2019; Paluck et al. 2021).

Similarly, from a theoretical standpoint, there is little understanding of which mechanisms may "extend" the impact of P2P interventions over time and across the population at large, even though the hope is that programs together and overtime may add up to "peace-writ-large", or widespread and lasting positive peace (USAID, 2024). A few recent exceptions include mechanisms such as the establishment of friendships (Guzman et al., 2025), or instances of social learning that in turn can foster wider social norms (Peterson et al., 2025). Still, calls for theoretical innovation and synergies with more structural or systems-based interventions and approaches have been issued

by scholars in the sector, as the few landmark studies on contact interventions have found limited effects (Paluck et al. 2021).

Seeing the importance of sustaining intergroup relations, as well as the understudying and theorizing of long-term intergroup contact, this paper leverages theories on institutions (North 1990; Pierson 2004; Pierson 2011), together with a recent mixed-methods study of P2P interventions funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) (Guzman et al., 2025), to conceptually develop and explore a potential driver of long-term social cohesion that can arise in the context of contact interventions, namely project institutions. Adapting North's definition, project institutions are understood here as the project-staff or participant-devised rules and organizations that begin to structure social interaction in the context of development interventions (North 1990). This paper posits that people-to-people interventions may be able to sustain attitudinal and behavioral changes over time, provided they leave behind institutions, which are subject to patterns of persistence over time known as positive feedback mechanisms (Pierson 2004). This paper specifies and showcases these mechanisms in action, including the development of networks to other organizations (coordination), the overcoming of large set-up costs that encourage the continuous use of existing social infrastructure (fixed costs), as well as the use of communication technologies to ease organizational set-up and upkeep (technology).

These insights are drawn from the results of a qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) of 10 USAID P2P activities funded by the Conflict and Violence Prevention Center's (CVP) reconciliation fund across Colombia, Nigeria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Zimbabwe (Guzman et al., 2025), which integrated program data, primary qualitative data, as well as quantitative primary data analyzed through propensity score matching (PSM). Five cases in this study, for which researchers followed-up with participants after 2-4 years of project closure, showcase that rules and organizations devised by project officers, managers, and participants, can sustain intergroup cooperation and positive attitudes into the future, with examples including local mediation systems, youth clubs, and instant-messaging groups.

This paper contributes to the literature in multiple ways. First, it provides additional comparative evidence of the long-term effects that P2P interventions can have, in a context where contact studies are mostly short-term, and often U.S-based (Paluck et al. 2019; Paluck et al. 2021). Second, it provides social cohesion researchers with novel theoretical mechanisms to test in the context of long-term intergroup contact studies by bridging two strands of social science literature that have so far remained relatively separate from each other. While the role of institutions in shaping behavior and outcomes conducive to social cohesion has been explored in the literature, such work rarely focuses on the question of whether and how beneficial social structures, nor cohesion outcomes persist (Oder 2005; Woodrooffe 2011; Moiseyenko 2005; Bleck 2024; Hartman et al., 2021; Nadeem, Anwar, and Pervaiz 2022). Finally, it contributes to the literature on institutions by exploring a level of analysis that is often neglected in said theories. Institutional analysis rarely sheds light on the effects of norms and organizations at the project level, with the study of non-state, social institutions taking a back seat to the analysis of cross-country variations of state and market structures (Stewart 2013).

2. Background

Producing Social Cohesion: Contact Theory, P2P Interventions, and Short-Term Assessments

Contact theory or the "contact hypothesis", first developed by psychologist Gordon Allport in the 1950s, has historically served as the underlying theory of change behind most people-to-people (P2P) peacebuilding activities. Allport posits that, given a set of ideal conditions, intergroup contact can successfully reduce prejudice. It follows that the ideal encounter should 1) occur between two groups of equal status, 2) involve intergroup cooperation, 3) engage groups towards pursuing a common goal, and 4) be sanctioned by a higher social or institutional authority (Allport 1954). Later, researchers added the opportunity for friendship creation as a fifth criterion (Pettigrew 1998).

On this basis, USAID's Reconciliation fund Program (RfP), which funded over 400 P2P reconciliation programs in more than 50 countries up until the agency's closure in 2025, envisioned that ideal face-to-face interactions between individuals of diverse backgrounds could drive attitudinal transformation, and ultimately, foster genuine collaboration amongst involved groups (USAID CMM, 2011). To measure these desired outcomes, USAID's P2P program evaluations, as well as those of other donors, focus on identifying and measuring changes in attitudes towards the relevant outgroups in an intervention, as well as either observing or collecting reports on changes in behavior towards the outgroup. While reported attitudes and behaviors are often measured at project endline in such interventions, long-term effects of such P2P activities and its outcomes remain understudied in the current literature, resulting in a relative lack of knowledge about the potential sustainability of these activities. Only a handful of studies track cohorts over extended periods of time (Ross and Lazarus 2015), with most evaluations focused on short-term outcomes. For example, a 2006 meta-evaluation of contact theory interventions revealed that out of more than 500 studies, only eight employed a rigorous design and waited at least one day after treatment to measure outcomes. Most of these rigorous studies were furthermore conducted among participants in the Global North, limiting their applicability elsewhere (Paluck et al. 2019).

More recently, researchers have highlighted deficits not only of long-term studies, but also reductions in the overall studies of field-based, multi-year contact interventions themselves, which may have had the best chances of producing sustainable effects. A recent literature review showcased that 76% of prejudice reduction studies examine light-touch interventions only, the long-term impact of which remains unclear. These interventions are brief and simple to implement, relying on movies or other devices for vicarious interaction as opposed to repeated face-to-face interactions outside controlled settings (Paluck et al. 2021).

Taken together, this pattern of short-term, light-touch, and Global-North focused studies in the literature motivates the focus of this study on the ***sustained outcomes*** of P2P reconciliation programs across 10 projects in the Global South. These outcomes, measured in terms of positive attitudes and collaborative behaviors across groups reported at least 2 years after a project's

closure, served as the key dependent variables of interest when designing and implementing this study (Guzman et al., 2025). Through this focus, this study hopes to fill the need for more contextually diverse, and longitudinal research capable of determining whether P2P interventions can achieve both sustainable and cross-regional impacts.

Sustaining Social Cohesion: Undertheorized Mechanisms for Long-term Effects

The theoretical reasons as to why the effects of P2P interventions may last beyond project closure are currently undertheorized. Only a handful of contact studies, albeit not necessarily concerned with the sustainability question itself, have supplied potential mechanisms by which the effects of such contact interventions could theoretically be sustained across time.

For example, recent literature has suggested that not intergroup contact itself, but rather the friendships that can be developed in the context of these interactions, serve as mediating factors generating trust across groups. An impact evaluation of Kenya's 2011 expansion of inter-ethnic "national schools" found that attending a national school by itself did not significantly affect intergroup trust and tolerance. Instead, students in national schools were found more likely to form diverse friendships, and these friendships in turn were positively associated with higher levels of trust, tolerance, and civic nationalism (Bleck et al. forthcoming). The potential implications for sustainability are that these deeper emotional bonds fostered through friendship may not only be key to building cohesion but could also serve as enduring relationships through which cohesion is carried over years after an initial contact.

More directly concerned with problematizing short-term assessments, other authors have argued that social cohesion programming may be subject to "sleeper" or "ripple" effects which scholars may fail to observe given the limited body of long-term contact studies (Gawerc, 2006; Salomon 2004). Sleeper effects refer to the idea that the impact of an encounter may not materialize until much later, particularly in a complex context of active conflict, with results potentially observed only after achieving peace. Salomon exemplifies this idea through showcasing project evaluations, such as those of conflict and education interventions, that find meager results at endline yet produce more significant impacts over the long run. Ripple effects on the other hand refer to the measure of effects that transcend the original group of participants, with attitudes spilling over from the treatment group to others in a particular community over time (Salomon, 2011). A recent theorization of ripple effects is the notion of "social learning", which posits that the intergroup practices developed in the context of a contact interventions can spread to the population at large during the long-term, provided participant positive interactions are publicly observed, and tied to visible rewards (Grady et al., 2023; Peterson et al., 2025). The implication of ripple and sleeper effects respectively are that the effects of social cohesion programs are potentially sustained by "contagion" towards community-wide effects, or rather, that these effects simply may fail to appear right at the end of an intervention.

Perhaps the larger implication of Salomon's sleeper effect discussion, however, is that researchers have yet to develop additional mechanisms that complement friendships and social learning,

simply because they rarely get to observe pathways towards long-term social cohesion, as a result of the field's focus on short-term evaluations and studies that persists to this day (Paluck et al. 2021). It is in this spirit that this paper seeks not only to engage in the study of long-term social cohesion outcomes, but also to draw synergies from theories in other subfields within the social sciences that may be able to provide explanations for dynamics of persistence. With this in mind, this paper proceeds to define and outline the importance of project institutions, and subsequently discusses the potential of theories of institutional change to explain the sustenance of cohesion outcomes.

Defining Project Institutions

Institutions are broadly understood in the social sciences as the "rules of the game" or the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction (North, 1990). They shape human behavior by, among other mechanisms, formally or informally specifying what individuals are prohibited or permitted from doing in a given situation. Examples are myriad and exist at different scales, from the underlying, consciously designed formal rules of a society such as a country's constitution, to the informal norms and conventions, often developed gradually over time, that regulate everything from the burial of family members to negotiations within the United States' Congress (Levitsky & Helmke, 2004).

Institutions are primarily understood as societal rules, but organizations too specify the constraints that structure human behavior "inside" said groups (North, 1994). Examples include political parties, trade unions, social clubs and athletic associations, schools and colleges, among many others. Organizations determine, often via internal statutes, the membership of their bodies, their systems of internal governance, the organization's purpose or mission, and the regular events members are expected to attend. They bind groups of individuals together via a common purpose (North, 1994). As such, institutions are understood in this paper as both rules and organizations.

In the context of social cohesion, institutions matter given they either limit or expand the opportunities for ideal intergroup contact across two conflicting groups. Indirect references to institutions in social cohesion literature include studies of large organizations such as schools (Bleck et al., forthcoming; Pettigrew et al., 2006; Paluck et al., 2018), universities (Moiseyenko 2005; Woodrooffe 2011), or classically, the military, one of Allport's original scenarios upon which contact theory was formulated (Allport, 1954). National boarding schools in Kenya, for example, facilitate repeated and particularly intense contact between groups from multiple ethnicities, thanks to explicit regulations that require students to come from different counties across Kenya to learn and live together (Bleck et al,. 2025). Institutions can also serve as alternative mechanisms for mediation within contact interventions. In addition to fostering intergroup contact via organizations and activities, many P2P projects seek to prevent the further deterioration of relations between the two groups by establishing norms for dispute resolution. The logic of such activities is that attitudes between groups will at least not deteriorate if conflicts do not escalate into violence (Moffit and Bordone, 2005; Bercovitch and Kadayific-Orellana, 2009; Hartman et al.,

2021). Studies of contact interventions are at times also interested in institutions as outcomes. For example, recent scholarship on contact interventions specifies that when these contact events are publicized (as opposed to contact situations that remain private), these can shift community norms dictating the appropriateness of engagement with an outgroup, producing spillover effects beyond the original participants (Grady et al., 2023; Peterson et al., 2025).

While institutions are clearly recognized as important drivers of behavior in the social sciences, including in intergroup contact studies, the institutions and cohesion literature have tended to operate at higher levels of analysis than the project level when studying norms and organizations. Scholars of institutional change, in particular, have been historically concerned with institutions and organizations that exist at the macro-level, such as constitutions or government bodies like Congress or Parliament (North, 1990; Mahoney & Thelen, 2012), only later taking an interest in lower-level objects of study, such as public policies (Pierson, 2004). A notable exception to this trend has been the study of informal institutions at the communal level (Ostrom, 1990). Within the institutional change literature, furthermore, organizations are also not usually analyzed as "rules" shaping behavior themselves, but rather as players seeking to modify (or uphold) some of the larger institutional frameworks under which they operate (North, 1990).

Similar to institutional literature, many contact studies have focused on the effects of established, state-driven institutions such as educational institutions on intergroup interactions as described above (Bleck et al., forthcoming; Pettigrew et al., 2006; Paluck et al., 2018), either at the national level or as part of cross-country comparisons (Stewart, 2013). However, recent work within social cohesion studies has highlighted the benefits of studying "micro-institutions", such as those created in the context of a project but also those organically developed at the community level. Bleck et al.'s recent study of associations in Mali explicitly links membership in community, informal groups, specifically urban youth clubs, with increased trustworthiness. Hartmann, Blair and Blattman's recent study of informal norms of dispute resolution in Liberia shows that norms "engineered" by international development projects can take root within treatment communities, remaining in place after a project's closure and reducing violence (Hartman et al., 2021). While these studies do not dive into the mechanisms explaining how exactly "engineered" norms manage to last, they do show the existence of institutional effects, even long-term ones for the latter study, through experimental and quasi-experimental designs.

In summary, these landmark studies, exceptions in a literature characterized by a dearth of micro-institutional work, show the promise of developing an academic research agenda seeking to study rules and organizations devised in the context of international development projects, either by program officers and managers at the program design phase, or rather by community participants themselves in the context of programming. ***This is how project institutions are defined here.*** Such an agenda would have concrete implications for project design and outcome sustainability within the social cohesion space. If project institutions are, for example, as effective as their national counterparts at shaping and sustaining behavior, communal contact projects could seek to strengthen the effects of their interventions by prioritizing the generation of shared social

infrastructure in their theories of change. Furthermore, while the aforementioned studies have yet to explore the pathways by which norms and organizations manage to outlive program closure, a well-developed body of theories explaining institutional resilience has been in place since the early 2000s, which may provide additional mechanisms for academics and project managers to test and leverage when seeking to "engineer" the sustainability of norms, organizations and through these, intervention effects. This paper thus proceeds to outline insights from theories of institutional change, particularly positive feedback, which may provide hypotheses towards understanding pathways to social cohesion sustainability.

Project Institutions and Positive Feedback

One of the characteristic properties of rules and organizations is their "stickiness". Once a set of institutions is created, these tend to become stable fixtures of a country's governance landscape. This is because rules and organizations in both the economic and political realms tend to be subject to positive feedback mechanisms, otherwise known as increasing returns, as explained by the work of Paul Pierson (Pierson 2000; 2004).

Perhaps given contact studies are rarely long-term (Paluck et al. 2019; Paluck et al. 2021), or perhaps because most do not explicitly connect to institutional theory frameworks, the potential for institutions at sustaining behavior has rarely been emphasized in the contact literature, with the exception of Hartman and colleagues (Hartman et al., 2021). As explored in sections down below, this might also be an issue of scope, since stickiness is not always assumed of local organizations and rules which may perhaps be more vulnerable to change. Still, following the literature on institutions and their stickiness, we can explore the various ways in which rules and organizations may be subject to positive feedback in the context of social cohesion projects:

1. *Large set-up or fixed costs:*

As Pierson explains, "New social initiatives such as the creation of organizations or institutions—usually entail considerable start-up costs", including significant material and cultural investments (Pierson, 2004). This is partly because most political and social organizing is subject to collective action problems, such as adaptive expectations and free rider dynamics. Whether forming a political party, coalition, industry interest group, or civic-minded voluntary group, people tend to adjust their behavior in accordance with how they believe others will act. In other words, they are careful to not pick the "wrong horse" in a context in which such a choice may have high individual costs (Pierson, 2004). Choosing a political party that is not supported by a majority of voters may lead to a loss of power, wasted resources and time, and even potential persecution in the context of certain regimes, for example. Mancur Olson further explains that voluntary organizations are subject to a classic free rider problem since many aim to provide public goods: "*Since any gain goes to everyone in the group, those who contribute nothing to the effort will get just as much as those who made a contribution. It pays to "let George do it"* (Olson & Glaeser, 2022). Organizations, such as trade unions and farmer cooperatives have solved this problem by providing members with either

positive or negative incentives to join, such as a right to join collective insurance schemes, or the use of intimidation/violence respectively. In any case, setting up organizations is costly. Once initial start-up costs have been overcome, however, institutions exhibit remarkable resilience, precisely because they become the de-facto entities to rely upon in a context where setting up alternatives is difficult. Party systems in many countries become "frozen" and are reproduced through time (Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Pierson, 2004). Despite massive political and economic disruptions over time, many of the most popular voluntary associations in the United States have also persisted in some shape or form (Skocpol, 1999).

These dynamics are not foreign to the context of social cohesion programming. Choosing to take part in an intervention that puts participants in contact with an outgroup may be socially unacceptable, and even dangerous in certain settings, hence the need for a "sanctioning authority" for ideal intergroup contact to take place (Allport, 1954). Similarly, contact interventions at times pair participation with a clear benefit to participants, such as the provision of infrastructure like wells and schools, participation in group sports, and other social services (Grady et al., 2023). It is as such likely that institutions such as mediation tents, infrastructure committees, or other organizations that provide intergroup contact as well as clear membership benefits may have to surpass myriad barriers towards set-up, yet be able to do so and benefit from continuous existence once in place.

2. *Coordination Effects:*

Originally a concept stemming from studies of technology adoption, coordination effects embody the principle that systems become more resilient when their elements are deeply interconnected. Coordination effects occur when the benefits from a particular activity increase as others adopt the same option. An example is the use of fax machines, phones, or social media platforms that encourage others to join said specific network once a specific threshold of users has been reached, or how the proliferation of cars encourages investment in compatible infrastructure like roads or gas stations, which in turn make driving more attractive (Pierson, 2004).

In a similar way, organizations and norms can become complementary to each other over time and become part of densely linked institutional matrices. The benefits of an organization's activities are often enhanced if they are coordinated or fit together with existing rule frameworks, or with the activities of other organizations (North, 1994; Pierson, 2004). Typical examples of these dynamics in the institutional literature include Pierson's work on social welfare systems, which show how interest groups and organizations can grow around social program legislation like Social Security or the Affordable Care Act and have sought to protect these from elimination by lawmakers (Pierson, 1994; Pierson, 1996; Vox, 2017).

In the context of social cohesion programming, contact interventions do not exist in a vacuum, and are ideally organized in partnership with local, regional and national government authorities, as

well as universities, local NGOs and cultural centers. These actors can act as implementing partners, consultants, sanctioning entities, among other roles, and their interests and skills may also be taken into account during the development and design of a project. For example, a contact intervention between pastoralists and farmers in Nigeria was funded by a government agency, USAID, implemented by a global NGO and its local subsidiary, namely Mercy Corps, and then socialized amongst community leaders from all the groups involved, who were embedded in all aspects of the program (Grady et al., 2023). As such, certain contact interventions establish interconnections not only between the groups involved but also between distinct organizations, as well as societal and political players during set-up, opening the potential to the development of interlinkages, and enhanced resilience, over time.

3. *Communication Technology:*

Advances in communication technologies (and their regulation) have allowed groups of people in the form of interest groups, parties, and voluntary associations to both easily come into contact with each other for the first time, as well as interact continuously to sustain their movements over time. This is most evident in Skocpol's survey of voluntary organizations referenced by Pierson, which shows substantial organizational continuity across multiple decades within the United States. Skocpol explains how translocal organizing was facilitated via the distribution of newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, petitions and other printed media. Most importantly however were the policies of the U.S. Postal Service, an arm of the federal government that was institutionalized early in the country's history, which allowed for the circulation of said media across the country and at subsidized rates (Skocpol, 1999). Synergies can thus occur between technology, policies and organizations which facilitate the creation and sustenance of the latter.

In the context of modern social cohesion projects, the use of communication technology has been explored and incorporated into interventions to some degree, although not always with the intention to foster organizing or communication amongst participants already engaged in in-person contact. For example, technology has been deployed to create parasocial, as well as vicarious contact amongst populations by exposing them to pieces of media containing each other's perspectives and stories (Schiappa, 2005; Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2015). Similarly, media (radio, films) have been produced to publicize intergroup events with the hopes of expanding the effects of the intervention to non-participants.

3. Hypotheses: Project Institutions as drivers of Sustained Social Cohesion

Following the literature reviewed, as well as its synergies with the existing designs of P2P projects, and the potential showcased by the few studies of micro-institutions and sustained cohesion outcomes, this paper leverages institutional change theory to develop a number of hypotheses. Concretely, we should expect to observe the following in our analysis of the 10 P2P projects that are the relevant object of study:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Projects which allow for the founding of project institutions, namely intergroup organizations and related norms, enable ideal intergroup contact between participants to continue after a project's conclusion, thus sustaining positive intergroup attitudes and intergroup collaboration efforts.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Project institutions are sustained by the presence and functioning of positive feedback mechanisms which enable their "stickiness", such as:

A. Coordination effects that establish complex institutional matrixes amongst organizations and groups of norms.
B. High set-up costs which, once surpassed, draw participants to the continued use of existing institutions.
C. Communication technologies, which when available, ease the coordination among institutional stakeholders and support organizational upkeep.

Scope Conditions: The Limitations of Theories based on Macro-institutions in the Global North

As outlined elsewhere, theories of institutions and institutional change that assume a minimal level of "stickiness" when it pertains to norms and organizations, have historically placed an emphasis on the study of formal "macro-institutions" such as constitutions and nationwide public policies. Furthermore, these accounts of institutional stickiness have taken place in the global north, describing the cases of countries such as the United States. As such, there exists a possibility that the patterns of positive feedback described by classical theories of institutional change may simply not hold for institutions created at the community level, or in the context of low-income countries.

As comparative political scholars, in particular Latin Americanists, have extensively pointed out in a more recent body of work (Levitsky and Murillo, 2014) (Brinks et al., 2019; 2020), institutions in the Global South can actually change quite rapidly. Formal rules can follow patterns of serial replacement, adapting to fit the needs of every new incoming government. Rules can also be modified by a lack of enforcement or compliance, which arises in part given limited state capacity, or even the resistance of a population to "imported institutions" that stand against local societal norms. These patterns of institutional instability and non-enforcement are collectively understood as institutional weakness, as they erase the ability of institutions to refract existing norms,

behaviors and ultimately power. In such contexts, weak institutions risk being merely epiphenomenal, a reflection of the existing power configurations as opposed to a variable with an independent effect.

Project institutions may very well be subject to these patterns of weakness. Not only are they often the output of projects implemented in the context of the Global South, where political instability and state weakness may lead to the quick replacement and non-enforcement or rules, but they are also frameworks that can often conflict with the existing norms and power-dynamics in the communities within which they are introduced. Furthermore, project norms and organizations often exist at the lowest levels of administrative authority, or fully lack de jure authority, being set-up as informal systems and clubs subject to voluntary compliance given the temporary and local nature of development interventions. This may make them much more vulnerable to change and non-compliance, as opposed to rules at higher levels of authority such as public policies backed by the state. For these reasons, a competing hypothesis to consider is that:

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Project institutions are weak, either being quickly abandoned or replaced after project completion, or when found in action, merely reflecting the existing configurations of power and norms in its host societies.

4. Methodology and Data

This study comparatively analyzed 10 USAID P2P activities funded by the Conflict and Violence Prevention Center's (CVP) reconciliation fund across Colombia, Nigeria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Zimbabwe (Guzman et al., 2025). To achieve this, the research design combined complementary quantitative and qualitative data to conduct a mixed-methods Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA).

To estimate the statistical impact of project participation on the study's two key outcomes related to social cohesion, namely intergroup attitude and cooperation, propensity score matching (PSM) was used to compare the responses of project participants with a comparable group of non-participants in each country. Following this analysis, crisp-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) was used to explain the contextual conditions and mechanisms that were sufficient for producing those outcomes across all 10 projects. The PSM analysis provides the outcome variable or "condition" for the QCA—*whether a project achieved a demonstrable improvement*—while the QCA itself identifies the most common configurations of design factors associated with success paired with rich qualitative detail, allowing researchers to understand *how demonstrable improvements were achieved*. This combination of approaches provides stronger inferential leverage than either using PSM or QCA alone: quasi-experimental estimates establish outcome validity, while the QCA illuminates the pathways by which outcomes emerged.

Using Propensity Score Matching (PSM) to code QCA Outcomes

The evaluation first established whether project participation led to measurable changes in intergroup attitudes and intergroup cooperation within each project. Given the lack of an experimental design, as well as baseline data in the identified projects, PSM was employed to create comparable treatment and control groups, thereby addressing selection bias on observable characteristics. Treatment groups consisted of participants in the reconciliation fund projects reviewed; comparison groups were drawn from non-participants in the same or neighboring communities. Matching was based on demographic characteristics and other conflict-relevant variables that were pre-treatment and time invariant, namely age, sex, state, ethnicity, group identity, religion and profession.

After matching, outcomes were compared between participants and controls to estimate the average treatment effect on the treated (ATT). Cases that achieved statistically significant and positive results as compared to the control group in two indicators, namely the "Willingness to Interact Index (WTI)" and the "Willingness to Bring Problem to Outgroup Leader" survey item were classified as having produced positive attitudinal and cooperation outcomes in the conducted QCAs. The binary outcome derived from this analysis formed the dependent condition in the QCA data matrix as 1 = project produced sustained improvements in social cohesion; 0 = project did not (Guzman et al., 2025).[2]

Explaining and Implementing Key Steps in a QCA

QCA is a case-oriented, set-theoretic method well suited for small- to medium-N research. It is ideal for examining smaller sets of case studies (ten or more) in a systematized approach, allowing researchers to expand beyond single-case process tracing and paired comparative case studies. Rather than estimating average effects, QCA identifies configurations of conditions that are together sufficient for producing an outcome across all case studies analyzed. This is helpful in examining situations characterized by complex causation, where there may be multiple possible pathways toward realizing an outcome.

As such, QCA provides the ideal avenue for comparing the efficacy of multiple projects that, while similar in their approaches, may have engaged in slight variations as it pertains to its activities. While varying in setting, all of the 10 CVP projects shared a common underlying theory of change, namely intergroup contact theory, and were implemented in a post-conflict setting with its respective in and out groups. The implementation of activities and their design, however, varied depending on the country team's vision, as well as the challenges encountered, motivating a comparative exercise. The research team thus utilized QCA to understand which combinations of programmatic elements were key in producing the outcomes of interest across cases.

[2] For a detailed analysis and description of the PSM results, please refer to the annexes in the referenced evaluation report (Guzman et al., 2025), namely Annex 3 for the balance tables, Annex 5 for the result tables, as well as the main results section of the report.

Furthermore, the case-oriented nature inherent to QCA preserves the complexity and detail of each case. Rich qualitative data is used to establish the presence or absence of the independent variables of interest. This has the advantage of aiding researchers focused in understanding *how* conditions or variables work together to produce an outcome. Researchers are potentially able not only to provide a list of sufficient conditions, but observe the mechanisms through which these, together, ultimately lead to the dependent variable. This makes the QCA suitable for a study interested in identifying the positive feedback mechanisms sustaining project institutions and, ultimately, social cohesion outcomes, as opposed to merely determining their impact.

The QCA involves several key steps which are outlined in the following sections. QCA offers two varieties in its implementation, namely crisp or fuzzy. The crisp variant classifies the variables of interest into sets of simple binary conditions, while fuzzy allows for a categorical approach. Conditions with more specific and reliable information may be better suited for fuzzy analysis, while broader and more subjective determinations of condition codings are best suited to crisp. While the quantitative measures for the outcomes of interest provide high data granularity, this is not necessarily the case for the qualitative data that underlies the independent variables or conditions of interest. Given this medium level of data granularity, this study chose to undertake a crisp-set QCA.

Condition Selection, Definition and Operationalization

A codebook was created defining relevant variables or "conditions" in QCA language for producing CVP outcomes. From said definitions, a database of indicators was subsequently built, specifying measures for each concept, as well as each dimension of a concept and aggregation rules when relevant (Guzman et al., 2025)[3].

To ensure the conditions selected were theoretically relevant, they were chosen from two sources. First, an extensive literature review on P2P interventions was conducted, and a set of conditions was ultimately drawn specifically from intergroup contact theory, especially Allport's classic formulation, which identifies equal status, cooperation toward common goals, and the support of relevant authorities as critical elements for any intervention attempting to reduce prejudice. Potential for friendship was also included as a condition stemming from Pettigrew's reformulation of intergroup theory. Second, project theories of change were reviewed to understand what other relevant conditions in a project's design may have been considered critical by project implementers to not only produce but also sustain outcomes. Through this process, the condition of project institutions or "social infrastructure" in the terms of project theories of change (ToCs), was first identified, and it was included in the analysis after additional literature review, including institutional change theory. A high-level overview of the conditions, outcomes, and measures is provided on Table 1.

[3] For a detailed version of the codebook with detailed definitions, as well as the table of indicators, please refer to the annexes in the referenced evaluation report (Guzman et al., 2025), namely Annex 7 and Annex 8 respectively.

Table 1: QCA Conditions and Outcomes. Adapted from Guzman et al., 2025

Conditions			
No.	**Name**	**Measures**	**Data Source**
1	**Equal Status**: Activity occurs between two groups of equal status	Perceptions of equal treatment reported by participants, presence of both groups in activities.	KIIs/FGDs/ documents
2	**Intergroup Cooperation:** Activity involves intergroup cooperation toward a common goal	Reports of collaboration between groups by interviewees and program documentation	KIIs/FGDs/ documents
3	**Authority:** Activity is allowed to occur without obstruction by a higher authority	Reports of authorization obtained by key informants, instances of obstruction in documentation	KIIs/document s
4	**Conditions for Friendship**: Activity provides sustained opportunities for friendship	Reports of activity implementation conducive to self-disclosure in program documentation.	KIIs/document s/survey
5	**Social Infrastructure/Institutions**: Activity creates social infrastructure with the potential to remain after program closure.	Reports of activity implementation involving the construction of institutions (networks, systems, rules, coalitions, councils, clubs) in program monitoring documents and interviews.	KIIs/document s
Outcomes			
No.	**Name (see the codebook with detailed theory-based definitions for each condition in Annex 7)**	**Measures (see the full list of indicators and coding decision-rules/cutoffs in Annex 8)**	**Data Source**
6	**Attitude Change:** Reporting of Sustained Attitudinal Change	Willingness to Interact Index	Survey Data
7	**Sustained Collaboration**: Reporting of Sustained Intergroup Collaboration	Will bring problem to outgroup leader	Survey Data

Calibration, Sufficiency Analysis, and Logical Minimization

After collecting all qualitative and quantitative data, measures, together with decision or coding rules, were used to identify the presence (1) or absence (0) of each of the conditions and outcomes in each CVP program through a process known as calibration. Codings were reviewed by multiple members of the research team to ensure reliability. The resulting dataset, known as a data matrix and showcased on Table 2, was then analyzed using the FSQCA software package, which identifies a combination of conditions sufficient for leading to the outcomes of interest across countries (Guzman et al., 2025)[4]. FSQCA does this by generating truth tables, which outline the consistency with which combinations of conditions lead to the desired outcomes across cases. Specifically, a combination needs to lead to an outcome at least ¾ of the time to be deemed sufficient.

As a final step, FSQCA outputs all identified sufficient combinations of conditions, and "logically minimizes" redundant conditions or variables amongst these "formulas". This means that, if two expressions leading to the same outcome differ on one condition that is present in one formula but not present in the other, then that remaining condition logically does not contribute to the outcome and can be eliminated. The output of this analysis is a short "minimal" formula, which summarizes the minimal amount of conditions that are sufficient for producing each outcome.

Table 2. Data matrix. Adapted from Guzman et al., 2025

QCA Data Matrix							
	Conditions					**Outcomes**	
	Equal Status	Intergroup Cooperation	Authority	Conditions for Friendship	Social Infrastructure	Rep. Attitude Change	Rep. Collaboration
Project	1	2	3	4	5	7	8
STaR	Present	Present	Absent	Present	Present	Present	Present
BTI	Present	Present	Absent	Absent	Present	Present	Present
RBL	Absent	Absent	Present	Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent
AR	Present	Present	Present	Present	Absent	Absent	Present
ECPN	Present	Present	Absent	Absent	Present	Absent	Present
ELAPC	Present	Present	Present	Absent	Present	Present	Present
SGG	Present	Present	Absent	Present	Present	Present	Present
RSOW	Present	Present	Present	Present	Absent	Absent	Absent
PPSD	Absent	Present	Absent	Absent	Present	Absent	Absent
CTCH	Present	Present	Present	Present	Absent	Absent	Absent

[4] For a detailed collection of the coding rules used for calibration, as well as the relevant truth-tables produced by FSQCA from the data matrix, please refer to the annexes in the referenced evaluation report (Guzman et al., 2025), namely Annex 8 and Annex 9 respectively.

Study Data

This study generated a rich body of primary and secondary data that served as the empirical foundation for conducting the QCA, with both data sources used to code conditions. Survey results provided evidence on outcomes through the PSM, as described in sections above, while data from KIIs and FGDs, triangulated with secondary data in the form of project documentation, were central for condition calibration.

For the primary data collection, fieldwork was carried out across the four evaluation countries—Nigeria, Colombia, Zimbabwe, and Bosnia and Herzegovina—covering the ten projects selected for in-depth study. Data collection took place during the summer and into the fall of 2023, led by local organizations in each country, as well as local consultants with knowledge of specific areas, topics and languages. All projects ended between 2019 and 2021, meaning data collection took place 4 years after project closure at the latest, and about 2 years after project closure at the earliest.

In total, this study was able to complete the same survey among about 2500 program participants, and about 2500 comparison respondents as summarized in Table 3. Respondents were randomly sampled from project participant lists, while comparison respondents were identified from similar nearby populations not exposed to the projects, using representative sampling strategies informed by local research partners.

61 focus group discussions and 75 key informant interviews were conducted as well. In the case of qualitative data, respondents included project participants, community and regional leaders, as well as former project staff. When feasible partners aimed to sample different respondents for participation in qualitative data collection to avoid survey fatigue. Secondary data was also gathered and reviewed, in the form of project monitoring and evaluation (M&E) reports, activity records, end-line and mid-line evaluations, and proposal documents. These documents were submitted by implementing partners to USAID at the end of the project cycle and later provided to the research team.

Table 3. Overview of Countries, Activities and Collected Data

Country	# Activities	Years	Conflict context	Target beneficiaries	Treatment Group	Comparison Group	FGDs	KIIs
Zimbabwe	3 activities (RSOW, PPSD, CTCH)	2012-2019	Political violence	Communities, youth	1030	500	24	24
Nigeria	3 activities (ELAPC, SGG, ECPN)	2015-2021	Occupation (Farmer-Herder)	Communities	1008	958	20	19
Colombia	2 activities (RBL, AR)	2018-2021	Armed and Environmental conflict	Trauma victims, communities, industry, local authorities	288	497	6	27
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2 activities (BTI, STaR).	2018-2020	Ethno-religious conflict	Youth	100	500	11	5
TOTAL					**2426**	**2455**	**61**	**75**

All 10 activities investigated in this study, while different in the particulars of activity design, were seeking to improve intergroup relations between two opposing identities stemming from current conflicts or conflict legacies. Such attempts were made at the individual and community level per the peer-to-peer portfolio of USAID-CVP, and all relied on the same underlying theory of change that ideal conditions can be provided to improve intergroup cohesion, or at the very least avoid further intergroup conflict.

In Zimbabwe, the 3 activities focused on resolving conflict related to political affiliation or electoral violence. The target beneficiaries of these programs were typically communities, and at times their youth. In Nigeria, the 3 activities were focused, at the community level, on the farmer-herder conflict, which relates to resource management and also overlaps with ethnicity and religion. In Colombia, the 2 activities differed in target groups within-country, with one project focused on engaging victims of the armed conflict in trauma healing, and a second project focusing on conflict over natural resources in areas with large industries such as mining or ports. Lastly, the 2 activities in Bosnia and Herzegovina sought to bring young people together from different sides of the ethno-religious armed conflict of the early 1990s.

5. Findings

In the context of the crisp-set QCA conducted, project institutions were measured across the 10 selected cases by documenting the presence or absence of activities involving the construction of institutions (exemplified as networks, coalitions, councils and clubs) in program documents, as well as their description within key informant interviews (KIIs) conducted retrospectively for the purposes of this study. Program documents included program design documentation such as theories of change, log-frames and monitoring and evaluation plans, as well as mid-term and final evaluation reports from studies conducted at endline. KIIs included interviews with former participants, as well as former program staff (Guzman et al., 2025).

The results of the QCA show that the presence of project institutions is part of a combination of variables that, working together in the context of a contact intervention, are ***sufficient to*** produce sustained changes in attitudes and sustained cooperation across groups. The results can be seen in Tables 4 and 5 respectively and cover 3 and 5 out of the 10 projects studied respectively. All sufficient combinations presented here achieved a raw consistency of 1, and the relevant truth tables can be found in Annex 9 of the original evaluation report (Guzman et al., 2025).

Table 4: QCA output for sustained attitudinal change. Adapted from Guzman et al., 2025

Minimal Formula for Reported Change in Attitudes	**ES*C*I*A → RCA** Equal Status*Cooperation*Institutions*Authority **→ Reported Change in Attitudes (long-term)** OR **ES*C*I*CF → RCA** Equal Status*Cooperation*Institutions*Conditions for Friendship **→ Reported Change in Attitudes (long-term)**
Interpretation	Equal status, together with intergroup cooperation, as well the creation of institutions (e.g organizations such as networks, coalitions, councils, clubs) during the project, are all part of two sufficient combinations of conditions that can produce positive changes in intergroup attitudes over the long term. Together with these three conditions, either lack of obstruction by a higher authority, or sustained opportunities for friendship must also be present during programming in order to produce attitudinal change.
Cases	STaR, ELAPC, SGG

The results also highlight the importance of some of Allport's classic conditions for ideal intergroup contact, namely that the participating groups enjoy equal status, and that activities involving cooperation amongst participating groups take place, which are also present in all combinations of variables sufficient at producing sustained attitudes and cooperation. This is consistent with the existing social cohesion literature. Following the theoretical discussion in previous sections, a potential interpretation of the results is that, while the presence of ideal contact conditions such as equal status and intergroup activities is essential to generating positive attitudes and cooperation in the first place, institutions help sustain said outcomes by extending ideal intergroup contact after a project's conclusion, given their subjection to positive feedback.

While the QCA analysis itself allows us to have some certainty regarding *whether* institutions play a role in producing and sustaining our outcomes of interest, namely positive intergroup attitudes and collaboration (H1), it does not by itself display *how* project institutions, and ultimately inter-group contact through them, was sustained (H2). The rich qualitative evidence inherent in the conduction of a QCA allows researchers to take a closer look at project-cases, through which the positive feedback dynamics may be observed at work within the projects covered. This is showcased in the sections below, which provide a deep-dive into the qualitative case studies to identify examples of the hypothesized mechanism (H2) at play.

Table 5: QCA output for sustained change in intergroup cooperation. Adapted from Guzman et al., 2025)

Minimal Formula for Reported Change in Intergroup Cooperation	**ES*C*I → RIC** Equal Status*Cooperation*Institutions **→ Reported Intergroup Cooperation (long-term)**
Interpretation	Equal status, together with intergroup cooperation, as well as creating an institutional structure in the context of a project, is sufficient to lead to reported intergroup cooperation over the long term. While approval by a higher authority is present in some rows, it is not a sufficient condition for intergroup cooperation over the long term.
Cases	STaR, BTI, ECPN, ELAPC, SGG

Coordination Effects via Local Partnerships

The STaR project, implemented between 2018 and 2020 by the Karuna Peace Center, sought to promote reconciliation and understanding among the youth of different ethnic and religious groups across Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), namely the Bosniak (overlapping with Muslims), Serbs (overlapping with Orthodox Christians), and Croats (overlapping with Christian Catholics). The project consisted of multiple activities, including peace camps, peace caravans, film and theater festivals, as well as a dialogue retreat for religious leaders (Guzman et al., 2025).

Key among these was the opening and operation, through Karuna's partner PRONI Center for Youth Development (PRONI), of Youth Clubs in Banja Luka, Bijeljina, Sarajevo, and Mostar. These groups served as hubs for inter-ethnic relationship-building by both allowing and encouraging inter-ethnic membership, as well as task its members with the implementation of intergroup projects where youth sought to resolve a shared problem. Such projects or "subgroups" engaged in activities such as local government advocacy, personal-growth, skill-building for conflict mediation, among other conflict and non-conflict related topics. Common among these subgroups was the constant inter-group structure that sought to mimic Allport's ideal conditions for intergroup contact, mixing youth from different ethnicities and religions in a situation of mutual problem-solving and cooperation, as opposed to a competitive environment along identity lines.

Interviews revealed that PRONI's youth clubs, when feasible, were established in cooperation with existing local organizations, such as Government entities. An example of this was the youth club of Mostar, still in operation at the time of data collection in 2023, which was established in cooperation with the Municipal Government of Mostar, and the Cultural Center Mostar, another public institution. The agreements established with the City Government, which were renewed and included cost-sharing elements such as the provision of facilities for the youth club's activities, supported the clubs in extending their programming beyond project closure in 2020, exemplifying the benefits of *coordination effects* in sustaining an organization's existence, activities, and corresponding behavioral effects. From the interviews, it becomes clear that the City of Mostar, one of the country's "mixed" environments where inter-ethnic contact is more common, shared the goals of Karuna, PRONI and STaR more broadly in fostering intergroup understanding, providing support even when facing financial and political difficulties in 2019, and connecting PRONI to like-minded institutions such as the Cultural Center.

In Nigeria, the institutions created by the Engaging Communities for Peace in Nigeria (ECPN) project were, in some cases, intentionally tied to existing organizations within the project communities, as well as to higher levels of government. The ECPN project, implemented by Mercy Corps between 2015 and 2019, with data collection taking place in 2023, sought to create peace infrastructure, which comprised organizations such as community peace committees, related norms such as Early Warning and Early Response Systems (EWER), as well as shared physical infrastructure among communities of farmers and pastoralists in the Niger Delta. The EWER systems designed by Mercy Corps served as alternative norms of conflict resolution introduced in

the communities, which had previously resorted to direct confrontation. These norms committed community members from all relevant groups to reporting incidents resulting in increased intergroup tensions, such as illegal grazing, to a community level peace committee, consisting of intergroup representatives. This committee would then meet and seek to mediate the incident, for example by establishing a process of redress, such as fines to be paid for the corresponding violation. If the committee failed to address the conflict, it would report to local government authorities, and ultimately to security agencies.

Mercy Corps directly involved community groups in the creation of these institutions. In multiple communities, interviewees described the involvement of all major traditional institutions, including the Christian and Muslim local churches, as well as the local youth group and women's group. In a particular community, key to the maintenance and continued usage of the EWER system however seems to have been the women's group, with a high interest, shared with the established community peace committees, in keeping community youth out of violent, and potentially deadly situations. Given the women's group was mostly composed of the mothers of local youth, this high interest in keeping their own children alive is only logical, and mothers would have also been able to encourage the usage of the EWER system directly within the home.

While Mercy Corps also liaised with authorities at the local and state levels, the institutions created did not always succeed in establishing enduring partnerships within its host communities. In Nigeria's Benue state, the State Government, without previous notification, promulgated an anti-open grazing law after continued clashes between farmers and herders. This law effectively meant that herders in Benue had to relocate states to protect their livelihoods, undoing the mediation systems and committees created by ECPN at the local level by driving one of its key participants out of the intervention communities entirely.

Messaging Apps as an Online Communication Technology

Similarly to STaR, the Be the Inspiration Project (BTI), implemented by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) between 2018 and 2020, sought to foster cooperation amongst interethnic youth in BiH, however specifically targeting youth leaders with some degree of influence on public opinion. Activities included intergroup advocacy training, debate academies, conferences, as well as a Mock International Criminal Court program. While not a major component of the projects' theory of change nor broader project design, the intervention nonetheless resulted in the creation of organizations. For example, after having been trained on how to run debates through a "debate academy", a number of participants worked together out of their own initiative to create a standing, inter-ethnic debate club within the Faculty of Political Sciences at the University of Sarajevo, which was still active at the time of data collection, three years after program closure.

As mentioned in qualitative interviews, a key piece of technology that facilitated such coordination and contact amongst participants both during and after the project was the NDI Viber group, called Inspirational Visionaries. The online group was still active three years after program closure, and

served as a platform for former participants across ethnic groups to communicate after the intervention's conclusion, allowing them to stay in touch, exchange information, and organize group activities. Focus groups with program participants showed that online interaction, while a minor initiative in the larger context of BTI's activities, may have been particularly useful to maintain interaction between participants who lived in areas of BiH that remained "divided" in terms of interactions between ethnoreligious groups. As opposed to "mixed" environments such as Mostar, divided municipalities in BiH retain the divisions created during the war, and youth from different ethnicities may be physically separated in schools or neighborhoods, making contact, relationship-building, and the sustaining of friendships difficult without an online interaction component.

Communication technologies also played a prominent role in supporting the functioning of institutions set up by the Sharing the Green Grass (SGG) project, implemented by Search for Common Ground (SFCG) in Nigeria, between 2019 and 2021. Much like ECPN, the SGG project explicitly sought to create sustainable social infrastructure, or "peace architecture" to reduce intergroup violence between farmers and pastoralists in the Niger Delta. Part of this infrastructure was the creation of Early Warning and Early Response Systems (EWER) to reduce retaliation and manage conflict among the involved populations. Such systems would task all members of a particular community with generating reports on observed or reported incidents between farmers and herders, ultimately transferring them to a community peace committee to be resolved or forwarded to higher authorities, much like ECPN's system. In this case however, the qualitative data in the SGG project revealed that some components of the EWER system, for example, the coordination of incident collection and reporting by EWER observers, have been facilitated via groups organized through the WhatsApp online messaging service, with its main advantage being the inexpensive nature of these networks, leading to their endurance in a context of constrained financing after the project's conclusion. In addition to the text-based discussion via the WhatsApp groups, illiterate members of the communities were able to connect to the EWER system by calling certain designated numbers for verbal reporting. At times, even meetings between the members of the community peace committees were also held via WhatsApp calls. Many of these innovations were implemented out of necessity by project staff, as the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic during project implementation necessitated virtual spaces for communication.

The Costs of Shared Infrastructure in Post-Conflict Societies

Through a review of the qualitative data, it becomes clear that setting up intergroup institutions in post-conflict contexts requires overcoming high costs for both implementers and program participants. Societal divisions, including norms crafted during a conflict context may remain, themselves fueling adaptive expectations designed to keep intergroup contact at a minimum. In BiH, both the STaR and BTI projects encountered obstacles during the set-up of their activities, mainly revolving around the securing of buy-in from local authorities and other partner organizations. While both organizations eventually overcame these issues, they signal the power that adaptive expectations can have in the realm of politics as described by Pierson.

In the case of problems faced by BTI, its youth participants were partially composed of secondary school students. As such, NDI was required to obtain approval from the different ministries of education across the multiple cantons and districts of BiH. This was not achieved, despite multiple advocacy attempts, in Republika Srpska (RS), an area of BiH where long-standing tensions have been on the rise given threats of secession by the entity's Serbian nationalist leadership. Despite finding authorities and schools willing to participate in the program within the RS, it became clear to program implementers that school and ministry officials were constrained by the expectations, and sometimes informal orders, to avoid approving programs involving interethnic youth interaction. NDI, as a result, opted to work with students from private schools within the RS area to continue programming.

Lack of cooperation was not only a problem exclusive to government authorities, as STaR encountered similar challenges by, at times, failing to secure the cooperation of non-governmental organizations, such as the Interreligious Council of BiH. Similarly, at the individual level, FGDs made clear that for participants living in inter-ethnic or inter-faith families, or for those living in "mixed" areas such as Mostar, it was easier to both establish and maintain intergroup contact in the first place given its social acceptability. Some program participants from non-mixed areas, where youth are at times forbidden from visiting certain neighborhoods of a city where other ethnicities live, had never interacted with members from other ethnic or religious groups prior to programming. A strategy that helped certain programs overcome barriers towards the participation of communities from both groups was the provision of incentives. In Nigeria, the Engaging Communities for Peace in Nigeria (ECPN) project provided program communities at large with tangible economic benefits in exchange for project participation. Examples included the financing and establishment of shared infrastructure projects such as the building of boreholes and the repair of facilities like schools and clinics, which participants helped to build together as part of the project's activities.

Paradoxically, following Pierson's logic, the myriad difficulties in engaging in intergroup contact within the societies outlined here, absent an exogenous "push" for mixed social spaces, may explain the continuous, sometimes unplanned reliance of former program participants on the connections established between them during programming. Once established, these spaces become one of the few existing opportunities for intergroup interaction that participants can turn to. Along these lines, program implementers from both the BTI and STaR projects expressed surprise at the continuum of initiatives spearheaded by program participants after a project's conclusion. Beyond the self-organized debate clubs, and the reliance on established messaging groups, a notable example was the joint creation of two organizations, the "New STaR" and "Neos" groups, by program participants, the latter of which functions as a small NGO and has implemented its own inter-ethnic programming. Continued reliance may have also been enabled by a similar lack of alternatives in the Nigerian context. Interviewees sharing details on the SGG project explained that prior to the implementation of the EWER systems and Community Peace Committees, there existed no forum for farmers and herders to convene around intergroup issues such as

unauthorized grazing. The alternative would have been direct confrontations, which without the presence of community representatives or authorities, often resulted in violence, and potentially death. Formal institutions, such as the relevant legal systems and the pursuit by local authorities including the police, were only available to resolve such incidents on a limited or delayed basis.

6. Discussion

Observing the QCA results in conjunction with the in-depth qualitative of each of the reviewed project-cases, this paper finds convincing evidence to support the notion that project institutions likely contributed to sustain attitudes and collaboration amongst participants of the reviewed P2P peacebuilding activities funded by USAID.

The QCA, through its systematic comparison of cases, each with its specific configurations of the outcomes and conditions of interest, identifies project institutions as part of the two combinations of variables sufficient to respectively produce positive intergroup attitudes and collaboration years after program completion. In turn, the in-depth qualitative data from project reports, key informant interviews and focus groups of project participants and staff showcases project institutions that are likely subject to the dynamics of positive feedback. The institutions generated in the context of projects, be them youth clubs, debate clubs, or EWER systems, seem to have established productive interconnections with the existing institutional matrix, likely benefited from communication technologies to enable continued coordination amongst its members, and appear to have been costly to set-up in the first place while providing tangible benefits, making them one of the few avenues to which participants would be likely to return for intergroup contact after project completion. Moreover, it is also noteworthy to observe these dynamics at work in diverse project and country contexts, suggesting a broad regional scope for institutional effects at the project level.

At the same time, a number of questions remain open or are rather generated by the in-depth analysis of the qualitative data for each of the project-cases. Chief among these is the potential sustainability of project institutions in environments where conflicting institutional matrices exist at the state and national level. While examples in BiH showcase how online modes of organizations can support intergroup contact in environments where physical contact is frowned upon, the case of Benue state in Nigeria suggests that project institutions, when encountered with norms and organizations with opposing objectives at higher levels of administrative power, can be quickly jeopardized. On a similar vein, the successful engineering and survival of groups and institutions seems to be partly driven by a lack of alternatives, which raises questions about the scope of these findings. On the one hand, this is a result of the high costs of generating institutions in general, but particularly of creating inter-group infrastructure in highly divided societies. On the other hand, and consistent with existing literature, it may also be a reflection of weak formal institutions, with limited government support and institutional weakness at higher levels of administration enabling pockets of informal, institutional engineering (Blattman et al., 2014; Hartman et al., 2021).

Beyond the evidence and further questions unearthed by this research, there are a number of important limitations of this study that should be considered, and if possible, avoided in future studies. While the evidence presented is promising, the following limitations lead this paper to understand institutions as ***potential drivers*** of long-term social cohesion. One key limitation is the lack of baseline data. As is common in ex-post evaluations of international development interventions, the projects analyzed did not collect pretreatment data on collaboration and attitudes amongst participants. Without such data, it is difficult to fully rule out that observed differences between treatment and control groups reflect pre-existing factors extraneous to the intervention; this issue was partially mitigated by employing Propensity Score Matching to estimate effects. A second limitation relates to the small-N design of the QCA. Although a QCA can technically be run with ten projects, best practices suggest an ideal of at least thirty-five cases in order to observe a broader range of combinations across conditions. To compensate, theoretically informed assumptions about how each condition would be expected to behave were incorporated, which the FSQCA software then used to calculate sufficient combinations despite the limited number of observed cases. A small-N QCA also limits the conditions that can be explored in the first place, and that can thus be accounted for. A third limitation concerns the reliance on qualitative data. Project reports and interviews with staff and participants served as the basis for measuring most conditions in the QCA and for tracing path-dependency mechanisms. Such data, however, are vulnerable to recall and social desirability bias. Whenever possible, triangulation across multiple qualitative sources was used to mitigate these risks.

Each of these limitations should be considered in interpreting the findings and further addressed in future work. Pursuing research that overcomes them would represent an innovative avenue for investigating the role of project institutions in shaping long-term social cohesion, while also informing the design of more effective contact interventions.

7. Conclusion

In summary and on the basis of these results, this paper would argue for the theoretical understanding of project institutions as *potential drivers of long-term social cohesion outcomes*, and believes future long-term studies of P2P interventions would benefit from establishing research designs that further investigate the effects of institutions developed in the context of programming, and equally important, *the concrete mechanisms by which they manage to outlast short-term interventions after closure*. This paper contributes to the literature not only by encouraging the study of project institutions in the context of a field that has traditionally focused on macro-institutional studies, but also by *specifying three potential mechanisms, namely coordination effects, high-set-up costs, and technology, by which engineered norms and organizations may outlast the projects that originally created them.* Such mechanisms, in the context of a literature with limited long-term empirical and theoretical studies, could prove useful to researchers seeking to test and theorize the resiliency of social cohesion outcomes in future retrospective studies. This

paper also contributes to the literature by providing empirical evidence of micro-institutional and cohesion resilience *in the Global South*. On the one hand, the findings here serve to enrich the discussion on the strength of formal, informal, and engineered institutions in developing countries, which as seen here, may be characterized by complex, complimentary interrelations spanning different administrative levels. On the other, this paper's results provide support for the viability of social cohesion interventions outside of western contexts.

A number of questions beyond the scope of this paper should be explored in future research. These include the aforementioned discussion on the effects of the broader institutional environment (e.g. norms and organizations at the national and state levels, as well as their strength) on the functioning and longevity of project institutions, the diffusion of project norms and organizations to other individuals and municipalities, as well as the exploration (inductively or deductively) of other mechanisms of institutional resilience at the micro-level. On the last point, a substantial number of literature on institutional change can be leveraged beyond what has been explored in this particular study.

Further research on this domain is highly relevant in the current context of increasing polarization, conflict and democratic decline at a global scale. Understanding sustainable institutional pathways towards increased social cohesion has the potential to deliver actionable recommendations for policymakers and practitioners seeking to mitigate conflict and violence, including politically-motivated divisions, amongst the citizenry. Moreover, in a context characterized by steadily decreasing and volatile funding for Official Development Assistance (ODA), research seeking to distill the mechanisms of intervention sustainability is key towards ensuring that the investments that are made manage to have the greatest, and longest-lasting impact.

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