

Sustaining Social Cohesion. “Project Institutions” as Conditions for Long-term Attitudinal Change and Cooperation¹

Eduardo Pagés² & Danice Brown Guzmán³

May 29, 2026

Abstract

This paper examines how “project institutions”, rules and organizations created by implementers and participants during people-to-people (P2P) peacebuilding interventions, sustain positive intergroup attitudes and collaboration beyond project closure. While contact theory has focused primarily on short-term intervention outcomes, long-term pathways remain undertheorized. We utilize quantitative, qualitative, and programmatic data to conduct a rigorous ex-post evaluation of ten USAID-funded P2P activities in Colombia, Nigeria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Zimbabwe. Using institutional theory and qualitative comparative analysis (QCA), this paper identifies project institutions as a key condition for enduring attitudinal and behavioral change and specifies the mechanisms by which these institutions continue operating post-closure. Findings show that institutions persist through positive feedback mechanisms — coordination with local entities, high setup costs that foster continued use, and low-cost upkeep enabled by communication technologies. By bridging contact theory with institutional research, this paper illuminates program design factors that may enable resilience of engineered norms, organizations, and communal attitudes in the Global South, and should be causally tested in future studies.

Keywords: People-to-People, Peacebuilding, Social Cohesion, Intergroup Contact Institutional Change, QCA.

¹ The first version of this conference paper was presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Vancouver, B.C, September 12, 2025. The authors disclose that artificial intelligence was used for copy-editing purposes, in the context of finalizing this paper.

² Kellogg Institute for International Studies, University of Notre Dame, *Email:* epagesji@nd.edu

³ Pulte Institute for Global Development, University of Notre Dame, *Email:* dbrown16@nd.edu

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. Intergroup divisions — along ethnic, religious, and political lines — can become deeply internalized as social identity, sustaining interpersonal violence at the communal level even after high-level hostilities have ended via negotiated agreements ([Peterson et al., 2025](#)). Persistent intergroup violence threatens lives, forces displacement, and undermines food security 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 well-being ([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](#)). These activities are widely implemented by funders internationally via short-term projects, including by entities such as the United Nations' Peacebuilding Fund, the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund, as well as the World Bank's State and Peacebuilding Fund. ([UN, 2026](#); [World Bank, 2026](#); [GCERF, 2024](#)) Despite this, 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

([Bleck 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](#)), 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. Project institutions are rules and organizations devised by project staff and participants that structure ongoing social interaction within beneficiary communities ([North 1990](#); [Knight 1992](#)).

This paper posits that P2P interventions may be able to sustain attitudinal and behavioral changes stemming from ideal intergroup contact over time, provided they leave behind institutions, which are subject to patterns of persistence known as positive feedback mechanisms ([Pierson 2004](#)). This paper specifies and showcases these mechanisms in action, including the development of ties between project institutions and existing organizations and norms (coordination), the existence of large set-up costs that encourage the continuous use of social infrastructure once it has been created (fixed costs), as well as the use of communication technologies to ease organizational set-up and upkeep (technology). These insights emerge from a qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) of 10 USAID P2P activities across Colombia, Nigeria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Zimbabwe ([Guzman et al., 2025](#)), integrating program documentation, primary qualitative data, and quantitative survey data analyzed through propensity score matching (PSM).

This paper contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it provides comparative evidence of long-term P2P intervention effects in the Global South, where rigorous longitudinal studies remain scarce ([Paluck et al. 2019](#); [2021](#)). Second, it offers novel theoretical mechanisms to explain sustained outcomes, namely coordination effects, high set-up costs, and communication technology, bridging institutional change theory with contact research. Third, it advances institutional analysis by focusing on an understudied level of analysis: norms and organizations created at the project level.

2 Background

2.1 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 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, which funded over 400 P2P reconciliation programs in more than 50 countries until 2025, envisioned that ideal face-to-face interactions between individuals of diverse backgrounds could drive attitudinal transformation and foster genuine collaboration ([USAID, 2024](#)). Long-term effects of such P2P activities remain understudied, with only a handful of studies tracking cohorts over extended periods and most rigorous studies conducted among participants in the Global North ([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, lab-based 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. 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.

2.2 Sustaining Social Cohesion: Undertheorized Mechanisms for Long-term Effects

The 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 national identity ([Bleck et al. 2025](#)). 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 "sleeping" or "ripple" effects ([Gawerc, 2006](#); [Salomon 2004](#)). Sleeping effects refer to the idea that the impact of an encounter may not materialize until much later, particularly in a context of active conflict. Ripple effects refer to attitudinal spillovers from original participants to others in a community over time ([Salomon, 2011](#)). A recent theorization is "social learning", through which intergroup practices can spread to the population at large as participant interactions are publicly observed and tied to visible rewards ([Grady et al., 2023](#); [Peterson et al., 2025](#)). These mechanisms suggest the effects of social cohesion programs may be sustained via contagion or may simply take longer to materialize than typical evaluation timelines allow. Perhaps the larger implication, motivated by the "sleeping" effect discussion, is that researchers have yet to specify additional persistence mechanisms for long-term cohesion, given the field's focus on light-touch evaluations in which outcomes are rarely observed after project closure ([Paluck et al. 2021](#)). This paper draws on institutional change theory to address this gap, by defining project institutions and their potential mechanisms of persistence.

2.3 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 consciously designed formal rules of a society such as a country’s constitution, to informal norms, often developed gradually over time, that regulate everything from the burial of family members to negotiations within the United States’ Congress ([Helmke & Levitsky, 2004](#)).

Institutions are primarily understood as societal rules, but organizations too embody rules that structure human behavior “inside” said groups ([North, 1994](#)). Organizations determine, via internal frameworks such as bylaws, the membership of their bodies and the expected forms of interaction amongst members. They often outline the events and activities members are expected to attend and undertake, as well as specifying the procedures by which collective decisions are made. Accordingly, many collective entities are conceptualized as both an institution and an organization, for example, firms, bureaucracies, legislatures, churches, political parties, social clubs, athletic associations, and universities ([Knight, 1992](#)). This paper similarly considers organizations a subvariant of institutions and includes them under said broader concept.

Institutions can be differentiated from individual habits in that their rules are shared by a community. Norms regulating the encounters between genders and ethnic groups, councils adjudicating justice in a particular locality, exemplify rules that are external and public in nature ([Knight, 1992](#)). In the context of social cohesion research, institutions shape the opportunities available for intergroup contact, as reflected in studies of schools, universities, and the military ([Bleck et al., 2025](#); [Allport, 1954](#); [Paluck et al., 2019](#), [Grady et al., 2023](#)), as well as the opportunities to resolve disputes between conflicting parties ([Moffitt & Bordone, 2005](#); [Hartman et al., 2021](#)). Despite their recognized importance, institutional scholars have historically focused on macro-level rules (e.g. constitutions, government bodies, public policies) only later studying informal institutions at the communal level ([North, 1990](#); [Mahoney & Thelen, 2009](#); [Ostrom, 1990](#); [Pierson, 2004](#)). Like institutional literature, many contact studies have focused mostly on the effects of established, state-level institutions such as education systems on intergroup interactions ([Bleck et al., 2025](#); [Pettigrew et al., 2006](#); [Paluck et al., 2019](#); [Stewart, 2013](#)).

By contrast, international development projects are time-bounded, externally financed activities (typically lasting three to five years) operating at the community level outside

established state bureaucracies. They represent the smallest unit of development aid delivery ([Scott, 2023](#)). Only recently has work within social cohesion studies highlighted the benefits of studying rules at the “micro-level”. Bleck et al.’s 2024 study of associations in Mali links informal youth club membership with increased trustworthiness, while Hartman, Blair and Blattman’s 2021 study shows that “engineered” norms of dispute resolution in Liberia persist after project closure and reduce violence ([Bleck et al., 2024](#); [Hartman et al., 2021](#)). These 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 can effectively sustain behavior, social cohesion projects could prioritize the generation of shared social infrastructure. This paper proceeds to outline insights from theories of institutional change — particularly positive feedback — that may explain how project institutions outlast the programs that create them.

2.4 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. 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:

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](#)). Political and social organizing faces collective action problems: adaptive expectations and free-rider dynamics make people hesitant to commit to new institutions whose adoption by others is uncertain, whether forming a

political party, coalition, interest group, or civic-minded organization ([Pierson, 2004](#); Olson & Glaeser, 2022). Organizations have historically solved this by providing tangible benefits to its members, like access to insurance and pension schemes for farmer and trade unions. Once initial costs are overcome, however, institutions exhibit remarkable resilience, as they become the de-facto entities to rely on precisely because creating alternatives is difficult. For example, party systems in many countries become “frozen” and persist through major political disruptions (Lipset and Rokkan 1967; [Pierson, 2004](#)).

These dynamics are not foreign to social cohesion programming. Choosing to take part in an intervention that puts participants in contact with an outgroup may entail considerable costs for participants, who can be deemed as engaging in socially unacceptable behavior ([Allport, 1954](#)). To solve this issue, 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](#)). The resulting entities are often a handful of places where groups in dispute can come into contact in the context of highly polarized societies.

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 are 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, institutions become complementary to each other over time, with the value of any given rule or organization increasing as more actors coordinate around it, making switching costly. Welfare systems exemplify this: employers, unions, and insurance companies organize around pension or health schemes, generating interest groups that resist drastic reform ([Pierson, 1995](#)).

In the context of international development interventions, including contact projects, sectoral program management guidance ([PM4NGOs, 2019](#)) dictates that they be organized in partnership with local government, NGOs, and community groups. Such actors serve as implementing partners, sanctioning authorities, and stakeholders whose interests are ideally embedded in program design. Certain contact interventions establish interconnections not only between the groups involved but between distinct organizations and political players, opening the potential for interlinkages and resilience after closure. Management guidance explicitly encourages including all influential

stakeholders as a risk management strategy, recognizing that sidelining local actors threatens both implementation and sustainability ([OECD, 2023](#); [Youker, 2003](#)).

Communication Technology:

Advances in communication technologies have allowed interest groups, parties, and voluntary associations to maintain movements over time ([Skocpol, 1999](#)). This is most evident in Skocpol's survey of voluntary organizations, which shows substantial organizational continuity across multiple decades within the United States. Skocpol explains how translocal organizing was facilitated early in the country's history via newspapers, pamphlets and other printed media, as well as the policies of the U.S. Postal Service which allowed for the circulation of said media across the country at subsidized rates ([Skocpol, 1999](#)). Synergies between technology, organizational policies, and associations facilitate both the creation and sustained operation of collective entities.

In the context of social cohesion projects, communication technology has been deployed for parasocial and vicarious contact — exposing populations to each other's perspectives via media — and to publicize intergroup events to non-participants ([Schiappa, 2005](#); [Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2015](#)). However, less attention has been paid to technology as a tool for sustaining coordination among in-person contact participants after project closure.

2.5 Potential Limits to Positive Feedback in the Global South

It is however important to recognize that theories of institutional change that assume “stickiness” have historically referred to formal “macro-institutions” such as constitutions and national policies 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 not hold for institutions created at the community level, or in the context of low-income countries. As comparative political scholars have pointed out, institutions in the Global South can change rapidly through serial replacement, non-enforcement, or resistance to “imported” rules ([Levitsky & Murillo, 2013](#); [Brinks et al., 2020](#)). These patterns of institutional weakness erase institutions' independent effect, rendering them epiphenomenal reflections of existing power configurations. Project institutions may very well be vulnerable to these dynamics: they are created in Global South contexts prone to instability, may conflict with local norms depending on the familiarity of the project designers with the relevant context, and typically exist at the lowest levels of authority, namely informal systems subject to voluntary compliance.

3 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).

3.1 The Cases

Ten projects were selected from the USAID-CVP portfolio via an evaluability assessment prioritizing data quality and documentation sufficiency — including records of implemented activities and accessible program contacts. The team ensured consistency in project theories of change while allowing variation in activity design to capture differences in contact approaches. All ten activities targeted intergroup relations between two opposing identities rooted in current or historical conflicts, relying on a shared theory of change: that ideal contact conditions can improve intergroup cohesion at the individual and community level. As summarized in Table 1, the three activities in Zimbabwe addressed electoral and political violence; those in Nigeria targeted farmer-herder conflict; the two Colombian activities addressed armed conflict and resource conflict respectively; and the two activities in Bosnia and Herzegovina focused on ethno-religious divisions stemming from the 1990s war. All ten projects ended between 2019 and 2021, placing data collection two to four years after project closure.

Table 1. Overview of Interventions

Country	Activities	Implementor	Years	Conflict Context	Target Beneficiaries
Zimbabwe	Shaping + Reshaping our World (RSOW)	Catholic Relief Services (CRS)	2012–2019	Political violence	Communities, youth
	Promoting Peace for Sustainable Development (PPSD)	Civic Forum on Human Development (CFHD)	2013–2016		
	Conflict Transformation and Community Healing (CTCH)	Grace to Heal (GTH)	2016–2018		

Country	Activities	Implementor	Years	Conflict Context	Target Beneficiaries
Nigeria	Sharing the Green Grass (SGG)	Search for Common Ground (SFCG)	2019–2021	Occupation (Farmer–Herder)	Communities
	Engaging Communities for Peace in Nigeria (ECPN)	Mercy Corps	2015–2019		
	Engaging Local Actors to Promote Peaceful Coexistence (ELAPC)	PACT	2019–2020		
Colombia	Art for Reconciliation (AR)	Prolongar	2018–2021	Armed conflict	Trauma victims, ex-combatants, communities
	Reconciliation and Business Laboratories (RBL)	Fundación ideas para la Paz (FIP)	2017–2020	Armed and environmental conflict	Communities, industry, local authorities
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Be the Inspiration (BTI)	National Democratic Institute (NDI)	2018–2020	Ethno-religious conflict	Youth
	Societal Transformation and Reconciliation (STaR)	Karuna Peace Center	2018–2020		

3.2 The Study Hypotheses

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 develops 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): Project institutions — intergroup organizations and norms founded during P2P programming — enable ideal contact between former participants to continue after project closure, sustaining positive intergroup attitudes and cross-group collaboration.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Project institutions are sustained by positive feedback mechanisms — enabling their long-term persistence — such as:

- A. Coordination effects that build institutional networks across implementing organizations.
- B. Communication technologies that ease coordination among stakeholders and support organizational upkeep.
- C. High setup costs that draw participants to the continued use of established institutions.

3.3 The Outcomes

To measure success for Hypothesis 1, we identify two key outcomes. The Willingness to Interact Index (WTI) is a composite survey-based index measuring participants' reported willingness to engage in various types of interactions with members of the relevant outgroup. Conceptually, the WTI captures intergroup attitudes in the realm of trust — the degree to which respondents report openness to contact across different social domains ([Burrows et al., 2022](#)). The index was validated using Cronbach's alpha across each of the four country contexts and rescaled to range from 0 to 1.⁴ The second outcome, "Willingness to Bring Problem to Outgroup Leader," is a single survey item capturing reported intergroup cooperation: whether a participant would seek assistance from an outgroup leader in a dispute or conflict situation. This last survey item, as well as the five WTI survey items, are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Survey Items Used to Measure Attitudinal and Cooperation Outcomes

Item	Survey Item (Response scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree)
Willingness to Interact Outcome	
WTI1	You are willing to have [outgroup] people as neighbors.
WTI2	You are willing to have [outgroup] people as close friends.
WTI3	You are willing to live in a community that consists mostly of [outgroup] people.
WTI4	You are willing to have people in your family marry someone of the [outgroup].

⁴ Cronbach's alpha was as follows: Bosnia-Herzegovina (.88), Colombia (.84), Nigeria (.92), Zimbabwe (.90). These are reported in Guzman, et al 2025 in Table 8.

Item	Survey Item (Response scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree)
Willingness to Interact Outcome	
WTI5	You are willing to marry a [outgroup]. ⁵
Cooperation Outcome	
SC15B	If there was a problem that affected the entire community, and your local leader was a member of [outgroup] would you seek help directly from that leader?

These outcomes are used to measure long-term project success for Hypothesis 1. To test which project components are leading to said sustained success for Hypothesis 1, including project institutions, a Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) is conducted integrating survey data, qualitative data and program documentation. The latter two sources are also consulted to investigate the presence of positive feedback mechanisms such as coordination, set-up costs, and use of communication technologies (Hypothesis 2). These data sources are described in the subsequent section.

3.4 The Data and Sample

This study generated a rich body of primary and secondary data that served as the empirical foundation for conducting the analysis. Fieldwork was conducted in summer–fall 2023 across all four countries, in a partnership between the US-based research teams and local experts. Approximately 2,500 program participants and 2,500 comparison respondents completed surveys (see Table 3). Treatment survey respondents were randomly sampled using lists of program participants in each country. Comparison respondents were sampled representatively from neighboring communities which did not participate in the programming. Local experts targeted the comparison respondents using their knowledge of areas with similar conflict contexts and demographics such as ethnicity, religion and socio-economic contexts. They also replicated eligibility criteria for program participation when possible. For example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where program participants were all young adults, comparison respondents were limited to a similar age cohort.

61 focus group discussions were conducted with participants, and 75 key informant interviews were conducted with community leaders, and former project staff. All qualitative interviews were recorded, then transcribed and translated into English.

⁵ This question was applied only in projects where the target population was young adults, who were more likely to be unmarried. In other contexts, the question was skipped.

Qualitative data were then coded in Atlas-ti, according to a hierarchical set of concepts and themes.

Secondary data — including project monitoring and evaluation reports, activity records, and evaluation reports — were provided by implementing partners and reviewed alongside primary data. As this study focused on completed projects, these secondary data sources were quite comprehensive.

Data collection for this study was governed by the University of Notre Dame’s Institutional Review Board (IRB), and followed an ethical framework designed to protect participants and ensure data integrity within conflict-prone environments. Measures taken included informed consent, confidentiality and privacy protections, and the use of conflict-sensitive instruments. For qualitative data collection in particular, FGDs were conducted separately for different identity groups (e.g., by ethnicity or political party), allowing participants to speak freely without fear of confrontation, and facilitators were instructed to organize discussions in neutral spaces, such as community centers, rather than politically affiliated offices to minimize hostility.

Table 3. Overview of Countries, Activities and Collected Data

Country	Activities (#)	Quantitative Sample		Qualitative Sample		Secondary Sources
		Treatment Respondents	Comparison Respondents	Focus Group Discussions	Key Informant Interviews	Documents Reviewed
Zimbabwe	3 (RSOW, PPSD, CTCH)	1,030	500	24	24	128
Nigeria	3 (ELAPC, SGG, ECPN)	1,008	958	20	19	73
Colombia	2 (RBL, AR)	288	497	6	27	21
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2 (BTI, STaR)	100	500	11	5	84
TOTAL		2,426	2,455	61	75	306

3.5 The Methods

To estimate the sustained impact of project participation on the study's key outcomes related to social cohesion, namely positive intergroup attitudes and intergroup collaboration, 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 these reported attitudes and behaviors across all 10 projects after closure. The PSM analysis provides the two outcome variables or "conditions" for the QCA—*whether or not a project achieved a demonstrable effect as compared to a comparison group*—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 collaboration within each project. Given the lack of a baseline data collection or pre-project experimental design, PSM was employed to identify comparable treatment and control groups, thereby addressing selection bias on observable characteristics. 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. See Appendix A which describes the matching in more detail, presenting both pre- and post-matching balance diagnostics (standardized mean ratios and variances). Matching was successful in reducing the differences between treated respondents and comparison respondents, although some differences do remain between the two groups. After matching, outcomes were compared between participants and controls to estimate the average treatment effect (ATE).

Cases that achieved statistically significant and positive results as compared to the comparison 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 QCAs⁶. The binary outcome derived from this analysis formed the dependent condition

⁶ This criterion was consistently applied for all project-cases apart from the STaR project, which contained a limited sample size for the relevant indicators. As such, this program could not be meaningfully judged

in the QCA data matrix as 1 = project produced sustained improvements in social cohesion; 0 = project did not ([Guzman et al., 2025](#)).

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. QCA is thus well-suited for comparing these 10 activities, which shared an underlying theory of change but varied in design, allowing the research team to identify which combinations of programmatic elements were key in producing outcomes. The QCA involves several key steps outlined below. Given the medium level of data granularity across qualitative conditions, this study employs crisp-set QCA, which classifies conditions as binary (present or absent) rather than as continuous fuzzy scores.

Condition Selection, Definition, Operationalization and Calibration

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](#))⁷. Conditions were drawn from two sources: intergroup contact theory — specifically Allport’s classic formulation (equal status, common goals, authority support) and Pettigrew’s friendship potential — and project theories of change, from which the condition of project institutions⁸ was first identified. A high-level overview of conditions and measures appears in Table 4.

using the standard of statistical significance as compared to other programs, and only coefficient direction at the project level, as well significance for country-average results, were considered when assigning values to outcome indicators for this case.

⁷ 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.

⁸ Project institutions were originally termed “social infrastructure” in the original study (Guzman et al., 2025).

Table 4: 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, with neither perceived as having a privileged position over the other.	Perceptions of equal treatment reported by participants, presence of mechanisms for equal participation.	KIIs / FGDs / documents
2	Intergroup Cooperation: Activity involves intergroup cooperation toward shared goals.	Reports of collaboration between groups by interviewees and project documents.	KIIs / FGDs / documents
3	Authority: Activity is allowed to occur without obstruction from authorities.	Reports of authorization obtained by key informants, instances of obstruction noted in reports.	KIIs / documents
4	Conditions for Friendship: Activity provides sustained opportunities for self-disclosure and personal connection.	Reports of activity implementation conducive to self-disclosure (e.g., recurring sessions, dialogue components).	KIIs / documents / survey
5	Project Institutions: Activity creates or enables intergroup organizations or norms that persist beyond project closure.	Reports of activity implementation involving the construction of organizations or rules used by participants beyond closure.	KIIs / documents
Outcomes			
No.	Name	Measures	Data Source
6	Attitude Change: Reporting of sustained attitudinal change toward the outgroup.	Willingness to Interact (WTI) Index.	Survey data
7	Sustained Intergroup Cooperation: Reporting of sustained change in cooperation behaviors.	SC15B item: "If there was a problem that affected the entire community, and your local leader was a member of [outgroup] would you seek help directly from that leader?"	Survey data

Of note is the operationalization of institutions, Condition 5. A project received a score of 1 on this condition if program monitoring documentation (including theories of change, log-frames, and mid-term and final evaluation reports) or key informant interviews (KIIs) with former staff or participants contained at least one explicit mention of institution creation in the context of joint in-group and out-group activities. A score of 0 was assigned when no such mention was found across all reviewed sources. Concrete examples of qualifying institutions include intergroup councils, youth clubs, community peace committees, Early Warning and Early Response (EWER) systems, mediation platforms, and communication networks such as WhatsApp groups. Condition 5 codings were subsequently triangulated between program documentation and KII data to strengthen reliability for the identified positive cases.

After operationalization, all conditions were coded as 1 (present) or 0 (absent) across all cases in a process known as “calibration”. Where doubts existed or discrepancies in the various data sources remained, such cases were discussed with the entire research team and calibrated jointly, following standard QCA practice. From this process, the resulting data matrix is analyzed using FSQCA software to produce a short “minimal” formula, which stipulates the conditions that are sufficient for producing the outcome of interest, as shown in the findings section below. Full calibration procedures, data matrix, truth table construction, and logical minimization steps are detailed in the Online Appendix.

5 Findings

The results of the impact assessment can be found in Table 5. Treatment effects were observed among both of the treatments in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In Colombia, treatment effects were not realized for both programs, whereas treatment effects in Nigeria varied by program activity. The peacebuilding activities in Zimbabwe were not found to result in lasting treatment effects.

Table 5: Project-Level ATE Estimates.

		(1) Willingness to Interact Index	N	(2) Willingness to Bring Problem to Outgroup Leader	N
BiH	StAR	0.14*** (0.05)	487	0.04 (0.08)	448
	BTI	0.15*** (0.03)	508	0.16*** (0.02)	547
Colombia	RBL	0.02 (0.02)	680	0.02 (0.03)	651
	AR	-0.04 (0.02)	506	0.06* (0.02)	453
Nigeria	ELAPC	.11*** (0.03)	705	0.11* (0.05)	654
	ECPN	-0.00 (0.02)	523	0.12* (0.05)	517
	SGG	0.10*** (0.02)	726	0.19*** (0.05)	706
Zimbabwe	RSOW	0.02 (0.04)	516	0.02 (0.11)	500
	PPSD	-0.05 (0.03)	500	-0.04 (0.05)	486
	CTCH	-0.04 (0.04)	494	-0.13** (0.04)	495

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. Standard errors in parentheses. Analysis includes covariates for respondent gender, ethnicity, age, religion and state-level fixed effects where relevant.

The QCA results, displayed in Tables 6 and 7, furthermore identify project institutions as part of sufficient combinations of variables that, working together in the context of a contact intervention, are sufficient to produce the sustained attitudinal change and sustained intergroup cooperation outcomes in Table 5. The results cover 5 out of the 10 projects studied, and all sufficient combinations presented achieved a raw consistency of 1, with the relevant truth tables found in the online appendix.

Table 6: QCA output for sustained attitudinal change. Adapted from Guzman et al., 2025

Minimal Formula for Reported Change in Attitudes	$ES * C * I * A \rightarrow RCA$ or $ES * C * SI * CF \rightarrow RCA$
Interpretation	Equal status, together with intergroup cooperation, project institutions, and authority approval (or conditions for friendship), are jointly sufficient for reported change in attitudes.
Cases	STaR, ELAPC, SGG

Table 7: QCA output for sustained change in intergroup cooperation. Adapted from Guzman et al., 2025)

Minimal Formula for Reported Sustained Intergroup Cooperation	$ES * C * I \rightarrow RIC$
Interpretation	Equal status, together with intergroup cooperation and project institutions, is jointly sufficient for reported sustained intergroup cooperation.
Cases	STaR, BTI, ECPN, 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 positive attitudes and post-intervention 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 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.

In summary, the counterfactual analysis allows this paper to infer that some interventions had a demonstrable effect on treated individuals' intergroup attitudes and cooperation as compared to non-treated individuals, and the sufficiency analysis provided by the QCA supports the inference that said outcomes are likely driven by combinations of program components that must include institutions (H1). To describe the exact mechanisms by which project institutions, and ultimately inter-group contact through them, were sustained over time (H2), this paper surveys the rich qualitative evidence present in QCA project-cases to identify examples of the hypothesized positive feedback dynamics at play.

5.1 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. As detailed in project documents, 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. Key informant interviews with former project staff revealed that PRONI's youth clubs were established in cooperation with existing local organizations. The Mostar club, still operational at the time of data collection in 2023, was established in partnership with the Municipal Government of Mostar and the Cultural Center Mostar. Agreements with the City Government — including cost-sharing for facilities — supported the clubs in extending programming

beyond project closure, exemplifying coordination effects in sustaining the organization's activities.

In Nigeria, the Engaging Communities for Peace in Nigeria (ECPN) project, implemented by Mercy Corps (2015–2019), created Early Warning and Early Response Systems (EWER) and community peace committees among farmers and pastoralists in the Niger Delta. As specified in project documentation, these systems committed members to report incidents of intergroup tension to a representative committee for mediation — escalating to local government or security agencies if unresolved — creating alternative norms of conflict resolution in communities that had previously resorted to direct confrontation. Mercy Corps directly involved community groups in the creation of these institutions. In multiple communities, participants in focus group discussions, as well as program managers interviewed, described the involvement of 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 was 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. Project documents and interviews with staff documented that 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.

5.2 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. Following the project's implementation reports, 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 interviews with former project staff, 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 also 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 the Sharing the Green Grass (SGG) project (SFCG, Nigeria, 2019–2021), which likewise created EWER systems and community peace committees. Interviews with regional coordinators revealed that WhatsApp groups facilitated EWER convenings, with illiterate members able to participate via phone calls to designated numbers. These innovations arose partly from necessity: COVID-19 forced virtual communication during project implementation, and the low cost of these networks enabled their continuation after project funding ended.

5.3 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, interviews with former staff and leadership from both the STaR and BTI projects reported encountering 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, participants in focus group discussions made clear that for those living in inter-ethnic or inter-faith families, or for those living in "mixed" areas such as Mostar, it was far easier to both establish and maintain intergroup contact in the first place given its social acceptability. By contrast, multiple program participants from non-mixed areas, where youth are at times forbidden from visiting certain neighborhoods of a city where other ethnicities live, reported they 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 showcased in documentation as well as participant accounts 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 these societies may explain the continuous, sometimes unplanned reliance of former participants on connections established during programming. Once established, these spaces become one of the few existing opportunities for intergroup interaction. Program implementers from both BTI and STaR expressed surprise at initiatives spearheaded by participants after project closure: beyond self-organized debate clubs and messaging groups, participants jointly created the "New STaR" and "Neos" organizations, the latter functioning as a small NGO with its own inter-ethnic programming. Continued reliance may have also been enabled by a similar lack of alternatives in the Nigerian context. Project participants sharing details on the SGG

project explained that prior to the implementation of the EWER systems and Peace Committees, there existed no forum for farmers and herders to convene around intergroup issues such as unauthorized grazing. The alternative would have been confrontations, which 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

6.1 Potential Conditions and Alternative Explanations

Observing the QCA results in conjunction with the in-depth qualitative data of each of the reviewed project-cases, this paper finds convincing evidence to support the notion that project institutions likely contributed to sustaining positive intergroup attitudes and post-intervention collaboration amongst participants of the reviewed P2P peacebuilding activities. Project institutions — whether youth clubs, debate clubs, or EWER systems — consistently appear in sufficient combinations for producing sustained positive attitudes and cooperation, persisting through coordination with local partners, communication technologies, and the high costs of establishing intergroup spaces that make them the primary avenue for continued contact. These dynamics were observed across four countries, suggesting a broad regional scope for micro-institutional effects.

Several alternative explanations were considered, and when possible, discarded in the analysis, strengthening our understanding of project institutions as explaining meaningful variation. Chief among these are shocks and violent incidents after programming, which could differentially affect attitudinal outcomes. Based on desk reviews conducted by local partners, it was determined that all but one of the ten programs experienced community-level shocks or incidents after programming — producing minimal variation and thus limited explanatory power. These factors were therefore excluded from the QCA analysis. Country-context could not be systematically controlled for via the QCA given the small N. Importantly, however, projects varied in their levels of success both within and across country contexts — including within Colombia and Nigeria — suggesting country-level factors were not determinant for project success.

However, several questions remain open or were rather generated by the in-depth analysis of the qualitative data for each of the project-cases. Concretely, while the norms and organizations observed remain in force at the local level years after project completion — denoting a degree of stability — the Benue state case in Nigeria illustrates how project institutions may be quickly undone by entities at higher administrative

levels. This example denotes the possibility of eventual serial replacement or resistance to imported norms ([Levitsky & Murillo, 2013](#); [Brinks et al., 2020](#)) for project institutions in environments where conflicting institutional matrices exist at the state and national levels. As such, further research needs to be conducted on the conditions enabling project institutions to take root in some cases but not others.

6.2 Limitations

Beyond the evidence and further questions unearthed by this research, there are a number of important limitations of this study that should be considered. While the evidence presented is promising, the following limitations lead this paper to understand institutions as *potential drivers* of long-term attitudes and collaborative behaviors. 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 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, such as country context. 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 identifying and illustrating increasing return 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 that aims to go beyond descriptive studies.

7 Conclusion

In summary, this paper argues for understanding project institutions — rules and organizations created in the context of P2P interventions — as potential drivers of long-term social cohesion outcomes. Future long-term studies would benefit from causal research designs that track institutional effects after program closure. This paper contributes by encouraging the study of project institutions in a field dominated by macro-institutional analysis, and by specifying three mechanisms — coordination effects, high set-up costs, and communication technology — by which engineered norms and organizations may outlast the projects that created them. The empirical findings also contribute evidence of micro-institutional resilience in the Global South, enriching the discussion on institutional strength in developing countries and supporting the viability of social cohesion interventions in non-Western contexts.

Future research should explore how the broader institutional environment — norms and organizations at national and state levels — affects the strength of project institutions, as well as additional micro-level mechanisms of institutional resilience beyond those explored here. 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.

Bibliography

- Allport, Gordon W. *The Nature of Prejudice*. The Nature of Prejudice. Oxford, England: Addison-Wesley, 1954.
- Amichai-Hamburger, Y., Hasler, B. S., & Shani-Sherman, T. (2015). Structured and unstructured intergroup contact in the digital age. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 52, 515–522. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2015.02.022>
- Bercovitch, J., & Kadayifci-Orellana, S. A. (2009). *Religion and Mediation: The Role of Faith-Based Actors in International Conflict Resolution*. <https://doi.org/10.1163/157180609X406562>
- Blattman, C., Hartman, A. C., & Blair, R. A. (2014). How to Promote Order and Property Rights under Weak Rule of Law? An Experiment in Changing Dispute Resolution Behavior through Community Education. *American Political Science Review*, 108(1), 100–120. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055413000543>
- Bleck, J., Dowd, R., Guzman, D. B., Mugo, J., & Oluoch-Aridi, J. (2025). Can Student Body Diversity Foster Inter-ethnic Trust, Tolerance, and National Identification Prioritization? The Role of Friendship in Kenya. *British Journal of Political Science*, 55, e142. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123425100690>
- Bleck, J., Bonan, J., Lemay-Boucher, P., & Sarr, B. (2024). Drinking Tea with the Neighbors: Informal Clubs, General Trust, and Trustworthiness in Mali. *American Political Science Review*, 118(2), 744–763. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055423000709>
- Brinks, D. M., Levitsky, S., & Murillo, M. V. (Eds.). (2020). *The Politics of Institutional Weakness in Latin America*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108776608>
- Burrows, B., Tropp, L. R., Dehrone, T. A., & Čehajić-Clancy, S. (2022). How intergroup contact shapes intergroup attitudes and construals of relations between ethnic groups: Evidence from Bosnia and Herzegovina. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 28(3), 372–383. (2023-14262-004). <https://doi.org/10.1037/pac0000629>
- Fonseca, Xavier, Stephan Lukosch, and Frances Brazier. 2019. “Social Cohesion Revisited: A New Definition and How to Characterize It.” *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research* 32(2): 231–53. doi:[10.1080/13511610.2018.1497480](https://doi.org/10.1080/13511610.2018.1497480).
- Gawerc, M. I. (2006). Peace-building: Theoretical and Concrete Perspectives. *Peace & Change*, 31(4), 435–478. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0130.2006.00387.x>
- GCERF. 2024. “About Us.” *Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund*, December 5, 2024. <https://www.gcerf.org/>.
- Grady, Christopher, Rebecca Wolfe, Danjuma Dawop, and Lisa Inks. “How Contact Can Promote Societal Change amid Conflict: An Intergroup Contact Field Experiment in Nigeria.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 120, no. 43 (October 24, 2023): e2304882120. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2304882120>.

- Guzman, Danice Brown, Lila Khatiwada, Jaclyn Biedronski, Eduardo Pages, and Paul Friesen. "Long-Term Evaluation of the Center for Conflict and Violence Prevention (CVP) Reconciliation Fund Activities." Report. University of Notre Dame, June 26, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.7274/29402405.v1>.
- Hartman, A. C., Blair, R. A., & Blattman, C. (2021). Engineering Informal Institutions: Long-Run Impacts of Alternative Dispute Resolution on Violence and Property Rights in Liberia. *The Journal of Politics*, 83(1), 381–389. <https://doi.org/10.1086/709431>
- Helmke, G., & Levitsky, S. (2004). Informal Institutions and Comparative Politics: A Research Agenda. *Perspectives on Politics*, 2(4), 725–740.
- Knight, J. (1992). *Institutions and Social Conflict*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511528170>
- Kwak, Young Hoon, and Sunil Dewan. 2001. "Risk Management in International Development Projects." *Proceedings of the Project Management Institute Annual Seminars & Symposium*, 2001. <https://www.pm4dev.com/resources/documents-and-articles/100-risk-management-in-international-development-projects-gwu/file.html>
- Levitsky, S., & Murillo, M. V. (2013). Lessons from Latin America: Building Institutions on Weak Foundations. *Journal of Democracy*, 24(2), 93–107.
- Lipset, S. M., & Rokkan, S. (1967). *Party Systems and Voter Alignments: Cross-National Perspectives*. New York: Free Press.
- Mahoney, J., & Thelen, K. (Eds.). (2009). *Explaining Institutional Change: Ambiguity, Agency, and Power*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511806414>
- Moiseyenko, Olena. 2005. "Education and Social Cohesion: Higher Education." *Peabody Journal of Education* 80(4): 89–104. doi:[10.1207/S15327930pje8004_7](https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327930pje8004_7).
- Moffitt, M. L., & Bordone, R. C. (Eds.). (2005). *The Handbook of Dispute Resolution*. Jossey-Bass.
- Nadeem, Muhammad, Mumtaz Anwar, and Zahid Pervaiz. 2022. "The Impact of Political Institutional Quality on Social Cohesion: Evidence from Worldwide Perspective." *Journal of Public Affairs* 22(4): e2630. doi:[10.1002/pa.2630](https://doi.org/10.1002/pa.2630).
- North, Douglass. C. (1994). Institutions Matter. *Working Paper, Economic History*, No. 9411004. <https://econwpa.ub.uni-muenchen.de/econ-wp/eh/papers/9411/9411004.pdf>
- North, Douglass C. 1990. *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:[10.1017/CBO9780511808678](https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511808678).
- Putnam, R. D. (2001). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Touchstone Books by Simon & Schuster.
- Oder, Elizabeth. 2005. "The Social Cohesion Role of Educational Organizations: Primary and Secondary Schools." *Peabody Journal of Education* 80(4): 78–88. doi:[10.1207/S15327930pje8004_6](https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327930pje8004_6).

- OECD. 2023. "Risk management and locally led development: Understanding how to better manage risks for sustainable impact" (No. DCD (2023) 48).
[https://one.oecd.org/document/DCD\(2023\)48/en/pdf](https://one.oecd.org/document/DCD(2023)48/en/pdf)
- Ostrom, E. (1990). *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*. Cambridge University Press.
- PM4NGOs. (2019). *Program DPro: Project Management for Development Professionals* (Version 1.6). PM4NGOs. <https://pm4ngos.org/download/139/english/19367154/program-dpro-guide-english-v-1-6.pdf>
- Paluck, Elizabeth Levy, Seth A. Green, and Donald P. Green. 2019. "The Contact Hypothesis Re-Evaluated." *Behavioral Public Policy* 3(2): 129–58. doi:[10.1017/bpp.2018.25](https://doi.org/10.1017/bpp.2018.25).
- Paluck, Elizabeth Levy, Roni Porat, Chelsey S. Clark, and Donald P. Green. 2021. "Prejudice Reduction: Progress and Challenges." *Annual Review of Psychology* 72(Volume 72, 2021): 533–60. doi:[10.1146/annurev-psych-071620-030619](https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-071620-030619).
- Peterson, David A., Mirta Galesic, and Ross A. Hammond. "A Model of Long-Term Conflict Resolution and Cooperation." *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, May 10, 2025, 00220027251338841. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00220027251338841>.
- Pettigrew, T. F., & Tropp, L. R. (2006). A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 90(5), 751–783. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.90.5.751>
- Pettigrew, Thomas F. 1998. "INTERGROUP CONTACT THEORY." *Annual Review of Psychology* 49(Volume 49, 1998): 65–85. doi:[10.1146/annurev.psych.49.1.65](https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.49.1.65).
- Pierson, P. (1995). Fragmented Welfare States: Federal Institutions and the Development of Social Policy. *Governance*, 8(4), 449–478. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0491.1995.tb00223.x>
- Pierson, Paul. "Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics." *The American Political Science Review* 94, no. 2 (June 2000): 251–67.
<https://www.proquest.com/docview/214406301/abstract/5C57FFA6E7534808PQ/1>.
- Pierson, Paul. 2004. *Politics in Time: History, Institutions, and Social Analysis*. Princeton University Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7sgkg> (January 15, 2025).
- Salomon, G. (2004). A narrative-based view of coexistence education. *Journal of Social Issues*, 60(2), 273–287. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-4537.2004.00118.x>
- Salomon, G. (2011). Four major challenges facing peace education in regions of intractable conflict. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 17(1), 46–59.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10781919.2010.495001>
- Schiappa, E., Gregg, P. B., & Hewes, D. E. (2005). The Parasocial Contact Hypothesis. *Communication Monographs*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0363775052000342544>
- Scott, C. (2023). *The Project in International Development: Theory and Practice*. Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429427411>
- Skocpol, T. (Ed.). (1999). *Civic Engagement in American Democracy*. Brookings Institution Press.

- Stewart, Frances. 2013. "Capabilities and Human Development: Beyond the Individual - The Critical Role of Social Institutions and Social Competencies." <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=2344469> (January 15, 2025).
- Somer, Murat, Jennifer L. McCoy, and Russell E. Luke. "Pernicious Polarization, Autocratization and Opposition Strategies." *Democratization* 28, no. 5 (July 4, 2021): 929–48. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2020.1865316>.
- USAID. 2024. "RFP Fact Sheet | Conflict Prevention and Stabilization." *U.S. Agency for International Development*. <https://www.usaid.gov/about-us/organization/conflict-prevention-stabilization/document/rfp-fact-sheet> (January 15, 2025).
- UN. 2026. "Peacebuilding Fund." United Nations, 2026. <https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/fund>.
- Woodrooffe, Dhruneanne D. 2011. "When Visions of the Rainbow Nation Are Not Enough: Effect of Post-Apartheid Higher Education Reform on Social Cohesion in South Africa." *Peabody Journal of Education* 86(2): 171–82. doi:[10.1080/0161956X.2011.561184](https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2011.561184).
- World Bank. 2026. "State and Peacebuilding Fund (SPF)." Text/HTML. World Bank, World Bank Group, 2026. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/state-and-peace-building-fund>.
- Youker, R. 2003. "The nature of international development projects." *Paper presented at PMI® Global Congress 2003—North America*, Baltimore, MD. Newtown Square, PA: Project Management Institute. <https://www.pmi.org/learning/library/nature-international-development-projects-7663> (January 13, 2026).