

Integrating Social Cohesion for Enhanced Outcomes

FINDINGS FROM AN EVIDENCE-MAPPING STUDY

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INTRODUCTION

This Learning Brief provides insights from an extensive evidence mapping study commissioned by CRS to understand *whether, how and to what extent integration of social cohesion and justice programming yields larger and more sustainable improvements in outcomes across the humanitarian-development-peacebuilding nexus.*

Key findings from the study include:

- CRS' signature 3Bs – *Binding, Bonding and Bridging* – approach is effective in strengthening social cohesion.
- Social cohesion outcomes can be enhanced when coupled with other sectoral interventions, particularly economic strengthening.
- Initial evidence shows integrating social cohesion and justice enhances outcomes in other sectors including natural resource management, economic development, and durable return of refugees/Internally Displaced Persons.

STUDY OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

This mapping study sought to provide CRS with evidence of the efficacy of its signature social cohesion and justice programming and the extent of its impact on humanitarian and development outcomes. Led by an independent consultant, the study assessed existing evidence, identifying promising practices as well as gaps and areas for improvement. It focused particularly on integration of social cohesion and justice interventions within other sectors and the relationship to improved humanitarian and development outcomes. It thus represents a **contribution towards bridging the development-humanitarian-peacebuilding “triple nexus” and is meant to guide the strategy, design, replication and scaling of future programming and research by CRS and others.**

The methodology of the study included a review of existing literature and an in-depth analysis of outcomes from 17 CRS projects on social cohesion and justice, including 10 projects where these elements are integrated with programming of other sectors.

ASSESSMENT OF SOCIAL COHESION & JUSTICE OUTCOMES

Most of the existing evidence around social cohesion is anecdotal and does not carefully probe why or how social cohesion interventions work, nor how sustainable their outcomes are. While the focus of research and measurement varies, most agencies and donors concentrate their work on issues of inclusion, trust building, community-level capacity building, and some work with government structures.

CRS has largely been consistent with this focus, building mutual trust, reducing violence and strengthening capacities of local actors in social cohesion and conflict mitigation. The CRS projects sampled in this study measured both interim steps toward social cohesion and justice improvements – for example, surveys on levels of and ability to manage trauma; assessments of improved capacity to manage conflict nonviolently – as well as how project interventions generated the higher-level outcomes – for example, reports by community structures about numbers of conflicts resolved without recourse

to violence, or the use of the [CRS mini-Social Cohesion Barometer](#) to assess overall improved social cohesion. The study found that most of the CRS evaluations employed the “independent, mixed methods final ... evaluations that are required to generate evidence of complex programs.”

FINDING 1: CRS’ 3BS – BINDING, BONDING, BRIDGING – APPROACH IS EFFECTIVE

CRS’ signature 3Bs – *Binding, Bonding, and Bridging* – approach¹ positively impacted social cohesion, whether completely or partially implemented. In particular, there is strong evidence that both *binding*, or intrapersonal healing and resilience, and *bridging*, or intergroup dialogue and collaboration, enhance social cohesion outcomes. Some positive evidence was also found for the contribution of *vertical* social cohesion – across levels of authority – to positive outcomes. In one project in Zimbabwe, creating forums for citizens to dialogue with local authorities led to a 35% increase in perceived responsiveness of leaders to community concerns, with over 88% of respondents agreeing that there had been an improvement.

EVIDENCE FOR INTEGRATED SOCIAL COHESION & JUSTICE

Little existing evidence links contributions of social cohesion and justice interventions to improved development or humanitarian outcomes. Further, **there is scant effort to integrate social cohesion and justice work into other types of programming in order to enhance impact in those other sectors.** Any such integration is typically only partial.

Similarly in the CRS projects studied, when social cohesion and justice activities are included in multisectoral programs, they are often implemented and measured either as a separate project phase or a separate wing of programming, rather than truly integrated. The relationship between these components is infrequently explored.

FINDING 2: INTEGRATION CAN IMPROVE SOCIAL COHESION OUTCOMES

A number of the projects in the CRS sample yielded both qualitative and quantitative evidence that adding social cohesion activities among other sectoral interventions always seemed to produce improved social cohesion; for example, participants in livelihoods programs that included social cohesion elements demonstrated or reported improved cohesion. There was also strong evidence that building capacities of local actors and engaging youth further enhanced these outcomes, with strong anecdotal evidence for the value of working with government.

Evaluations in several cases show the additive value of pairing social cohesion and economic development. In Central African Republic, participants trained on social cohesion testified to healing from past violence and trauma (*binding*), yet groups that were also supported with economic activities consequently experienced strengthened intragroup *bonding* and intergroup *bridging* as well. Ample evidence was also found in the study to support the social cohesion outcomes of Savings and Internal Lending Communities; these outcomes were present even when no particular social cohesion sensitization was provided but were even more evident when coupled with intentional social cohesion efforts. For example, in the case of a refugee returns program in Senegal, women in SILC groups who also benefitted from social cohesion workshops began using their groups to resolve community conflict.

“There is little evidence linking contributions of social cohesion and justice to development and humanitarian outcomes ... and little evidence that this link is considered.”

“These are very good processes, we are happy [things] have been changed. But we don’t eat peace.”

—PROJECT PARTICIPANT FROM ZIMBABWE

¹ For more information about CRS’ 3Bs approach, please consult [The Ties That Bind: Building Social Cohesion in Divided Societies](#).

The study identified initial limited-yet-promising evidence among the sampled CRS projects that social cohesion and justice integration leads to stronger humanitarian or development outcomes.

FINDING 3: INTEGRATION SHOWS PROMISING LINKS TO ENHANCED DEVELOPMENT & HUMANITARIAN OUTCOMES

Nearly one-third of the sampled CRS projects deployed social cohesion and justice interventions with the aim of enhancing development, resilience, or progress in recovery and returns. Project evaluations show initial limited-yet-promising evidence among this sample that such **integration leads to stronger humanitarian or development outcomes.**

In several of these cases, **improvements in social cohesion led to improvements in economic pursuits**, such as in better management of natural resources for collective benefit, or the ability of participants to form small businesses or reopen markets. For example, a resilience program in Sudan’s Darfur region documented improved year-round access to and management of key natural resources – land and water – for farmers and pastoralists alike as a result of the strengthened ability of different groups to dialogue. Supporting communities to organize themselves for effective, inclusive and equitable resource management was a key success factor directly attributed to the project.

In a multisectoral post-conflict recovery program in Ethiopia, once participants in the program’s business track underwent social cohesion training, they began forming new groups and small businesses together across divisions in ways that had not previously occurred, thus unlocking new livelihood opportunities. Similarly, as police from different communities participated in social cohesion activities, they were able to reach agreement on reopening roads, thus enabling greater market access for community members.

In addition, **adding a social cohesion component programming around return of displaced populations increased durability of that return.** In the same example from Ethiopia, joint community “connector projects” provided conflicting groups with the opportunity to improve communication and trust as they reconstructed water points and other infrastructure; the evaluation found that this process helped people to overcome suspicion and develop greater confidence to return home.

IMPROVING THE EVIDENCE BASE

The relationship of social cohesion and justice integration to humanitarian and development outcomes remains largely unexplored. This gap begins in the design phase: projects are generally not designed with clear theories of change articulating how the elements contribute to one another, nor are monitoring and evaluation systems geared to tracking this interplay.

CRS has become more intentional in designing programs employing social cohesion and justice approaches to augment humanitarian and development outcomes: paying greater attention to its role in a project’s theory of change; adopting standardized tools and indicators to track frequently sought outcomes and developing a means of assessing collective, systemic local capacity for peaceful conflict management; and investing in further research via quasi-experimental designs and longitudinal studies.

Future areas of research and programming focus – to capitalize on CRS strengths as well as to help fill recognized gaps and opportunities noted in the external literature – include the impacts of integration with natural resource management, disaster risk reduction, resilience and refugee/IDP returns, in addition to general livelihoods programming and enhancing local dispute management capacities.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, CRS makes the following recommendations for policymakers and peer agencies:

- Addressing community-level peacebuilding needs through building social cohesion has the potential to catalyze and enhance humanitarian and development outcomes. Donors should encourage integrated approaches including explicit theories of change that outline how different components contribute to expected outcomes and ensure these elements are measured.
- Greater investment in evidence-building is needed to fully understand and improve the mutually reinforcing benefits of integrated approaches. Fund research to capture learning.