

Effect of Media & Communication on Intermediate Social Cohesion Outcome

Media interventions in conflict regions showed a small effect on social cohesion. While they fostered dialogue and understanding, persistent divisions, trauma, and external tensions limited their overall impact.

Geographical Regions: Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America & Caribbean, Middle east & North Africa

Effect: Small effect ($g = 0.025$)

Confidence in study findings: Low (6 studies with 40 effect sizes)

Short summary

Media and communication interventions in conflict-affected contexts demonstrated small but uneven effects on social cohesion. Some initiatives enhanced fairness-based reasoning, self-efficacy, and historical perspective-taking, while others struggled to shift deep-seated biases, trauma, and political divisions. Certain programs reduced in-group superiority and improved tolerance, yet others unintentionally reinforced obedience to authority or entrenched stereotypes. Overall, the small positive gains highlight media's potential to promote coexistence, though results remain context-dependent and difficult to sustain. The cell is rated low confidence due to inconsistencies across studies.

Long summary

The intervention

The interventions included video campaigns, radio dramas, and counter-narrative programs using storytelling, dialogue, and educational content to promote tolerance and intergroup understanding. Activities often encouraged civic engagement, historical reflection, and empathy-building, aiming to challenge stereotypes and reduce hostility in polarized communities.

How the intervention is expected to work

Media interventions are designed to foster cognitive and emotional change by reshaping perceptions, reducing prejudice, and promoting social harmony. Through relatable narratives and inclusive messaging, they aim to improve empathy, enhance perspective-taking, and encourage cooperative attitudes, thereby strengthening intergroup cohesion in divided societies.

The evidence base

The cell comprises eight studies, including six impact evaluations (IEs) and two systematic reviews.

All included impact evaluations were conducted in conflict-affected regions—Colombia, Eastern DRC, Burundi, and Burkina Faso's Sahel region (Seno Province). Notably, three studies were conducted by the same author in different years.

Evidence findings

Media interventions had a small positive effect on social cohesion, improving fairness-based reasoning and reducing in-group bias in some cases. However, effects were inconsistent across contexts, with several studies reporting limited or even adverse outcomes due to external tensions, trauma, and unequal media exposure.

The review evidence

This cell consists of two SRs; A systematic review of counter-narrative and peace-building interventions found that media campaigns, storytelling, dialogue, and training effectively reduced stereotypes, built resistance to extremist narratives, and promoted intergroup understanding. These interventions enhanced emotional regulation, self-efficacy, and the value of peace while fostering knowledge about out-groups and social cohesion. However, their long-term impact on sustaining behavioral change remained inconsistent, with limited evidence on translating attitudinal shifts into concrete peace-building actions.

Included studies:

The cell comprises six primary studies/IEs, with one study excluded from effect size (ES) calculation due to insufficient data for computing “d.” A detailed summary is provided below.

Bruneau (2022) evaluated a 5.5-minute media video intervention designed to address psychological barriers to peace in Colombia. Created in collaboration with Colombian filmmakers, the video featured interviews with ex-FARC combatants and non-FARC Colombians. It focused on reducing negative beliefs about the willingness and ability of FARC members to reintegrate into society. The intervention highlighted successful coexistence initiatives, such as mixed sports teams and community events in demobilization camps, to demonstrate FARC members' capacity for positive change. The primary objective was to promote peace and reintegration by challenging the belief that FARC members are unwilling and incapable of change. This objective was guided by a theory of change rooted in cognitive belief modification rather than affective pathways, such as empathy, to reduce psychological barriers to reconciliation.

The study revealed that the intervention consistently reduced the dehumanization of FARC members across studies, with statistically significant effects that persisted over time. Overall, the study is rated as high confidence in the consistency of findings.

The Billali 2015 evaluates the intervention involved in a radio drama, *Kumbuka Kesho*, broadcast in Eastern DRC to promote peaceful intergroup relations amidst ongoing violence, it used fictional narratives grounded in social psychology theories to model reconciliation and trauma recovery behaviors. The objective was to test if media-based interventions effective in post-conflict settings (e.g., Rwanda, Burundi) could foster inclusive victim consciousness, reduce social distance, and mitigate conflict-enhancing attitudes in an ongoing conflict context. A mixed-methods study included an experimental priming paradigm with 1,522 participants and focus group interviews with 51 listeners. The intervention showed mixed results. Historical perspective-taking improved, with significant increases in inclusive victim consciousness and reductions in exclusive victim consciousness among listeners. However, priming unexpectedly increased obedience to leaders, contradicting intervention goals. There was no significant impact on tolerance for differing perspectives or reductions in in-group superiority, highlighting the challenges of fostering broader attitudinal changes in ongoing conflict settings. Overall, the study indicated medium-quality methodology and mixed effectiveness in fostering peace under continuous trauma conditions.

The Billali 2015 evaluates the radio drama *Murikira Ukuri* ("Shedding Light on the Truth") in Burundi, which used an entertainment-education approach to address intergroup conflict and reconciliation. It addressed intergroup conflict and reconciliation through a fictional story of two socio-economically different ethnic groups. The drama embedded educational messages based on psychological theories of intergroup conflict and trauma healing, aiming to challenge stereotypes, foster empathy, and promote active bystandership. Its objectives included raising awareness about violence, encouraging interventions against harmful behaviors, challenging in-group superiority, and fostering trust, tolerance, and cooperation. The design drew on Staub's theories of violence and reconciliation, emphasizing the importance of history, role models, and social norms.

The study involved 1,074 participants and found that listeners showed greater tolerance, reduced in-group superiority, and were more open to trauma disclosure. Exposure to violence led to stronger changes, particularly in perspective-taking, suggesting the drama successfully fostered tolerance, reduced bias, and encouraged discussions on trauma. The study is rated as a low confidence study.

Bilali et al. 2019 evaluated the Voices for Peace project, featuring the radio drama *Wuro Potal*, which aimed to counter violent extremism in Burkina Faso's Sahel region. The intervention sought to reduce vulnerability to extremism by raising awareness, promoting dialogue, fostering social cohesion, and encouraging collaboration with security forces. It included weekly listening sessions in 66 treatment villages over 12 weeks, where participants engaged in 52 episodes addressing issues such as corruption, governance, and police-community relations. Personnel facilitated group discussions to encourage reflection on key themes and collective learning. Conducted in Seno Province, the study surveyed 2,904 core participants from 132 villages (66 treatment, 66 control) at baseline and endline, with 2,112 network participants also included.

The intervention assessed various outcomes related to self and collective efficacy beliefs. It significantly increased participants' confidence in their community's ability to address violent extremism, reducing collective fatalism. Individually, participants felt more capable of driving positive changes within their community, enhancing their self-efficacy. At the collective level, the intervention bolstered perceptions of the community's ability to create social change through collaborative efforts. These results demonstrate the intervention's effectiveness in strengthening both individual and collective agency in addressing security and social challenges. The study is rated as a medium - high confidence study.

Finkel (2018) The Peace through Development II (PDEV II) program (2011-2016) aimed to strengthen resilience against violent extremism in Burkina Faso, Chad, and Niger by promoting social cohesion, civic engagement, and positive community outlooks. It combined media, education, vocational training, and governance-focused initiatives, with a key component being radio programming to counter extremist narratives and encourage dialogue. Additional activities included leadership training, livelihood support, and civic education. The program's impact was assessed using a quasi-experimental difference-in-differences (DiD) approach, comparing full-intervention core zones, media-only non-core zones, and no-activity zones. Findings showed increased awareness of peace and conflict mediation but no significant improvement in self-efficacy. While some reductions in perceived ethnic and religious differences were observed, especially in Burkina Faso, these effects were weak and inconsistent across countries, indicating that while the program influenced awareness and perceptions, deeper behavioral and attitudinal changes remained limited and context-dependent. The study is rated as a medium confidence.

Cole (2003) evaluates The Rechov Sumsum/Shara'a Simsim television series was designed to promote mutual respect and understanding among Israeli and Palestinian children by depicting positive intergroup interactions. Using a pre-test/post-test design, the study assessed 275 preschoolers from Israeli-Jewish, Palestinian-Israeli, and Palestinian communities in Tel Aviv, Acre, and Ramallah, focusing on stereotypes, cultural knowledge, and conflict resolution.

While the program had some positive effects, particularly among Israeli-Jewish and Palestinian-Israeli children, who showed greater fairness-based reasoning in conflicts, Palestinian children exhibited increased negative stereotypes toward Jewish adults. This regression was likely due to external sociopolitical tensions and differences in media exposure, as the Palestinian version contained fewer direct intergroup interactions. Although Palestinian children improved in rule-based reasoning, their perceptions remained largely shaped by external realities, limiting the program's overall impact on reducing hostility. Ultimately, while the intervention enhanced cultural awareness and encouraged some prosocial behaviors, deep-seated biases and real-world conflicts still heavily influenced children's perceptions, showing that media alone cannot fully counteract societal divisions. The study is rated as a low confidence.

Confidence assessment

The cell is rated low confidence due to variability in findings and inconsistency in effect sizes across independent studies, despite a moderate evidence base.

Other outcomes in this study

Violence and atrocity prevention/Social norms regarding violence and atrocities

Social cohesion/Feelings of trust and acceptance of diversity

Community and state governance/Government performance

Government performance/Civic participation