

Effect of social funds, community-driven development and reconstruction on nature and scale of violence and atrocities

Social funds, community-driven development, and reconstruction programs overall had no effect on violence outcomes, with some interventions showing small reductions, others no impact, and a few unintentionally increasing conflict casualties.

Geographical space: South Asia, Middle East & North Africa, Sub Saharan Africa, East Asia & Pacific.

Effect size: No effect ($g=-0.005$)

Confidence in study findings: Low confidence (8 studies; 27 ES)

Short summary

Social funds, community-driven development (CDD), and reconstruction programs had no overall effect on violence and atrocities. While some interventions produced marginal reductions in violent incidents, insurgent attacks, or conflict casualties, others had no measurable impact. A few programs inadvertently increased conflict casualties, highlighting unintended consequences of development initiatives in fragile settings. Confidence in this cell is low due to inconsistent effect sizes and the predominance of low-confidence studies.

Long summary

The intervention

Interventions included social funds, CDD programs, local governance initiatives, infrastructure projects, livelihood support, mediation and dialogue efforts, and small-scale aid programs. Implementation often involved elected Community Development Councils (CDCs), block grants, Provincial Reconstruction Teams, or military-led emergency programs to enhance security, governance, and economic conditions in conflict-affected areas.

How the intervention is expected to work

These interventions aim to reduce violence by strengthening local governance, social cohesion, and economic well-being. CDD and social funds empower community decision-making, promote accountability, and encourage inclusivity. Infrastructure and livelihood projects address grievances that can fuel insurgency. Mediation and dialogue initiatives resolve disputes peacefully, while small-scale aid programs provide relief and foster trust between civilians and authorities. By targeting the root causes of instability, these interventions seek to mitigate violence and limit insurgent influence.

The evidence base

The cell includes eight impact evaluations and three systematic reviews. Methods included RCTs, panel data analyses, first-difference regressions, quasi-experimental designs, natural experiments, and survey experiments.

Studies were conducted in Afghanistan, Iraq, Sierra Leone, the Philippines, and Niger.

Evidence findings

Social funds, CDD, and reconstruction programs produced mixed outcomes on violence: some interventions marginally reduced conflict, others had no effect, and a few unintentionally increased violence, emphasizing the complexity of implementing development programs in fragile settings

The review evidence

Systematic reviews similarly report mixed effects: while some CDD and reconstruction efforts reduced violence, others failed or exacerbated it due to misappropriation, sabotage, or implementation challenges, highlighting the need for rigorous monitoring and evaluation.

The impact evaluation evidence

Beath (2012) examines the impact of the National Solidarity Programme (NSP) in Afghanistan, focusing on security perceptions. The intervention aimed to foster local governance through elected Community Development Councils (CDCs) and infrastructure projects. Conducted across 500 villages, with 250 receiving NSP, the study followed a randomized controlled trial design. The findings indicate no significant impact of the intervention on actual security outcomes. For villages that experienced attacks in the past 12 months, the treatment effect was a reduction of 0.3 percentage points, but this was not statistically significant ($p > 0.1$). Similarly, for attacks by anti-government elements in the past year, the treatment effect was a negligible reduction of 0.3 percentage points, again statistically insignificant ($p > 0.1$). Household-level insecurity also showed no significant changes. The proportion of households affected by insecurity in the village during the past year increased slightly by 0.3 percentage points in treatment areas. A similar pattern was observed for households affected by insecurity on roads around the district, where the treatment effect was an increase of 0.3 percentage points with no statistical significance ($p > 0.1$). When looking at the summary measure of survey-based security incidents, the treatment effect showed a slight reduction of 0.003, but this too was not significant ($p > 0.1$). The study is rated as low confidence quantitative study due to presence of sample attrition.

Beath (2015) evaluates the impact of Afghanistan's National Solidarity Programme (NSP), a large-scale rural development initiative aimed at improving local governance and economic well-being through community-driven projects. The NSP facilitates the creation of gender-balanced Community Development Councils (CDCs), providing block grants for local projects. The study covers 500 villages across 10 districts in Balkh, Baghlan, Daykundi, Ghor, Herat, and Nangarhar provinces. The evaluation uses a randomized controlled trial (RCT) approach, with 250 villages receiving NSP (treatment group) and 250 villages not receiving it (control group). Data was collected through baseline, midline, and endline surveys from 2007 to 2011, comprising over 25,000 household interviews and more than 2,600 focus groups. The sample includes 500 villages with household surveys and focus groups of village leaders and women. The data is derived from both male and female respondents. The findings indicate that the National Solidarity Programme (NSP) had mixed effects on conflict-related outcomes. There is no strong evidence that NSP reduced violent incidents, as the coefficients for violent incidents at both midline and endline ($p = 0.495$) were statistically insignificant. However, the fixed-effects interaction specification suggests a weakly significant reduction in violent incidents at the 10% level at endline. Regarding informal taxation by insurgent groups ($p = 0.266$) indicating a potential decline, but this result was not statistically significant. The findings suggest that while NSP may have had some positive security effects, they were not robust across all measures, particularly in reducing violent incidents and informal taxation by insurgents. The study is rated as high and medium confidence quantitative study.

Berman (2011) examines violent incidents against Coalition and Iraqi forces in Iraq between 2004 and 2008, using a dataset of significant activity (SIGACT) reports. The research focuses on predictors of violence and the impact of counterinsurgency strategies. Findings indicate that violence was highly concentrated in a few districts and varied significantly over time. Sunni vote share was a key predictor, with districts voting entirely Sunni experiencing 2.1 more violent incidents per 1,000 than those with

no Sunni votes ($p < 0.01$). Violence escalated over time, increasing by 0.19 incidents per 1,000 in 2005, 0.53 in 2006, and 0.61 in 2007, before dropping sharply in 2008 ($p < 0.01$). The 2007 increase was particularly pronounced in Sunni-majority districts, where violence rose by 0.23 incidents per 1,000 ($p < 0.05$). These results highlight the role of sectarian dynamics in shaping conflict intensity and the temporal patterns of violence. The study is rated as high and medium confidence quantitative study.

Berman (2013) examines the effects of development aid on insurgent violence in Iraq, specifically focusing on the rate of attacks per capita against Coalition and Iraqi government forces. Conducted in Iraq from 2004 to 2009, the study utilizes panel data on U.S. government aid spending and insurgent attack reports, employing a first-differences design to estimate causal effects. The sample includes data from multiple districts across Iraq, incorporating information on troop strength, Provincial Reconstruction Teams, and different types of aid programs. Findings indicate that small-scale aid projects, particularly those funded through the Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP), significantly reduced violence. A \$50 per capita increase in CERP spending led to approximately six fewer violent incidents per 100,000 residents in six months ($p < 0.01$). Small CERP projects had six times the violence-reducing effect compared to larger projects ($p < 0.01$). The presence of additional battalions strengthened these effects, and areas with Provincial Reconstruction Teams saw enhanced reductions in violence, reinforcing the importance of small, secure, and locally informed aid strategies. The study is rated as high and medium confidence quantitative study.

Casey (2013) The GoBifo Project, implemented in Sierra Leone, aimed to foster inclusive decision-making, strengthen local institutions, and provide united block grants for community development. A core goal was to shift political and social attitudes towards greater inclusivity and democratic participation. Location of the study was Sierra Leone, specifically targeting rural communities across Bombali and Bonthe districts. A randomized controlled trial (RCT) assigned 236 villages to treatment or control groups. The project involved community facilitation, development planning, and project implementation over four years (2005–2009). Impact was assessed through household surveys, focus groups, and structured community activities. The study surveyed 2,832 households in 236 villages. The GoBifo project in Sierra Leone had no significant impact on reducing crime and conflict. The estimated treatment effect for crime and conflict reduction was 0.028 standard deviation units ($p = 0.54$), indicating a small, statistically insignificant change. This suggests that while the intervention may have improved governance and economic welfare, it did not lead to measurable reductions in community-level violence or crime. The study is rated as high and medium confidence quantitative study.

Chou (2012) investigates the impact of development assistance on insurgent violence in Afghanistan, focusing on insurgent events per 1,000 population. Conducted across multiple Afghan districts from 2002 to 2010, the study utilizes a panel dataset of 60,075 insurgent incidents and development aid expenditures from three major programs: the National Solidarity Program (NSP), USAID's Local Governance and Community Development (LGCD) program, and the U.S. military's Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP). Using first-difference regressions to control for district-level characteristics, the study finds no statistically significant reduction in insurgent events per 1,000 population due to NSP or LGCD spending. The coefficient for NSP was 0.00116 ($p > 0.1$), and for LGCD, 0.000246 ($p > 0.1$), indicating no meaningful effect. However, CERP spending showed a negative coefficient of -0.0110 ($p > 0.1$), suggesting a potential reduction in violence, though the effect was not statistically significant. Small-scale CERP projects were more effective, reducing insurgent events by -0.0291 per 1,000 population ($p > 0.1$). The results indicate aid conditionality plays a crucial role in influencing security outcomes. The study is rated as high and medium confidence quantitative study.

Crost (2014) examines the impact of the KALAH-CIDSS development program in the Philippines, which aimed to enhance local infrastructure and governance but unexpectedly led to an increase in conflict casualties. Using a regression discontinuity design, the study analysed municipalities just above and below the eligibility threshold. The sample included 222 municipalities, with 7,992 observations over the period 2002-2006. Findings indicate that conflict casualties increased significantly in municipalities eligible for the program. Specifically, insurgent-initiated incidents

resulted in an increase in casualties by 0.088 to 0.118 per month ($p < 0.05$), while government casualties rose between 0.048 and 0.070 ($p < 0.05$). Civilian casualties also saw an increase ranging from 0.017 to 0.029 per month, though not all estimates were statistically significant. The impact was most pronounced in the early stages of program preparation, suggesting that insurgents sought to disrupt the initiative before funds were disbursed. These results highlight how development programs can inadvertently exacerbate conflict by altering the political and economic landscape of contested areas. The study is rated as low confidence quantitative study due to selectively report incidents and the sample size is large, the actual number of conflict incidents and casualties is relatively low.

Lichtenheld (2022) evaluates the PEACE (Preventing Extremism through Action and Community Engagement) program, which aimed to enhance social cohesion and reduce support for violence in Niger's Tillabéri region. The intervention employed community-driven development (CDD) strategies, mediation and dialogue sessions, shared infrastructure projects, livelihoods support, and cultural/sports activities to improve intergroup relations and reduce vulnerability to violent extremism. The study used a quasi-experimental approach, with a difference-in-differences (DiD) analysis comparing communities with different levels of exposure to PEACE activities. It incorporated direct survey questions and indirect survey experiments (list experiments and endorsement experiments) to measure support for violence while minimizing social desirability bias. The study focused on 40 villages and the final sample size for endline survey experiments (measuring support for violence) was 589 respondents. Participants included men, women, and youth across different ethnic and livelihood groups. The findings indicate that the PEACE program in Niger had no significant effect on reducing youth-started conflicts or women-started conflicts, with both showing statistically insignificant results ($p > 0.1$). The incidence of conflict in treatment areas remained unchanged compared to control areas ($p = 0.37$). However, the number of violent incidents slightly decreased in villages with higher participation in the program, but the effect was not statistically significant ($p = 0.22$). These results suggest that while the intervention aimed to strengthen social cohesion, it did not lead to measurable reductions in conflict intensity or frequency. The study is considered low confidence quantitative study.

Confidence assessment

Confidence in this cell is low due to inconsistent effect sizes, with most of the included studies rated as low confidence.

Link to review summaries

Cramer (2016)

Wong (2012)

Zurcher (2017)

Other outcomes in the study

- Violence and atrocity prevention/Diplomatic relations and peaceful dispute resolution/social norms regarding violence and atrocities
- Social cohesion/Feelings of trust and acceptance of diversity/willingness to participate or help
- Community and state governance/Access to justice, rights and public services/Government performance/Civic participation
- Human security/Intermediate social cohesion outcomes/food security and nutrition and health security/Educational security/Physical Security/ Political security