

## **Effect of transitional or restorative justice & Justice system support and reform on Sense of belonging**

Transitional and restorative justice interventions had large positive effects on the sense of belonging by fostering collective identity and community participation.

Geographic Location: Sub Saharan Africa

Effect: Large effect ( $g = 0.902$ )

Confidence in study findings: Low (3 studies with 8 effect sizes)

### **Short Summary:**

The studies suggest that transitional and restorative justice mechanisms, alongside justice system support and reform, play a crucial role in fostering a sense of belonging in post-conflict communities. Cilliers (2018) argued that the Fambul Tok reconciliation program in Sierra Leone strengthened social cohesion and community engagement, as participants were more likely to join local organizations and interact with neighbors. However, revisiting trauma also led to psychological distress, which could complicate long-term reintegration. Similarly, studies on Rwanda's Gacaca courts (Kanyangara, 2014; Rime, 2011) indicate that participation fostered a shared national identity and reduced intergroup stereotyping, reinforcing social integration. Overall, while justice interventions can enhance a sense of belonging by promoting collective identity and community participation, their emotional and psychological costs must be addressed to ensure sustainable social reintegration and trust-building.

### **Long Summary:**

#### *The Intervention:*

Interventions aim to convene victims and perpetrators of historic or recent conflicts to prevent further violence. This includes Truth and Reconciliation Commissions and other formal or informal justice mechanisms, which may result in acknowledgment of harm, apologies, and agreements to repair damages. Broader justice reforms, such as improving court accessibility, integrating human rights into legal frameworks, and strengthening legal protections, complement these efforts to foster social cohesion and collective trust.

#### *How the intervention is expected to work:*

These interventions promote reconciliation and strengthen social cohesion by combining truth-telling, forgiveness ceremonies, and community participation. The Fambul Tok program in Sierra Leone (Cilliers, 2018) encouraged engagement in local organizations, rebuilding social networks and trust. Rwanda's Gacaca courts (Kanyangara, 2014; Rime, 2011) provided community-based forums for survivors and perpetrators to confront the past, reduce guilt, and foster a shared national identity. While participation strengthens social integration, psychological risks such as emotional distress and distrust—especially when apologies are perceived as insincere—must be carefully managed.

#### *The evidence base:*

This cell consists of 4 studies, 2 impact evaluations utilising RCTs, 1 evaluation utilising a quasi-experimental design and finally a qualitative study by Muke (2016).

The primary studies are from Rwanda (3 studies) and Sierra Leone (1 study).

### *Evidence findings*

Transitional and restorative justice interventions, particularly reconciliation programs, have a large positive effect on individuals' sense of belonging and community cohesion in post-conflict settings. Mechanisms such as the Fambul Tok program in Sierra Leone (Cilliers, 2018) strengthened social cohesion and encouraged community engagement, with participants more likely to join local organizations and interact with neighbors. Similarly, Rwanda's Gacaca courts (Kanyangara, 2014; Rime, 2011) fostered a shared national identity and reduced intergroup stereotyping, reinforcing social integration. However, revisiting past trauma can cause psychological distress, which may undermine long-term reintegration. Overall, these justice interventions can significantly enhance collective identity and participation, but careful implementation and integrated psychological support are essential to sustain social reintegration and trust-building.

### *Included Studies:*

**Cilliers (2018):** This study examines the impact of transitional and restorative justice, specifically the Fambul Tok reconciliation program in Sierra Leone, on individuals' sense of belonging in post-conflict communities. The findings suggest that while reconciliation efforts strengthened community bonds and collective identity, they also carried psychological costs that complicated social reintegration. One of the study's key findings is that participation in reconciliation programs fostered a stronger sense of community and social cohesion. Individuals in treated villages were more likely to engage in community activities, such as joining parent-teacher associations (PTAs), religious groups, and women's organizations. The study notes that "individuals residing in treated villages also became more community-oriented in their behaviour: they joined more organisations like parent-teacher associations and contributed more to public goods". This suggests that transitional justice mechanisms can promote a sense of social responsibility and belonging by encouraging community engagement. However, the study also highlights the emotional burden of revisiting past trauma, which, for some participants, led to higher levels of anxiety, depression, and PTSD symptoms. While reconciliation brought communities together, it also reopened psychological wounds, potentially hindering long-term reintegration for certain individuals. Overall, the findings suggest that transitional and restorative justice initiatives can enhance a sense of belonging by fostering social cohesion, encouraging participation, and restoring trust. This is a high confidence study.

**Kanyangara (2014):** This study explores the impact of transitional and restorative justice, particularly the Gacaca courts in Rwanda, on individuals' sense of belonging in post-genocide communities. The findings reveal that while participation in Gacaca tribunals had positive effects on social cohesion, it also introduced psychosocial challenges, particularly for survivors. One of the study's key findings is that participation in Gacaca enhanced social integration, particularly by reducing survivors' personal and collective guilt and increasing their empowerment within the community. The study notes that participation "led to a marked reduction in survivors' personal and collective guilt and to an increase in prisoners' personal guilt". This shift in emotional burden helped survivors regain a sense of control, reinforcing their connection to the broader social fabric. Additionally, the findings suggest that Gacaca contributed to a sense of collective identity, aligning with Durkheim's theory that participation

in collective rituals fosters social cohesion. The study explains that “participation generally resulted in positive effects on social integration”, indicating that engaging in structured justice processes can help individuals see themselves as part of a larger national community rather than divided ethnic groups. However, the study also highlights negative emotional consequences, particularly among survivors. Many experienced heightened distrust and skepticism toward perpetrators' apologies, which in turn weakened their willingness to reintegrate and build relationships across groups. Findings suggested that “survivors who participated in Gacaca had greater doubts about Gacaca, trusted the prisoners' apologies less, were less inclined to forgive, and were more revengeful”. These findings suggest that while justice mechanisms can promote a shared sense of belonging at a macro level, they may also exacerbate emotional wounds at an interpersonal level, particularly when trust and sincerity in the process are questioned. This study is rated low confidence due to its partial definition of evaluation questions and outcomes as well as lack of power calculations.

**Rime (2011):** The study examines the role of transitional and restorative justice, specifically the Gacaca tribunals in Rwanda, in fostering a sense of belonging among post-genocide communities. The findings suggest that while collective participation in truth and reconciliation processes enhances social cohesion and strengthens collective identity, the emotional consequences are complex. A key finding is that participation in Gacaca tribunals promoted identification with a shared national identity over ethnic divisions. The study notes that “participation in Gacaca strengthened participants' self-definition in ‘non-ethnic’ terms”, indicating that such mechanisms help relax intergroup boundaries and foster unity. Additionally, participation reduced out-group stereotyping, making individuals more likely to see members of opposing groups as individuals rather than homogenous adversaries. The study also highlights that Gacaca rituals reinforced social cohesion by fostering emotional communion. Through collective truth-telling, emotional expression, and shared suffering, participants experienced a greater sense of group belonging. As the authors explain, “feelings of group belongingness and social consensus become set at the foreground of participants' representations, lowering individual self-salience and enhancing collective identity”. This suggests that the ritualized nature of transitional justice mechanisms can reinforce a collective national identity, strengthening individuals' connection to their communities. However, the study cautions that the emotional burden of truth-telling can sometimes undermine these positive effects. Survivors, in particular, reported increased sadness, anger, and anxiety following participation, which in some cases led to a more negative perception of the emotional climate in their community. Overall, this study is graded low confidence due to its non-experimental design, no mention of power calculations and unreported levels of attrition.

*Confidence Assessment:*

Overall Low: Confidence in the findings is low due to the limited number of studies included in this cell.

**Other outcomes in this study:**

Social cohesion / Feelings of trust and acceptance of diversity

Human security / Intermediate social cohesion outcomes