

Effect of transitional or restorative justice & Justice system support and reform on Government Performance

Transitional and restorative justice have large effects on government performance by strengthening institutional trust, improving dispute resolution, and reducing reliance on non-state actors.

Geographic Location: Latin America & Caribbean, Sub Saharan Africa and Global

Effect: Large effect (g=2.872)

Confidence in study findings: Low (3 studies with 38 effect sizes)

Short Summary:

The evidence in this cell indicates that transitional and restorative justice, combined with justice system reform, have a large effect on government performance. These interventions strengthen institutions, facilitate dispute resolution, and reduce reliance on armed groups. Their effectiveness is often constrained by weak enforcement, limited political will, and inadequate institutional capacity. Studies show that truth commissions and justice reforms produce better outcomes when paired with accountability measures and local engagement. Without sustained commitment and systemic reform, these mechanisms risk remaining largely symbolic rather than transformative in post-conflict governance.

Long Summary

The Intervention:

Interventions include efforts to convene meetings between victims and perpetrators of historic or current conflict to prevent further violence. This encompasses Truth and Reconciliation Commissions and other initiatives aimed at acknowledging wrongdoing, offering apologies, and repairing harm. They also involve reforms to improve the rule of law and justice system, such as integrating human rights into legal frameworks, capacity building for courts and lawyers, and criminal code reform to ensure equal protection under national law.

How the Intervention is expected to work:

The ComunPaz program in Colombia sought to replace rebel governance and strengthen the state's presence in rural areas historically controlled by FARC and other armed groups. It aimed to improve dispute resolution, foster collaboration between state and community institutions, and build trust in government authorities. The program addressed gaps in information, trust, and coordination by training state and communal authorities, clarifying their legal roles, and enhancing cooperation.

The Evidence Base:

This cell contains 7 studies: 3 impact evaluations (1 RCT and 2 quasi-experimental studies), 3 qualitative studies (Honeyman 2004; Lang 2019; Muke 2016), and 1 RCT protocol (Vargas 2018, ongoing). The studies are based in Colombia (3), Rwanda (3), and globally (2).

The studies are based in Colombia (3 studies), Rwanda (3 studies) and finally there are (2 studies) with a Global focus.

Evidence Findings:

Transitional and restorative justice interventions, combined with justice system reforms, show a large effect on strengthening institutions, enhancing dispute resolution, and reducing reliance on armed groups. However, without sustained political commitment and comprehensive systemic reforms, these mechanisms risk becoming symbolic, limiting their transformative impact on post-conflict governance.

Included Studies:

Blair (2022): This study highlights how state and communal institutions can work together to fill governance gaps left by rebel demobilisation, preventing armed groups from reclaiming control. The findings suggest that justice system reform can improve governance, but its success depends on trust, coordination, and institutional capacity. The ComunPaz program was implemented in rural areas previously dominated by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). The intervention aimed to "enhance the quality of local dispute resolution, increase citizens' trust in (some) state institutions, and strengthen coordination between state and communal authorities." While the program improved coordination and reduced reliance on armed groups, it did not significantly increase trust in communal institutions or reliance on state mechanisms for dispute resolution. The study states that "providing institutions to resolve disputes is essential for preventing armed actors from becoming new de facto rulers in areas formerly ruled by rebels or paramilitaries." However, many communities historically distrusted state institutions, making it difficult to fully integrate judicial reforms. The study also notes that in weak post-conflict states, the best strategy for resolving disputes is often to "partner with communal institutions," as they have deeper local legitimacy and insider knowledge that the state lacks. Despite these improvements, no evidence in the study showed that the program increased reliance on state authorities to resolve disputes, nor did it significantly alter perceptions of communal institutions. This suggests that while justice system support and transitional justice mechanisms can enhance governance by filling security and judicial gaps, their impact is limited without deeper institutional reforms and long-term state investment. This study is rated low confidence due to partial outcome definitions and no mention of power calculations.

Nichols-Barrer (2014): This study evaluates the Rwanda Threshold Program (RTP) and its impact on government performance, focusing on governance reforms in areas such as law enforcement, judicial processes, media, and civic participation. The findings suggest mixed effects of these transitional justice and governance reforms on government performance. One major area of impact was police accountability and citizen trust through the Strengthening Rwanda National Police (RNP) inspectorate services. The study discovered that while public awareness of complaint and commendation submission boxes increased in areas where they were installed, "living near a submission box is not correlated with improved perceptions of the RNP's trustworthiness or effectiveness." This suggests that while transitional justice mechanisms can introduce structural reforms, they may not automatically lead to increased public confidence in government institutions. Furthermore, the study noted "important barriers to continuing the citizen feedback system now that the RTP has concluded," highlighting the sustainability challenges of justice system reforms when external funding ends. In the judicial sector, the Strengthening Rule of Law for Policy Reform component aimed to professionalize

Rwanda's judicial system, including training judges in international legal standards. However, the evidence shows that "the quality of judicial decision writing was relatively high before the program began", meaning there was little room for improvement. After the program's completion, "quality scores remained high but there was no evidence of additional improvement." This indicates that while reforms can enhance institutional procedures, their impact on overall government performance may be limited if baseline conditions are already strong. This study is rated medium confidence due to partial description of intervention and outcome definitions as well as non-experimental design.

Royer (2017): Royer argues that while truth commissions are widely recommended in post-conflict settings, their effectiveness in isolation is questionable. The study finds that "truth commissions are unlikely to produce positive societal outcomes if used in isolation from other transitional justice mechanisms." Instead, truth commissions paired with reparations or retributive justice measures tend to yield better outcomes, including "increased levels of democratisation, reduced levels of communal violence, and increased levels of wealth in post-conflict countries". Royer's case study of Rwanda's gacaca courts highlights the importance of localised, bottom-up approaches in justice reform. The gacaca courts were designed to handle crimes from the Rwandan genocide, offering a community-based form of justice. The study finds that "top-down approaches will likely fail to accomplish their goals if they do not provide tangible results at the local level." Public perception data suggests that while the gacaca courts were imperfect, they were viewed as a more relevant and accessible form of justice than external tribunals. Moreover, the study critiques transitional justice programs that lack political will and institutional backing. Royer emphasises that "we must continue to rethink how transitional justice is being implemented in situations marked by past periods of violence and instability at the local level." A hybrid approach, blending international norms with grassroots solutions, appears to be the most effective path toward government reform and improved governance performance. In summary, transitional and restorative justice mechanisms can enhance government performance, but only if they are supported by broader legal reforms and localised, community-driven efforts. Truth commissions, while valuable, must be paired with accountability measures and institutional support to be truly effective in rebuilding post-conflict societies. This study is rated medium confidence due to non-experimental design and partial intervention definition and no mention of power calculations.

Confidence Assessment:

Overall low: The cell has a limited number of studies.

Other outcomes in the study:

Human Security / Economic Security

Community and state governance / Presence and quality of social safety nets

Social cohesion / Feelings of trust & Acceptance of diversity