

## Effect of transitional or restorative justice & Justice system support and reform on Intermediate social cohesion

Transitional and restorative justice, alongside justice system reforms, have a small effect on intermediate social cohesion, fostering forgiveness, trust, and community engagement, though effectiveness depends on implementation.

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

Effect: Small effect ( $g=0.065$ )

Confidence in study findings: Low (5 studies with 18 effect sizes)

### Short Summary:

The evidence in this cell suggests that transitional justice interventions can modestly enhance social cohesion by promoting reconciliation, trust, and collective engagement. Studies show that initiatives like gacaca courts, truth-telling programs, religious participation, and economic support contribute to post-conflict community involvement and social repair. However, perceptions of justice and fair grievance redress are critical, as interventions can sometimes reinforce divisions instead of fostering unity. Overall, the effect on social cohesion is small.

### Long Summary

#### *The Intervention:*

The interventions include meetings between victims and perpetrators, truth and reconciliation commissions, and other mechanisms aiming to acknowledge harm, facilitate apologies, and repair damages. Justice system reforms involve improving courts, legal access, human rights integration, capacity building, and criminal code reform to strengthen rule of law and fairness.

#### *How the Intervention was expected to work:*

These interventions aim to build reconciliation and intermediate social cohesion by addressing trauma, promoting justice, and supporting conflict resolution. Trauma-healing programs improve emotional resilience and relationships, conflict resolution workshops build non-violent skills, and gacaca courts or truth-telling initiatives encourage restorative justice and forgiveness. Religious participation reinforces moral guidance and reconciliation, while community and economic development programs address inequalities, fostering stability and interdependence critical for sustainable peace.

#### *The Evidence Base:*

The cell contains 8 studies: 5 impact evaluations, 2 qualitative studies (Heykoop 2014; Muke 2016), and 1 ongoing RCT protocol (Vargas 2018). The studies are from Rwanda (4), Uganda (1), Liberia (1), Sierra Leone (1), and Colombia (1).

#### *Evidence findings:*

The studies show that transitional and restorative justice interventions can modestly enhance social cohesion. For example, organized group religious participation in Rwanda strengthened reconciliation and trust. However, multiple factors—such as economic conditions, historical distrust, intergroup differences, and political dynamics can limit the effectiveness of cohesion-building resulting in a small overall effect.

*Included Studies:*

**Bazuin (2013):** The study highlights key factors influencing social cohesion among Ugandans after the war, emphasizing the challenges posed by trauma, economic instability, and lingering grievances. It finds a negative correlation between post-traumatic stress and openness to reconciliation, with highly traumatized individuals struggling to trust former enemies. Truth-telling mechanisms and community-based healing programs, such as radio interventions, have shown promise in fostering reconciliation, though some view justice efforts as inadequate. Economic development plays a crucial role, as financial insecurity often fuels resentment and hinders social cohesion. Religious institutions have been instrumental in promoting forgiveness, providing narratives that help communities cope with trauma. Women, despite experiencing higher PTSD rates, have been central to community rebuilding, while higher education levels sometimes correlate with decreased openness to reconciliation due to heightened awareness of past injustices. However, sustainability remains a challenge, with funding limitations and political instability threatening long-term peace efforts. This study is rated low confidence due to little or no description of the interventions and outcomes.

**Best (2011):** This study demonstrates that participation in truth and reconciliation processes can transform social relationships between victims and perpetrators by reducing perceived outgroup homogeneity and promoting positive intergroup perceptions. Transitional justice mechanisms encourage emotional expression and truth-telling, leading to increased empathy and mutual understanding. This process, while often painful in the short term due to the reactivation of negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, and sadness, contributes to long-term social integration by reducing in-group bias and fostering a sense of shared national identity. Additionally, justice system reforms that emphasise procedural fairness and victim participation reinforce trust in legal institutions, which is essential for rebuilding social cohesion in post-conflict societies. Through formal apology mechanisms and public recognition of wrongdoing, restorative justice provides a structured avenue for acknowledging past harms, thereby facilitating reintegration and strengthening communal bonds. However, the effectiveness of these mechanisms depends on the ability to balance emotional healing with institutional reform, ensuring that justice processes are perceived as fair and inclusive by all societal groups. This study is rated medium confidence due to partial description of evaluation questions and no mention of power calculations. Additionally effect sizes could not be extracted from this study due to insufficient data against the outcome measured in this cell.

**Caparos (2020):** This study highlights that transitional justice measures—such as the Gacaca trials—can bolster intermediate social cohesion by enhancing openness to reconciliation among affected communities. For example, survivors who participated in the trials appeared to be “more open to reconciliation” than those who did not attend, indicating that such mechanisms can help rebuild social bonds in post-conflict settings. Yet, the study also warns that “reconstructing social cohesion may be more costly for victims of the violence”, suggesting that while these interventions can strengthen collective ties, they may also impose significant psychological burdens on individuals by reopening traumatic wounds

and intensifying feelings of collective guilt. This study is rated low confidence due to little to no description of evaluation questions and no mention of power calculations.

**Cilliers (2018):** The findings in this study indicate that reconciliation programs, such as those implemented in Sierra Leone, can both strengthen social networks and community participation while also imposing psychological costs. These justice mechanisms promote forgiveness, reduce stigma towards former combatants, and foster stronger social ties, ultimately leading to increased trust and cooperation within communities. Reconciliation efforts encourage individuals to participate in local organizations, engage in collective activities, and contribute to public goods, which are crucial elements of social cohesion. However, the process also entails emotional distress, as reliving traumatic experiences may exacerbate anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among victims and even perpetrators. This dual effect highlights the need for a careful balance between fostering societal reconciliation and addressing the psychological well-being of individuals. Justice system reforms that prioritize victim participation and procedural fairness enhance trust in institutions, further reinforcing social cohesion by ensuring that communities perceive justice processes as fair and inclusive. This study is rated high confidence.

**Nichols-Barrer (2014):** Findings from the study suggest that strengthening the rule of law, civic participation, and institutional accountability are key elements in improving social cohesion at an intermediate level. For example, efforts to increase transparency, encourage citizen participation in governance, and promote fair judicial processes have led to greater trust in public institutions and enhanced community collaboration. Community-based truth-telling and reconciliation efforts, provide platforms for victims and perpetrators to engage in structured dialogue, which reduces social polarisation and fosters shared identity formation. Transitional justice interventions particularly in the case of post-genocide Rwanda demonstrate mixed but largely positive effects on rebuilding social ties. However, challenges remain, such as ensuring that marginalised groups feel included in the process and mitigating the psychological distress that may arise from revisiting past traumas. When communities perceive justice institutions as fair and responsive, they are more likely to engage in collaborative civic activities, economic cooperation, and collective decision-making, leading to stronger communal bonds. However, the study also highlights that justice reforms must be sustained and accompanied by broader social and economic policies to ensure long-term cohesion. This study is rated medium confidence due to partial description of intervention and outcome definitions as well as non-experimental design.

#### *Confidence Assessment:*

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

#### **Other outcomes in the study:**

Human security / Economic security

Human security / Political security

Community and state governance / Government performance