

Effect of transitional or restorative justice & Justice system support and reform on Willingness to participate or help

Justice mechanisms that promote truth and accountability have a **small effect** on trust and civic engagement. If not carefully managed, they can risk re-traumatizing victims and reducing participation.

Effect: Small effect (g= 0.097)

Geographic Location: Sub Saharan Africa

Confidence in study findings: Low (1 studies with 2 effect sizes)

Short Summary

Transitional and restorative justice interventions have a small positive effect on willingness to participate and help in communities. In Sierra Leone, the Fambul Tok program modestly increased participation in parent-teacher associations, religious groups, and women's organizations and strengthened social networks. In Rwanda, the Gacaca tribunals encouraged social cohesion and collective responsibility, though revisiting past trauma caused higher anxiety, depression, and PTSD symptoms for some participants. The small effect highlights that while these interventions can improve civic engagement, careful management is needed to mitigate psychological risks.

Long Summary

The Intervention

The interventions examined in this cell include efforts to convene victims and perpetrators of historic or recent conflicts to prevent further violence and foster reconciliation. These include formal mechanisms such as Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, as well as community-based programs like Sierra Leone's Fambul Tok and Rwanda's Gacaca tribunals. The programs facilitate public acknowledgment of harm, apologies, and agreements to repair damage. They also strengthen rule of law and equitable access to justice through reforms, capacity building for courts and legal professionals, and integrating human rights into national legal frameworks. By creating structured opportunities for dialogue and accountability, these interventions aim to restore communal bonds and promote collective responsibility, thereby fostering social cohesion and trust within communities.

How the intervention is expected to work

The interventions operate by encouraging victims and perpetrators to share experiences publicly, promoting forgiveness, trust, and social reintegration. In Sierra Leone, Fambul Tok ceremonies allowed communities to rebuild bonds and strengthen social networks, while Rwanda's Gacaca tribunals facilitated justice, intergroup understanding, and national identity formation. These programs are expected to increase civic engagement by promoting participation in local organizations, community decision-making, and collective projects. However, revisiting trauma can trigger anxiety, depression, or PTSD symptoms among participants, which may reduce willingness to engage if psychological support is insufficient. Effective implementation therefore requires balancing reconciliation and justice objectives with care for participants' mental health to sustain participation and long-term social reintegration.

The evidence base:

This cell includes 2 studies: 2 impact evaluations (1 RCT, 1 quasi-experimental) and 1 qualitative study (Heykoop, 2014), from Sierra Leone, Uganda, and Rwanda.

Evidence findings

The evidence indicates that transitional and restorative justice programs can foster community-centered behavior, social cohesion, and collective engagement, resulting in a small positive effect on willingness to participate and help. Participants showed greater involvement in local organizations and social networks, and community trust was strengthened. However, revisiting past trauma also created psychological challenges, highlighting the importance of incorporating mental health support into program design. Overall, the findings suggest that carefully structured transitional justice initiatives can modestly improve civic engagement while minimizing unintended negative consequences.

Included Studies:

Cilliers (2018): This study provides valuable insights into how restorative justice and justice system support influence willingness to participate or help in post-conflict communities. The Fambul Tok reconciliation program, which facilitated truth-telling and forgiveness ceremonies, led to greater community engagement and increased participation in local organizations. The study found that individuals in treated villages became more community-oriented, joining parent-teacher associations (PTAs), religious groups, and women's organizations at higher rates than those in control villages. The researchers noted 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". Additionally, the program strengthened social networks, with people becoming more willing to seek advice and help from others in their community. The study observed that participants "sought more help and advice from each other". This indicates that transitional justice efforts not only encourage active participation in communal activities but also help restore trust among individuals, fostering a willingness to support one another. However, while willingness to engage increased, the program also had psychological costs. The process of revisiting past trauma during reconciliation ceremonies led to higher anxiety, depression, and PTSD symptoms in some participants. Despite this, the study concludes that the positive societal benefits, such as enhanced participation and cooperation, were significant and persisted in the long run. This is a high confidence study, however, effect sizes could not be extracted from this study due to insufficient data against the outcome measured in this cell.

Rimé (2012): This study evaluates the effects of transitional justice and restorative justice on willingness to participate or help in post-genocide Rwanda, particularly through the Gacaca tribunals. The findings indicate that participation in these community-based truth and reconciliation trials significantly influenced social engagement and collective action, though with complex emotional consequences. One of the key outcomes was that Gacaca fostered social cohesion, increasing participants' involvement in community life and enhancing their identification with a shared national identity. The study found that participants were more likely to see out-group members as individuals rather than stereotypes, which facilitated collaboration in community projects. As the authors note, participation "favoured an individuated perception of members of the out-group", reducing prejudice and making cooperation more likely. Additionally, the process encouraged victims and perpetrators to engage in social initiatives, reinforcing collective responsibility for rebuilding society. However, the emotional burden of reliving trauma through testimony sometimes led to increased distress, particularly among survivors. The study reports that "participation in Gacaca systematically provoked and renewed feelings of sadness, anger, and fear", which, while fostering truth-telling, also presented challenges for long-term social harmony. Overall, the findings suggest that transitional justice mechanisms can enhance willingness to help and participate in society by promoting social integration and shared responsibility. However, emotional distress and trust deficits must be addressed to ensure sustainable engagement and cooperation. Overall, this study is graded low confidence due to its non-experimental

design, partial intervention description and no mention of power calculations. Effect sizes could not be extracted from this study due to insufficient data across the cell.

Confidence Assessment:

Overall Low: The findings in this cell are relatively consistent; however, the confidence rating is low due to the limited number of studies.

Other outcomes in this study:

Social cohesion / Feelings of trust and acceptance of diversity

Human security / Intermediate social cohesion outcomes