



Bimba Thomas: Mercy Corps Nigeria

ROLE OF RELIGION AND RELIGIOUS LEADERS IN FARMER-PASTORALIST CONFLICT IN PLATEAU STATE

An Inter-Religious Peacebuilding in Northern Nigeria (IPNN) Qualitative Research Report

OCTOBER 2016



Executive Summary

In the context of persistent, low-intensity conflict, which has characterized Nigeria’s Middle Belt for the past decade, Mercy Corps’ Interfaith Peacebuilding in Northern Nigeria (IPNN) program, supported by the Gerald A. and Henrietta Ravenhorst (GHR) Foundation, reduces violent incidents and increases economic activity by leveraging the roles of religious leaders to create interfaith cooperation in a region where ethnicity and religion are closely interlinked. As part of this effort, this IPNN qualitative research study evaluated the impact of religious leaders and interfaith initiatives on peacebuilding outcomes. The research was conducted through four separate field visits to Plateau State—including the four IPNN sites and one control site—and answers three interconnected questions:

1. What role do religious leaders and religion play in conflict escalation and de-escalation?
2. How can religious leaders contribute to peacebuilding and what has been their impact thus far?
3. How can interfaith activities, including economic activities, contribute to peacebuilding?

Each IPNN site is home to one farmer and one pastoralist community, which are in conflict with each other. The researchers asked community members questions about the nature of the conflict, their relationship with the other community (the “conflicting community”) and their religious leaders. The research sought to establish whether and to what extent religious leaders have a role to play in peacebuilding and under what conditions they are most effective. Answering these questions will inform future programming in Plateau State. The research has also served as a monitoring and evaluation tool for ongoing IPNN activities at the four sites.

This Qualitative Research Report presents findings from the four phases of research conducted in November 2014, June 2015, March 2016 and August 2016. The research found that religious leaders have great potential to influence people’s attitudes and behaviors. The role of religious leaders, as well as the mediation training they received, was often mentioned as one of the reasons for the reduction of conflict in Plateau State.

While the findings provide a strong basis for including religious leaders in peace programming, some gaps and limitations remain. Traditional counterparts, such as the chiefs and members of traditional councils, are often more involved in conflict resolution than their religious counterparts; furthermore, despite reportedly high trust in and reverence towards the religious leaders, community members may choose not to follow their advice if it conflicts with their financial interests. The report discusses these limitations, and includes recommendations for overcoming them in future work, as well as areas for further research.

Key Findings

1. **Most participants did not identify religion as a direct trigger for conflict.** Land issues (e.g., land encroachment, blockage of cattle routes) are the key driver of conflict in Plateau State. Participants identified negative attitudes between communities—articulated as a lack of trust or patience, despite reporting regular business exchanges between their members—and spill-over of violence from neighboring communities as other drivers of conflict, both of which are somewhat linked to ethnic and religious identities.

2. **Despite not being a driver, religious differences create an environment that is conducive to conflict.** Focus group participants reported a strong link between the conflicting group’s ethnic and religious identity and the conflict. They also see religious identity as an important identity category for themselves.
3. **Religious leaders’ authority, status and social capital make them potential agents of peace in their communities.** Data from focus groups demonstrated that religious leaders are highly respected, trustworthy and influential in their communities. Focus group participants perceive their religious leaders as “close” to community members, possessing high social capital, and frequently playing more than one leadership role in the community.
4. **Despite religious leaders’ authority, community members do not usually engage them in mediating disputes between farmer and pastoralist communities until after the crisis has been defused, and religious leaders rarely participate in conflict resolution.** Most conflicts occur over access to land, which is the remit of traditional leaders. Thus, traditional leaders, rather than religious leaders, are the first and most significant authorities to participate in conflict resolution. However, researchers observed a trend towards a greater inclusion of religious leader at the earliest stages of dispute resolution in IPNN sites. Respondents attributed this change both to the mediation training received by religious leaders and increased trust towards the conflicting community—resulting from joint peacebuilding meetings and activities facilitated by IPNN—making them more inclined to resolve the disputes amicably.
5. **Senior religious leaders are generally more effective in resolving disputes than their junior counterparts. However, women and youth leaders have an important role to play in conflict prevention.** When community members ask religious leaders to mediate disputes between them and members of the conflicting community, they usually turn to leaders at the top of the hierarchy, such as imams or reverends. However, research also found that youth religious leaders and women religious leaders have an important role in that they work with youth to shift their perception of the other group, helping them understand the negative impacts of retaliation and joining violence.
6. **Religious leaders have a high potential for changing attitudes and behavior.** In a behavior-modeling activity, the majority of focus group participants indicated that they would change their behavior towards the conflicting group if their religious leader advised them to do so. Participants also indicated seeing their religious leader interact with the religious leader of the conflicting community would positively affect their own attitude towards that community.
7. **Interfaith economic activities are an effective way of bringing members of conflicting communities together, and can lead to increased interaction and peace between communities.**

Recommendations

Recommendations for Action

The following recommendations are meant for all actors working with farmer-pastoralist conflict, including non-governmental organizations, the Plateau State government, and religious and traditional leaders of local communities that experience such conflict. While Mercy Corps recognizes the limited resources of local leaders, it recommends they take

whatever steps they can to replicate some of the positive impacts of the IPNN programming. These recommendations include:

1. Non-governmental organizations (NGO), Plateau State Government and donors should consult and include local religious leaders in all initiatives addressing grievances between farmers and pastoralists to capitalize on these leaders' knowledge of their communities and existing infrastructure.
2. NGOs, Plateau State Government and donors should work with religious leaders, including women and youth, to increase their peacebuilding capacity, enabling these leaders to be involved in peacebuilding from early stages.
3. Local community leaders, NGOs, Plateau State Government and donors should support greater cooperation between religious and traditional leaders (e.g., regular meetings, roundtable discussions or trainings on how to address these conflicts with their communities) on issues of conflict over resources and other divisive matters.
4. Local community leaders, NGOs, Plateau State Government and donors should organize and support regular peacebuilding meetings, led by religious leaders including women and youth, bringing together members of the two conflicting communities to discuss the issues they face.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should explore:

1. The role of youth and female religious leaders in peacebuilding and the best ways to engage them in conflict prevention.
2. Religious leaders' role in peace-related advocacy and their influence over higher-level political actors.

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List of Acronyms

CONCUR	Conciliation in Nigeria through Community-Based Conflict Management and Cooperative Use of Resources
DFID	Department for International Development
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GHR Foundation	Gerald A. and Henrietta Rauenhorst Foundation
IPNN	Interfaith Peacebuilding in Northern Nigeria
KII	Key Informant Interviews
LGA	Local Government Area
MEF	Micro-Enterprise Fundamentals
NGOs	Non-governmental organizations
PARE	Pastoral Resolve

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Introduction

Northeast Nigeria and the greater Lake Chad Basin region continue to suffer from violence stoked by Boko Haram, one of the world's deadliest armed groups.¹ In addition to the deaths of more than 17,000 people and displacement of millions, at least 250,000 children in Borno State alone are malnourished and risk starvation as a result of these conflicts.^{2,3} Although recent security gains have made some communities more peaceful, Boko Haram's continued acts of violence threaten Nigeria's future, demanding a concerted response.

In Plateau State, a low-intensity violent conflict, punctuated by periods of high levels of violence, has deeply affected the communities. Plateau State's multi-ethnic and religious make up exacerbates this conflict.⁴ Due to the high degree of correlation between ethnic and religious identities, and because some ethnic groups traditionally have stronger control of resources, one's religion is often linked to one's access to and control over resources, particularly land and economic opportunities. These overlapping factors create a powerful basis for mobilization, rivalry and, sometimes, violent conflict.

Mercy Corps in Nigeria

Mercy Corps is a global aid agency engaged in transitional environments that have experienced some sort of shock: in Nigeria, typically natural disaster, economic collapse, or conflict. Mercy Corps' Inter-religious Peacebuilding in Northern Nigeria (IPNN) program strategically builds on a three-year Department for International Development (DFID)-funded program, titled Conciliation in Nigeria through Community-Based Conflict Management and Cooperative Use of Resources (CONCUR). CONCUR aims to resolve pastoralist-farmer conflict in Northern Nigeria using an integrated approach to mitigating conflict, managing shared natural resources, and promoting economic development in the states of Benue, Kaduna, Nasarawa, and Plateau. IPNN's two intended outcomes are: 1) strengthening the capacity of local religious leaders to promote peace and to resolve community conflicts in an inclusive, sustainable manner; and 2) evaluating the impact of faith-based interventions on peacebuilding outcomes in Northern Nigeria.

Purpose of the Study

IPNN assists in reducing violent incidents and increasing economic activities through faith-based interventions. This study complements these efforts in several ways. In line with the Theory of Change 2 of Mercy Corps' CONCUR program, which states, "[i]f Nigerians address the underlying drivers of community conflict, then conflict will decline and dispute resolution will be more sustainable," the IPNN qualitative research seeks to determine to what extent religious identities can be seen as an underlying driver of conflict.

¹ Institute for Economics and Peace. (2015). Global terrorism index. Retrieved from <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/AFR44/1657/2015/en/>

² UNICEF. (2016). An estimated quarter of a million children severely malnourished in Borno state, Nigeria. Retrieved from http://www.unicef.org/media/media_91911.html.

³ Amnesty International. (2015). Stars on their shoulders. Blood on their hands. War Crimes committed by the Nigerian military. Retrieved from <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/AFR44/1657/2015/en/>

⁴ For example, Harnischfeger (2004:440) notes that "for the majority of converts [in the Middle Belt], embracing the new faith entails an ethnic conversion. Those becoming Muslim tend to assume the language, dress and manners of the predominant people, e Hausa." Harnischfeger, J. (2004). Sharia and control over territory: Conflicts between 'settlers' and 'indigenes' in Nigeria. *African Affairs*, 103(412), 431-452.

In line with the Theory of Change 1 of CONCUR, which states, “[i]f Nigerians work together across lines of division to resolve community conflicts, then they will negotiate agreements that are legitimate and sustainable,” IPNN fosters interfaith cooperation for peacebuilding. This study contributes to this outcome by assessing the impact of religious leaders’ inclusion and participation in peacebuilding. It does so by asking: How and by what process have religious leaders participated in peacebuilding and has their inclusion in peacebuilding efforts been effective?

The report is structured as follows:

1. **Section 1:** Processes of conflict and peacebuilding in target communities
2. **Section 2:** An agent-based approach: Evaluating the role of religious leadership in peacebuilding
3. **Section 3:** Evaluating the impact of interfaith economic activities on peacebuilding outcomes

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach—using focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs)—to understanding the interaction between religion, religious leadership and peacebuilding in Plateau State. The study draws on discussions with various stakeholders regarding their experiences and perceptions of religion, religious leadership and conflict. In collaboration with local partners, Mercy Corps’ research team collected the qualitative data in four IPNN sites and one control site—all in Plateau State.

FGDs assessed community members’ perceptions of and the role religion plays in conflict. To measure the impact of faith-based activities on peacebuilding and examine the extent of religion and religious leaders’ impact on peacebuilding, the FGDs explored participants’ perceptions of the conflicting group. To gather additional information on the unique contributions of religious leaders on peacebuilding, conflict management and dispute resolution, the researchers conducted KIIs with selected religious leaders in the project communities.

Researchers conducted the study in four stages: Phase I in November 2014, Phase II in June 2015, Phase III in March 2016 and Phase IV in August 2016. Conducting the research over four phases allowed the research team to adjust tools according to the findings of each previous phase. This approach also allowed researchers to evaluate IPNN by tracking changes in the levels of conflict, the role of the religious leaders, and participants’ perceptions of the conflicting communities.

The research employed the following tools:

1. **Key Actors Mapping:** This tool helped researchers understand who the most important actors in conflict are, the types of religious actors present within target communities, and the relationships between them.
2. **Attitude and Behavior Modeling:** To understand the attitudes between the communities, IPNN used this tool—partially modeled on Bogardus’ social distance scale—to ask participants about their willingness to engage in different types of interactions (e.g., trading, sharing transportation, marriage) with members of the conflicting community. IPNN then asked if participants’ behavior would change based on the religious leaders’ advice and

facilitated discussion to assess their rationale for these answers. In addition, IPNN compared the responses with the self-reported levels of trust, acceptance and forgiveness towards the conflicting community.

3. **Story-telling Exercise:** Inspired by the “Most Significant Change” methodology, the researchers divided FGD participants into groups to discuss the ways in which their daily life changed since the beginning of the interfaith economic activities. The facilitators collected the participants’ stories and grouped them into categories, which they used for indicator mapping.
4. **Impact Indicator Mapping:** The researchers worked with participants to determine the impacts (e.g., increased interaction, increased income) of economic activities. They then requested the participants to vote on the impacts they found the most important. Each group identified 4-6 impacts, and participants were given 10 beans and asked to allocate them among the impacts based on their perceived importance.

IPNN conducted field visits in all four target sites. In total, researchers consulted 83 individuals during Phase I, 259 during Phase II, 156 during Phase III and 442 during Phase IV (see Table 1 for breakdown). The team held eight focus groups in Phase I and 18 in both Phases II and III. Men and women participated in FGDs and, where available, youth from the farmer and pastoralist communities attended. The research team separated men, women and youth into different groups, which were also divided based on membership in either farmer or pastoralist communities. Due to time constraints and the limited number of men available, the research team conducted one of the Phase III FGDs for farmer communities jointly with men and women.

IPNN carried out KIIs with religious leaders in Phases II, III and IV—with the help of a translator in some cases. In addition, the researchers conducted an in-depth literature review prior to the facilitation of FGDs to learn from previous research conducted on the role of religious leaders and religion in peacebuilding.

Phase (Date)	Location LGA	Pastoralists			Agriculturalists			Religious Leader KIIs	Totals
		Women	Men	Youth	Women	Men	Youth		
Phase I (Nov 2014)	Bisichi	11	10		9	10			40
	Butura / Kunet	8	12		11	12			43
	Total	19	22		20	22			83
Phase II (Jun 2015)	Butura / Kunet	8	12	12	10	15	16	3	76
	Dambush/ Tahoola	10	12		15	12		3	52
	Bisichi	14	13		15	8		3	53
	Fokkos	21	15		21	18		3	78
	Total	53	52	12	61	53	16	12	259

Phase III (Mar 2016)	Butura / Kunet	12	10		13	5		2	40
	Dambuash/ Tahoola	10	7		10	13		2	52
	Bisichi	7	10		10	9		2	53
	Fokkos	10	7		7	8		2	78
	Total	39	34		40	35		8	156
Phase IV (Aug 2016)	Butura / Kunet	21	6	15	24	11	9	4	90
	Dambuash/ Tahoola	22	9	7	21	6	15	4	84
	Bisichi	18	16	8	17	10	5	4	78
	Fokkos	17	8	14	18	9	4	4	74
	Wereh/Luggere (control site)	25	23		24	42		2	116
	Total	103	62	44	104	78	33	18	442
TOTALS		214	170	56	225	188	49	38	940

TABLE 1: DATES, LOCATIONS AND PARTICIPANT NUMBERS OF FGDS AND KIIS

Limitations

The research team faced several challenges and potential limitations described in detail below. While some are inherent to conflict research, others are specific to this research study and can therefore be rectified in the future.

1. **Sensitivity of Topics:** The sensitive nature of religion, conflict and the role of religious leadership in communities creates several research challenges, including concerns that participants may not be forthcoming and/or honest in their responses or that they may shape responses in particular ways due to social pressure. The research team structured FGD questions (e.g., not directly asking questions about conflict-related behaviors and attitudes) to mitigate this limitation. Where religious leaders participated in some FGDs, it is possible their presence affected responses regarding the role of religious leaders.
2. **Nature of Qualitative Research:** Qualitative research methodology, by nature, also presents a number of challenges. While the methodology is well suited for tracing processes and analyzing conflict resolution and peacebuilding (the focus of this report), it is limited in its ability to generalize the findings to wider contexts. Furthermore, there is a risk that strong or dominant voices in FGDs and KIIs (those coming from more confident, more educated, or more respected participants) may overpower group perspectives. The research team made every effort to triangulate information from a wide range of sources, consulting both religious groups in each target

sites, as well as actively seeking to consult with key informants with different perspectives on the conflict. The report highlights where particular perceptions or viewpoints cut across several focus groups representing different religious communities, and may have a wider significance beyond the specific context of the target sites and Plateau State. In general, the findings should be interpreted as the perceptions and perspectives solely of FGD participants.

3. **IPNN Programming:** The vast majority of interviewees has participated in IPNN and/or received training on peacebuilding. Although valuable for measuring the impact of IPNN, this factor limited the ability to test the attitudes and attitudinal change in the communities as a whole. It also increased the possibility of bias, as participants may have responded to meet the interviewers' perceived expectations. Researchers mitigated this limitation by using a control group and including both participants who had participated IPNN trainings and those who had not in Phase IV FGDs.
4. **Level of Education:** Given many respondents' relatively low education level, concepts such as "identity" were sometimes difficult to convey. To mitigate the risk of one dominant voice (from a participant with more education or higher standing in the community) in the FGDs, facilitators made efforts to direct certain questions toward less active participants. The story-telling exercise also facilitated the sharing of experiences by all participants. Since the focus groups were small and divided by gender and farmer/pastoralist affiliation, breakout groups were not necessary.

Section 1: Processes of Conflict and Peacebuilding

This section seeks to understand the drivers of conflict in the targeted IPNN communities. Through a strategy of actor mapping and process tracing, it outlines the key actors and processes of conflict onset, escalation, de-escalation and resolution.

The research confirmed that conflict is persistent in all target communities. In the first two phases, all participants reported being affected by conflict and all communities reported they lived in relative harmony with the neighboring community previously (with various communities mentioning the pre-2010, pre-2001 and pre-1983 periods as turning points).⁵ However, the research also indicated there has been a decrease in the prevalence of conflict in the targeted communities over the course of IPNN. The majority of the respondents in Phase III noted a decrease in conflict starting six months prior to the research. The respondents largely attributed the reduction of violence to CONCUR/IPNN intervention and training of religious leaders.

In spite of these overall positive appraisals, the FGDs revealed persistent levels of distrust of and tension with the conflicting community, which suggests the relationship between communities in some of the target areas remains complex and potentially conflict inducing. For example, the majority of FGD participants in Phase III believed that the conflicting community posed a danger to their community.

However, despite the apparent lack of trust, participants engaged in a range of interactions with the members of the conflicting community. IPNN researchers asked all FGD participants in Phases II and III a series of hypothetical questions regarding their willingness to engage in certain activities with members of the opposing group. During both phases, the participants indicated they are willing to trade, do business with, and use transportation services owned by a member of the opposing community. The majority also indicated they would be happy to leave their child in the care of a member of the opposing community.

Conflict Drivers

Overall, the research found that disputes over access to land and other resources—from destruction of crops and cattle rustling to blocking of cattle routes—are typically direct triggers of conflict, rather than religion. While a few respondents in Phase I indicated disrespect toward their religion as a trigger of conflict, these were isolated voices. One group of Christian respondents reported that name-calling was a prevalent issue, with Christians being called *arna*, meaning someone without a religion.⁶ Due to the nature of identity in Nigeria, conflict “spill-over”—that is, response to violence in neighboring communities with a similar ethnic make-up—was also cited as a primary cause of conflicts spreading across communities in Plateau State.

⁵ These three dates correspond to important events in Nigerian history: 1983 marked the year of the coup d'état, which resulted in military rule. 2001 was the year of riots in Jos, the capital of Plateau State, during which Christians and Muslims clashed following an appointment of a Muslim politician to a local post, protested by the Christian population. 2010 was the year of illness and death of Muslim president Umaru Yar'Adua; he was succeeded by a Christian, Goodluck Jonathan.

⁶ November 2014 FGD 1.

KII and FGD participants in Phase III research also indicated religious leaders do not incite conflict in IPNN communities. Conversely, in the control sites, while FGD respondents denied religious leaders were involved in inciting conflict, some of the KIIs revealed they may be promoting violent messages, whether intentionally or not. Furthermore, as discussed below, religion—as it affects people’s attitudes and trust towards the other group—may contribute to an environment in which conflicts easily foment.

Conflict Processes and Stages

In Phase II KIIs, the researchers asked participants to describe the most common type of conflict and how it begins. Two types of conflict were reported more frequently than others:

- 1) Encroachment on land, such as crop destruction or blocking of cattle routes
- 2) Conflicts starting in neighboring villages or towns and spilling over into the community

Role of Religious Leaders in Land Disputes

In early phases of the research, many respondents reported that the community would call on military personnel to intervene and restore calm if a conflict escalated—particularly if it reached a point of open violence. However, in the research conducted in 2016, respondents more frequently reported that they try to negotiate with the other side, attempting to resolve the conflict amicably before going to the police or military. Both Phase II and III research indicates that if traditional or religious leaders consider the conflict manageable within the community, they will use their authority to withdraw the case from the local police, committing to resolving it themselves. In Phase III and Phase IV research, some of the interviewed religious leaders reported that they, too, have withdrawn cases from the security forces to mediate them within the community.

“Usually, if the issue has become violent (involves a beating or theft) the best bet is to go straight to the police. If that’s not part of it, some people prefer to rely on the traditional or religious leaders alone.”

As discussed later, Nigerian law mandates that traditional leaders mediate disputes. One group of Phase I participants outlined a process whereby a dispute breaks out and the traditional leader calls the aggrieved parties. In the context of their respective actions, the religious leaders’ role is then “just to apologize to the people, tell them to be patient, give them stories from the Bible to get peace.”⁷ However, in Phase III, more respondents indicated that religious leaders do sometimes play a role in mediation, although only two out of 14 groups said they would consult their religious leaders regarding inter-

PROCESS OF CONFLICT ESCALATION

During KIIs in Phase II research, respondents noted farmer-pastoralist conflict commonly starts in cases where young pastoralist boys advertently or inadvertently allow cattle to destroy crops. These cases frequently occur during the planting season, since—as one of the participants remarked, “When it starts raining and the grasses are coming out, for the pastoralist, it is the right time to feed their cattle; for the farmer, it is the right time to plant.”

Although an initial dispute may involve only two individuals, due to the close-knit nature of the communities, conflicts can escalate quickly. While not every dispute becomes violent, the pattern of escalation is similar across communities.

⁷ November 2014 FGD 8.

communal or land disputes.^{8,9} In Phase IV research, nearly all interviewed religious leaders—including women—provided examples of cases in which they mediated disputes over land and other resources. When asked, community members confirmed that the process of dispute resolution has changed since the beginning of the IPNN intervention. Participants claimed to consult their leader—either traditional or religious—first and ask for mediation instead of going to the military or the police. They attributed the change to increased interaction with the conflicting group, as well as the Interest-Based Negotiations training religious leaders received at IPNN sites. This shift between findings of research Phases I and IV suggests IPNN programming and mediation training increases religious leaders’ engagement in dispute resolution.

Whether a traditional leader intervenes first also reportedly affects religious leaders’ subsequent course of action. As one respondent noted, reporting the dispute to traditional leaders first diminishes the role of religious leaders. The timing of religious leaders’ involvement in disputes was among the most common limitations raised in discussions. A male pastoralist noted that religious leaders do not act as fast as they “should” when conflict breaks out.¹⁰ However, participants also reported response delays among traditional leaders, particularly when the initial dispute took place farther from the village. One participant remarked, “The traditional leaders do not stay with [the herders] in the bush, so they do not normally get involved immediately. But as soon as they hear, they call everyone together to resolve the crisis.”¹¹

Role of Religious Leaders in “Spill-Over” Conflicts

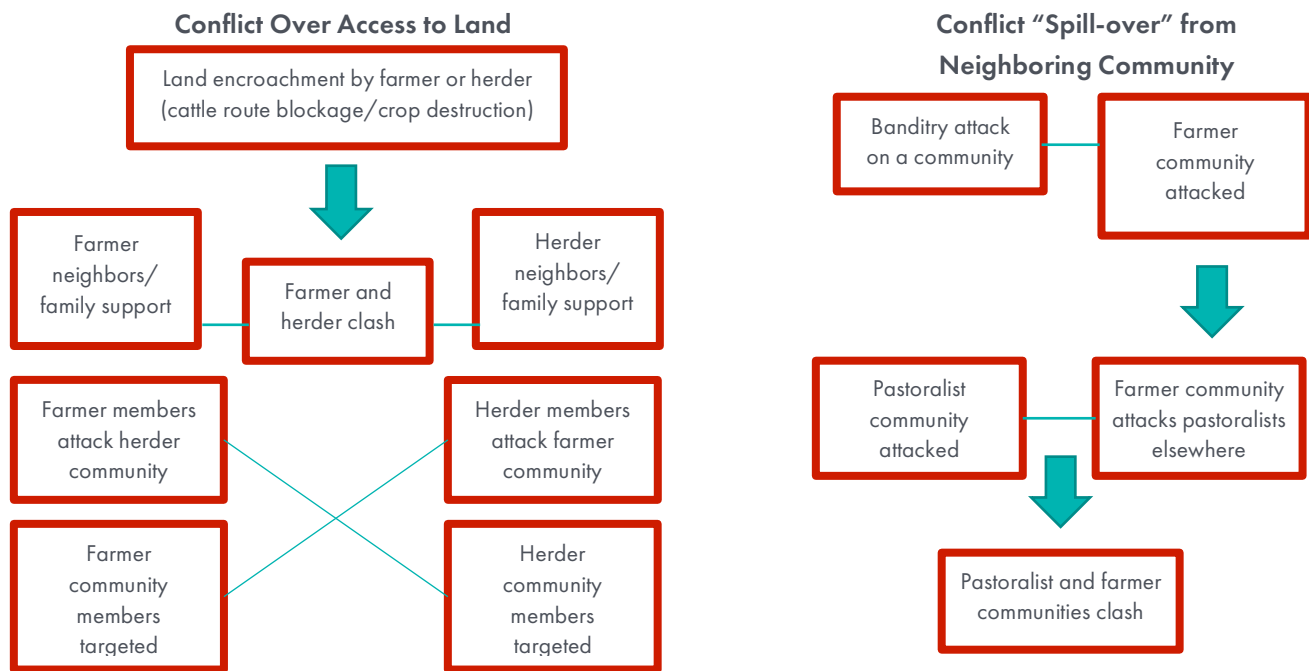


FIGURE 1: PROCESS TRACING OF CONFLICT ESCALATION

⁸ March 2016 KII 2, 7, 8.

⁹ March 2016 FGD results—Tool 5.

¹⁰ November 2014 FGD 4.

¹¹ June 2015 KII 4.

As illustrated in Figure 1, conflict also bleeds into communities from neighboring communities with similar ethnic or religious makeup. In these cases, traditional leaders speak to youth, or those responsible for youth (their parents or youth leaders) and encourage them to halt the violence. One example is a farmer who took an encroachment case to the police. When the Imam arrived and asked to mediate the case, it was resolved amicably. The role of religious leaders in this type of conflict involves preaching peace in places of worship; leading collective prayers for peace; counseling individuals in their homes on the importance of peace; helping to resolve disputes directly; and assisting in relief and collection efforts for community members affected by crisis.

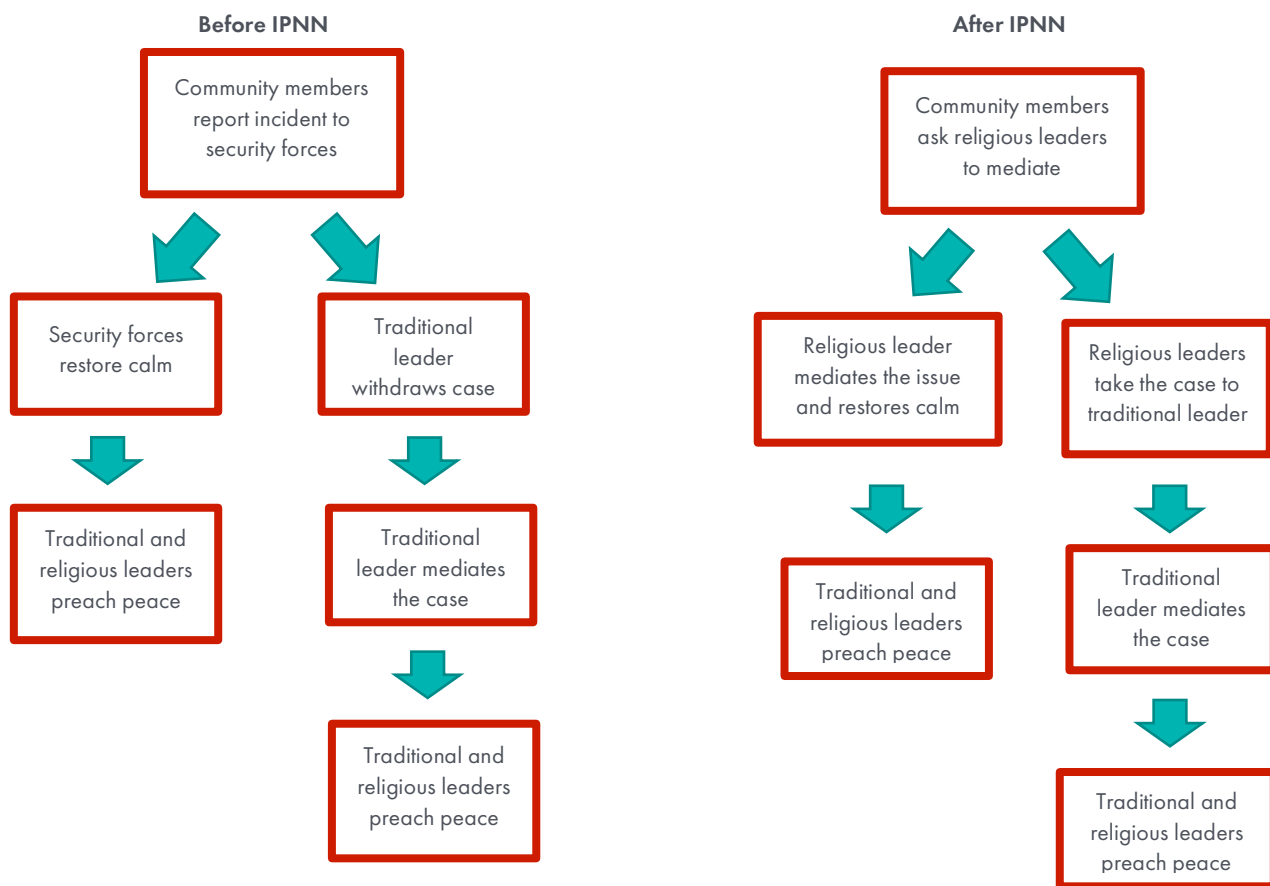


FIGURE 2: PROCESS TRACING OF DE-ESCALATION OF FARMER-PASTORALIST CONFLICT

In the most recent phase of the research, respondents reported that when violence breaks out, the religious leaders gather their congregations and advise them not to join the fighting. In some cases, such preaching prevents conflict escalation. For example, communities from two IPNN sites located in Bokkos Local Government Area (LGA)—Fokkos and Dambuash-Tahoola—reported that religious leaders’ intervention prevented their youth from joining violence that erupted following the killing of a local Paramount Chief. In Fokkos, the respondents said that farmers from a neighboring community came to their site and burned pastoralists’ houses. This is a common occurrence in “spill-over” conflicts, whereby one ethnic group (in this case, Fulani pastoralists) is blamed for an act of violence (e.g., killing of the paramount chief), and the members of this group are attacked across different communities and sites in retaliation. In most cases, the crisis escalates because local youth respond with violence. However, the respondents in Fokkos said that—thanks to trust built through IPNN activities, youth

religious leaders' interventions, and mothers who spoke to the youth—the community remained peaceful during the most recent crisis. Figure 2 illustrates the process tracing of de-escalation for common farmer-pastoral conflicts.

Religious Identity and Conflict

While the above conflict tracing suggests religion is not the primary source of conflict, it is an important identity, often linked by respondents to the conflict. Not surprisingly, in Phase I all groups except one (the male pastoralist group in Bisichi) reported religious affiliation as their most important identity. This suggests that, although conflict most often erupts because of disputes over land, it often spreads and intensifies along religious and ethnic lines.

Results from Phase II research support this statement. IPNN asked the participants how important various identity categories were on a scale of “very important” to “not at all important.” All groups reported that the religious identity was very important, with more varied results concerning ethnic, regional, educational and political identities. Both Christian and Muslim participants associated religious identity with several characteristics, including respect, ethics and integrity, humility, and peace.^{12,13,14,15}

94.7% of participants saw the conflicting group's identity as relevant to their behavior.

These findings may seem at odds with the findings of the baseline study in which Mercy Corps asked community members to name their primary conflicting group in order for researchers to assess which identity marker (e.g., religious, ethnic, livelihood) most informs community members' interpretation of conflict actors. Findings show most participants referred to the conflicting group in ethnic terms (roughly 71%), with only 20% of respondents using religious terms to describe the conflicting group.

To explore the meaning of these findings, the research team asked FGD participants in Phase III the same question. The research showed mixed results with 86% of participants using a religious identity to describe their conflicting group and 50% using an ethnic identity descriptor.¹⁶ However, some respondents used both or even all three descriptors, limiting the comparability of these results with those of the baseline study. As different descriptors were used by the participants interchangeably and respondents agreed that all of them were important, the findings support the baseline study's finding that community members may conflate the religious and ethnic identities of the conflicting group.

Religious Identity and Behavior

94.7% of participants thought that the conflicting group's identity has an impact on the way they behave. Identities include: religion, ethnicity, indigeneity (i.e., indigenous vs. settler), profession (i.e., farmer vs. pastoralist), political leaning, education level and business affiliation (i.e., whether the person is involved in business or not). Respondents saw ethnicity and religion as creating conditions for the conflict to spread because they claimed the religious/ethnic divide makes it difficult for the two

¹² June 2015 FGD 1, 2, 8, 12.

¹³ June 2015 FGD 4.

¹⁴ June 2015 FGD 7.

¹⁵ June 2015 FGD 11, 12, 13, 16.

¹⁶ March 2016 FGD results—Tool 5.

groups to fully understand and trust each other. This divide can breed distrust and cause miscommunication. The research also found that the respondents usually have negative views of the “other”—meaning members of other religious and ethnic groups, including their conflicting community (as discussed in more detail in Section 2). For example, both male and female farmer groups in Bisichi believed that religious difference exacerbates conflict, as one respondent remarked, “Muslims are violent and Islam encourages violence towards Christians.” On the other hand, some groups also noted that religion can contribute to greater peacefulness, as religious leaders’ can preach peace and acceptance.¹⁷



“Religious leaders are involved before, during and after conflict. Before, in the sense that they try to preach [...] non-violence in their congregations; during, in that they call on attention of members in places of worship and warn not to escalate; and after, in that they call a series of meetings to check on these.”

Contrary to the FGD respondents, who linked ethnicity with religion and conflict, interviewed religious leaders argued that ethnicity was not important in escalating conflict. Instead, they identified profession and religion as factors contributing to conflict escalation.

The Role of Religious Leaders in Resolving Conflict

The religious actors’ mapping conducted in Phase III identified four types of religious leaders in the targeted communities:

1. **Senior leaders** (e.g., imams, pastors)
2. **Junior leaders** (e.g., *naibi* or assistant imams, assistant pastors)
3. **Women leaders** (e.g., female teachers or *amira*, girls’ brigade leaders)
4. **Youth leaders** (e.g., *ageji* or leaders of Islamic aid groups, often also responsible for mosque security; boys’ brigade leaders)

The IPNN research indicated different types of leaders live in harmony and cooperate with each other. Participants perceived all types of religious leaders as having a “high” or “very high” level of authority, being trustworthy and approachable. However, the participants said they would only consult senior religious leaders in cases of land or inter-communal disputes.¹⁸ Overall, the majority of respondents reported that senior religious leaders are more effective in conflict resolution because they have greater authority than their junior counterparts and lay church leadership.

¹⁷ March 2016 FGD results—Tool 5.

¹⁸ March 2016 FGD results—Tool 5.

Nonetheless, Phase IV research, which gauged the roles of women and youth religious leaders in conflict resolution, found they are often key actors in conflict prevention due to their direct work with and access to youth. In all youth FGDs in Phase IV, participants suggested their mothers prevent them from acting violently (e.g., physically confronting a herd boy whose cattle encroached on their farm). Youth from one community also said their mothers serve as role models for them and that observing them interact and conduct business with women from the conflicting community serves as an example of the benefits of peace. Women said that increased interaction with the conflicting group, and the preaching of their woman religious leader, increases their peacefulness, which they try to pass on to their children. All FGD participants in Fokkos and Dambuash-Tahoola sites agreed that youth religious leaders and mothers played a key role in preventing the youth from joining the violence that erupted as a result of the Paramount Chief's killing in neighboring Bokkos.

Traditional leaders are mandated to resolve land disputes. The Policy Guidelines to the 1976 Local Government Reforms listed "[d]etermination of customary law and practice on all matters including that relating to land."¹⁹ By contrast, participants indicated religious leaders' realm includes inter-personal disputes, intra-religious disputes, issues in the home (i.e., either marital or involving youth) and inter-religious mediation where religion plays a central role in conflict.

Similarly, participants highlighted differences between religious and traditional leaders in terms of the nature of their role in conflict resolution, the timing of their involvement, the strategies they use to resolve disputes, and the scope of their authority. One description sums up many of these factors: "The difference is the traditional leader first calms the situation [...] before the religious leader comes in. The pastors use love and positive feelings while preaching but the traditional leaders use law to make peace by forcing the resolution. But the pastor can resolve disputes not physically; only orally through sermons."²⁰

However, as discussed above, this pattern appears to be changing in IPNN communities, with religious leaders more often involved in dispute resolution from early stages. Ultimately, the research found that the most important role of religious leaders in peacebuilding stems from their considerable potential to affect community members' behavior, including towards the conflicting group.

¹⁹ Blench, R., Selbut L., Hassan, U., & Walsh, M. (2006). The role of traditional rulers in conflict prevention and mediation in Nigeria. Retrieved from <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/265579023> *The Role of Traditional Rulers in Conflict Prevention and Mediation in Nigeria*

²⁰ November 2014 FGD 1.

Section 2: An Agent-Based Approach—The Role of Religious Leadership in Peacebuilding

This section analyzes the role of religious leadership in conflict prevention through longer-term impacts on attitude change and identifies mechanisms by which religious leaders contribute to building peace in their communities. The first sub-section discusses the social capital of religious leaders and their potential to contribute effectively to peacebuilding, and the second looks at religious leaders' impact on attitudinal and behavioral change. In Phase III, IPNN tested the hypothesis that religious leaders play a role in long-term peacebuilding using a tool specifically designed to measure attitudes and attitudinal change in the targeted communities.

Religious Leaders' Capacity to Resolve Violent Conflict

All groups reported religious leaders play an important role in peacebuilding. Respondents perceived the religious leaders' role as overwhelmingly positive, as one focused on advising and counseling those involved in conflict to be forgiving, patient and apply lessons from religious teachings.

Participants' perceptions of religious leaders authority, status and social capital in society provide the strongest evidence for the positive effect of religious leadership on peacebuilding. Respondents saw religious leaders' role affecting conflict resolution and peacebuilding capacity in several ways. As discussed in more detail below, respondents reported that they would shift some of their attitudes and behaviors following their religious leader's advice. Some also said witnessing cooperation between their religious leaders and those from the opposing community could change their own attitude and lead to greater peacefulness. These responses must be carefully weighed against the limitations of qualitative research and the risk (discussed elsewhere in this report) that respondents may have been giving the researchers a response they thought was expected of them. Nonetheless, they are examples of how high social capital and authority of religious leaders may make them powerful actors in peacebuilding.

The religious leaders are highly respected and enjoy a high status in the communities. One group reported that religious leaders are more respected than other leaders and people trust them more.²¹ In relation to their conflict resolution work, another group considered religious leaders successful because "they're highly respected. We believe when you don't do what they say, you're going against God."²² Further, in a series of hypothetical questions, exploring whether community members would follow the advice of their religious leader or other leaders in the community in a variety of situations, most respondents reported that they would follow the advice of their religious leaders, emphasizing the religious leaders' perceived wealth of knowledge, lack of bias and truthfulness.^{23,24,25}

²¹ November 2014 FGD 2.

²² June 2015 FGD 14.

²³ June 2015 FGD 4, 5, 6, 7, 11, 16.

²⁴ June 2015 FGD 8.

²⁵ June 2015 FGD 10.

Furthermore, religious leaders are seen as extremely close to the communities in which they work, in that they are involved in their everyday lives and form personal relationships with them. Because of this proximity, they are often first to know about the conflicts that erupt in their communities. Findings also suggest participants perceive religious leaders as more accessible to the community than their traditional counterparts. Participants compared them with “parents” and described them as “close, like family” to the community.^{26,27} Despite religious leaders playing a smaller role in resolving, mediating or de-escalating conflict once it breaks out, some community members reported they have a more significant role than traditional leaders in the prevention of violence. A group of Christian participants reported that when community members have a problem, they go first to the religious leaders and listen to their advice before approaching the traditional leader.²⁸

Social Capital of Religious Leaders

Religious leaders often hold more than one position: with 12 out of 18 focus groups reporting the religious leader as playing multiple roles in the community. FGD and KII participants saw this as a factor allowing religious leaders to have a greater impact on conflict, as these leaders have access to a larger portion of the population through their various roles.

Religious leaders’ social capital and their extensive connections and responsibilities within the community may provide opportunities to build peace. Factors such as a religious leader’s seniority, buy-in, and commitment to peacebuilding can further enhance or diminish their perceived social capital, as the most effective leaders are respected, connected and invested in the community’s life.

In addition to their social capital and position, religious leaders’ conflict mediation skills are critical to their effectiveness at building peace. Phase II evaluated the impact of improving dispute resolution capacity—through IPNN programming—among religious leaders on peacebuilding and conflict management. Overall, participants in several communities reported that religious leaders’ mediation skills were enhanced, resulting in greater peace through improved prevention and resolution of disputes.²⁹ Respondents associated these enhancements with greater fairness in the mediation by religious leaders and greater patience in addressing disputes.^{30,31} Interviewed religious leaders who received training themselves most commonly cited understanding different actors’ motivations and interests as the skill which most affected their approach to dispute resolution.³² Some communities reported that this training had a trickle down effect, whereby a trained religious leader would pass on skills, knowledge and strategies to the wider community. For example, one FGD reported that when youth leaders attend church or mosque, they are better guided and equipped to resolve community disputes.³³ While the seemingly positive effects of religious leaders’ training on their ability to mediate conflict is promising, robustly assessing whether religious leaders’ skill acquisition can independently affect peacebuilding outcomes has proven challenging.

The skills religious leaders acquire through training are valuable, often enhancing their social capital. During Phase III, six out of 13 focus groups mentioned the mediation training as a factor in increasing the religious leader’s authority and

²⁶ November 2014 FGD 1.

²⁷ November 2014 FGD 3.

²⁸ November 2014 FGD 1.

²⁹ June 2015 FGD 4.

³⁰ June 2015 FGD 7.

³¹ June 2015 FGD 13, 16.

³² June 2015 KII 4, 5.

³³ November 2014 FGD 1.

trustworthiness.³⁴ Therefore, in addition to enhancing religious leaders' skills for addressing conflict and dispute resolution, their participation alone elevated their social capital within their communities, increasing their capacity to resolve such conflict.

Religious Leaders and Violence

Some respondents suggested religious leaders play a role in inciting conflict by spreading inflammatory messages. For example, respondents reported cases where places of worship were used to encourage violence, with one report of a religious leader who used "harsh words and incit[ed] violence" against other religious groups, but stopped after the imam instructed him not to spread such messages.³⁵ The role of religious leaders in inciting conflict is even more pronounced in the control communities, even if coupled with preaching of peace messages. For example, one religious leader from a control site said that he always instructs his community members to "pray for peace, and for God to open the eyes of those who cause trouble." However, when asked about whether and how he address the fact that some groups are perceived as being non-indigenous and therefore not having the right to land, he said he tells his congregation, "This is their land and they should defend it."³⁶ This is in contrast with IPNN sites, where—when asked the same question—religious leaders said they preach the value of cooperation and living together in peace, regardless of the indigenous-settler divide.

Religious Leaders' Impact on Change of Attitude and Behavior

Since traditional leaders are the ones mandated to mediate land-related conflict, and do it more often than their religious counterparts, religious leaders' contribution to peacebuilding may be more pronounced in affecting long-term attitudinal change. To explore this hypothesis, Phase III set out to measure the level, and change, of three attitudes that were identified as particularly pertinent to IPNN objectives: trust, acceptance and forgiveness.

For the purposes of this research, researchers defined trust as an attitude characterized by the absence of fear of another person and a willingness to give them responsibilities which can have bearing on one's life (e.g., entrusting a person with the safety of a family-member). Acceptance was defined as a willingness to share various areas of life with the other group. As such, acceptance can be viewed as related to social distance and measured using a method akin to Bogardus' social distance scale (i.e., measuring the respondents' willingness to enter into various social interactions with members of the conflicting group, including living on the same street, working together and marrying).³⁷ Researchers defined forgiveness as the low likelihood of projecting blame and seeking retaliation against an individual or group perceived as doing wrong.

Behavioral and attitudinal change is an important element of building peace recognized by many organizations working in the field. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies noted that "[s]uccessfully addressing [violence, discrimination and exclusion] requires a change of mind-sets, attitudes and behaviours."³⁸ Abu-Nimer (2001)

³⁴ March 2016 FGD results—Tool 5.

³⁵ March 2016 KII 4.

³⁶ August 2016 Control KII 2.

³⁷ Bogardus, E.S. (1933). A social distance scale. *Sociology and Social Research*, 17, 265-271. Retrieved from https://brocku.ca/MeadProject/Bogardus/Bogardus_1933.html

³⁸ International Federation of the Red Cross Red Crescent. (2011). *The Red Cross Red Crescent approach to promoting a culture of non-violence and peace*. Retrieved from [http://www.ifrc.org/PageFiles/53475/1205900-Advocacy%20report%20on%20Promotion%20of%20culture%20of%20peace-EN-LR%20\(2\).pdf](http://www.ifrc.org/PageFiles/53475/1205900-Advocacy%20report%20on%20Promotion%20of%20culture%20of%20peace-EN-LR%20(2).pdf)

highlights the key role of religion and religious leaders in such attitude change, by noting that, “in interreligious peacebuilding, the major objective is to change the participants’ worldview, particularly attitudes and behaviours towards the ‘other’.”³⁹

To measure the levels of trust, acceptance and forgiveness towards the other group, researchers asked FGD participants two types of questions:

- 1) A self-reporting question, asking directly about their level of trust, acceptance or forgiveness towards the other group.
- 2) “Scenario” questions, asking how likely they would be to do certain things or engage in certain activities with members of the other group.

Researchers chose scenarios carefully, depicting situations relevant to participants’ everyday-life. Researchers measured the role religious leaders play in shaping communities’ attitudes through a series of hypothetical and counterfactual questions. They asked respondents if they would change their behavior if their religious leader advised them to do so. They also probed for anecdotal examples of situations in which a religious leader’s intervention changed a person’s behavior or attitude. The below section outlines the key findings of the research on attitudes and attitudinal change in the targeted communities.

Trust

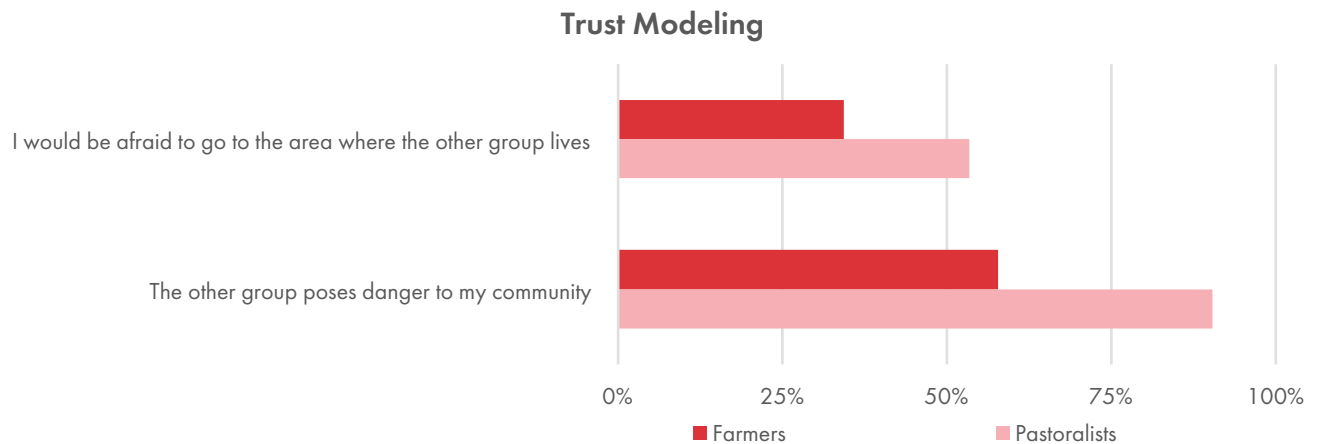


FIGURE 3: DIFFERENCES IN MODELING TRUST BETWEEN FARMERS AND PASTORALISTS

Overall, the research found low levels of trust and acceptance in target communities. While many respondents said they trusted and accepted the conflicting group in the self-assessment questions, their answers to scenario-based questions revealed distrust and negative, often harmful, stereotypes of the other group. Trust-modeling questions indicated that pastoralists are less trusting—53.4% of pastoralist participants said they would be afraid to go to the farmer-controlled area,

³⁹ Abu Nimer, M. (2001). Conflict resolution, culture, and religion: Toward a training model of interreligious peacebuilding. *Journal of Peace Research*, 38 (6), 688. Retrieved from <http://jpr.sagepub.com/content/38/6/685.abstract>

compared to 34.3% of farmer participants. Pastoralist participants saw farmers as hostile, distrustful and unforgiving. Again, the percentage was higher among pastoralists (90%) than farmers (58%). Respondents attributed the lack of trust to the perceived threat the other group posed to the participants' livelihood.

Despite the lack of trust, 70% of participants said they would leave their child in the care of a member of the conflicting community, and a similar number said they would be happy for their wife or sister to go to the neighboring community's area. This is at odds with the above findings on trust and may be linked to a fear of being accused of a crime when visiting another group's area, as such factors would not necessarily affect willingness to leave one's child in the other group's care. Second, it is possible that participants provided contradictory answers, since their perception of the conflicting group as a whole differs from their perceptions of the individuals they know. However, the data is significant, especially when compared with responses from the control group, in which all respondents said they would not leave their child in the care of the other community, and only 20% said they would be happy for their wife or sister to visit the conflicting community's area. This suggests that increased interaction through interfaith activities may lead to increased trust—even if the increase happens slowly and only on an individual level initially.

Acceptance

The findings on acceptance between the communities were equally mixed. While both self-reporting and scenario-based questions pointed to small "social distance" and considerable acceptance of the other community, this was not reflected in answers about equal rights and seemingly contradicted other findings, such as limited trust between communities and the link between ethnicity and violence.

The research revealed high levels of acceptance of the other group in all targeted communities. Between 70% and 80% of participants believe that the conflicting community was "basically the same" despite their different ethnicity, religion and profession. This is interesting, as it seemingly contradicts the finding linking the difference in identities to conflict. While people may in principle believe their groups are "the same" (in the sense of having a shared humanity), in practice they treat the other group with suspicion. These mixed perceptions of the other group point to the complexity of human nature and relationships. They may also have interesting implications for future programming.

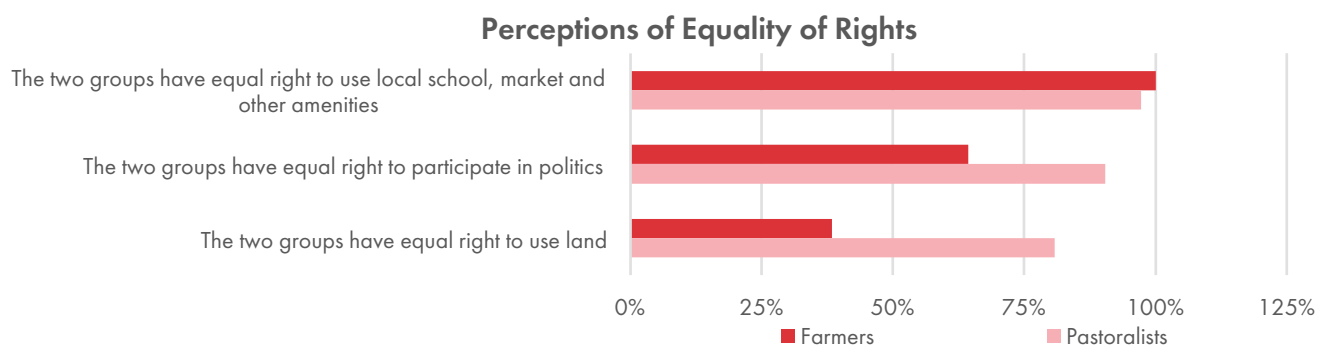


FIGURE 4: DIFFERENCES IN PERCEPTIONS OF RIGHTS' EQUALITY BETWEEN FARMERS AND PASTORALISTS

Responses to questions on rights and political participation were more predictable, given the nature of Nigerian politics and local land ownership. Due to the indigene/settler issue and perceptions that Fulani are settlers, less farmers than pastoralists believe both groups have an equal right to participate in politics. As farmers own land, 38.4% of farmers believed that

pastoralists have rights to access land. However, as illustrated in Figure 3, all groups believe the conflicting groups have a right to access to markets, schools and similar amenities.

Trust and Acceptance: Modeling Behavior

A behavior-modeling exercise measured both trust and acceptance between the two groups. The researchers presented the respondents with a series of scenarios (including taking transport belonging to the other group, trading with the other group, leaving their child in the care of a member of the other group, and marrying a member of the other group), asking them whether:

- 3) They would be happy to engage in these actions
- 4) They would be happy for a female relative (daughter/mother/sister) to do so
- 5) They would be happy for any member of their community to do so

The behavior-modeling activity provided some valuable insights into the relationship between the two groups. The scenarios were modeled on Bogardus' social distance scale, which is "based on the idea that various social relations imply different levels of emotional proximity or distance, so that the acceptance of a particular relation with an abstract person (member of a particular group) reflects one's general attitude towards the particular group."⁴⁰ The scenarios were also in line with similar questions asked in the previous research phases.

The behavior modeling indicated high levels of interaction and low levels of social distance between the communities. Between 90% and 99% of participants said they would use transport belonging to a member of the other community, trade and do business with the members of the other community. Concerning inter-marriage, a commonly used indicator of social distance, 68.7% of participants said they would be open to the concept if the person converted to their religion. These findings point to an interesting contradiction. While most community members did not fully trust the members of the other community and perceived them as a threat to their own group, they were not opposed to engaging in a range of activities with them. Interestingly, even the respondents from the control group remarked that—despite the lack of trust and acceptance of the other group—they would trade with and use transport of the members of the conflicting communities. However, they would not start a cooperative with the members of the conflicting group, suggesting that IPNN activities did contribute to increased trust and willingness to interact. In IPNN sites, the respondents were open not only to economic interactions, but also visiting each other and going to each other's celebrations (e.g., funerals and weddings).

While the contradiction between limited trust and high willingness to interact may stem from some of the limitations of this research, it also points to the need for more research into the relationship between social cohesion/social distance and conflict. While it is generally assumed high levels of social cohesion indicate resilience to conflict, this may not be true in closely-knit communities in which interaction is often a question of economic necessity. In other words, these findings indicate that just because an individual takes his/her neighbor's taxi today does not mean that he/she will not retaliate against that neighbor's family members if they encroach on his/her land tomorrow.

⁴⁰ Opačić, G. & Vujadinović, V. (2005). Ethnic distance and ethnic stereotypes as factors influencing the decision on repatriation. *Living in post-war communities* (115-144). Retrieved from <http://www.ian.org.rs/publikacije/posleratnezajednice/book/09ETHNIC-DISTANCE.pdf>

Forgiveness

Forgiveness is a particularly important attitude to examine as the process tracing exercise attributed a notable portion of the violence in the Middle Belt to reprisals. In order to measure levels of forgiveness, the researchers presented FGD participants with a scenario in which some violation (e.g., encroachment on their land, blockage of cattle route, cattle rustling) occurred, and asked them a series of questions about their reaction to such an incident.

Retaliation was not openly indicated as the best approach: 13 out of 15 groups indicated negotiation or seeking mediation as the “best” approach. Some of them also mentioned forgiveness as a possible approach, indicating that their choice of behavior would depend on the extent of damage. However, since participants seemed to have a problem with understanding the difference between the “best” and “most likely” approach, the results of the FGD cannot determine to what extent community members follow these “best” approaches in practice. Yet, there is some anecdotal evidence suggesting that they do in at least some instances. The pastoralist group from Fokkos recalled a recent incident, in which cattle destroyed a farmer’s crop, and he called the pastoralist elders to mediate instead of retaliating. A religious leader from Butura/Kunet also recalled a situation, in which a farmer blocked a watering point and the youth wanted to let their cattle graze on all of the farmer’s crops, but the religious leaders intervened and convinced them not to retaliate against the farmer.

Religious Leaders’ Impact on Attitudes⁴¹

As indicated in Figure 5, more than half of participants (and often nearly all of them) said they would change their behavior following the advice of a religious leader. This reflects the high authority of religious leaders, and suggests that they have a high potential to build peace in their communities through behavioral change. However, several groups stated that the leader would have to “give a legitimate reason” when asking them to change their behavior, indicating a limit to the religious leaders’ influence.

A majority of participants indicated that they would change their behavior if their religious leader told them to do so.

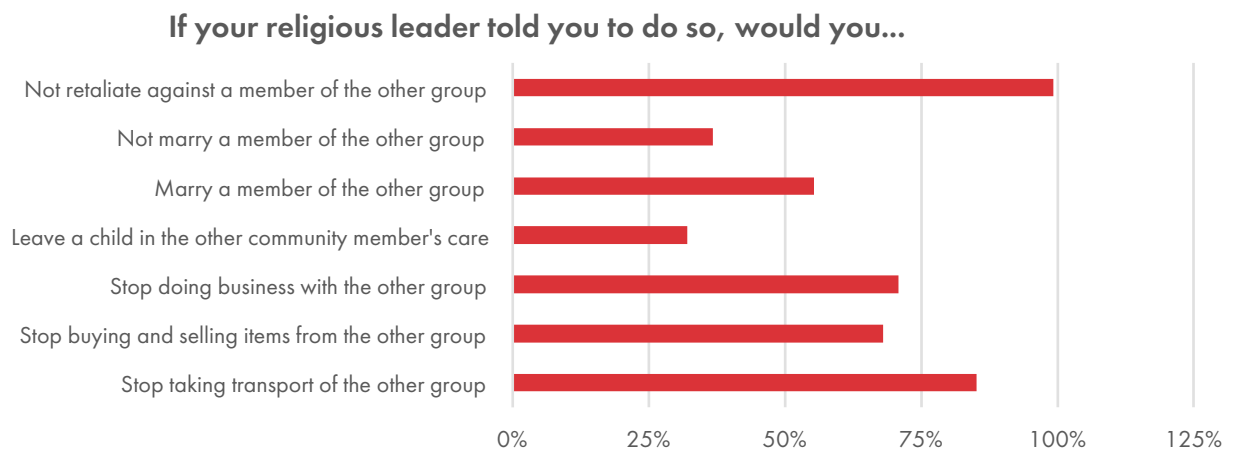


FIGURE 5: POTENTIAL IMPACT OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS ON BEHAVIOR

⁴¹In order to measure the extent to which the religious leaders affect the attitudes of community members, the researchers used the definition of attitudes as “a complex construct comprised of cognitive and affective components [which] simultaneously account for behavioral intentions [that], in turn, lead to overt behaviors.” Bagozzi, R.P. & Burnkrant, R.E. (1979). Attitude measurement and behavior change: A reconsideration of attitude organization and its relationship to behavior. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 6. Retrieved from <http://www.acrwebsite.org/search/view-conference-proceedings.aspx?id=9573>

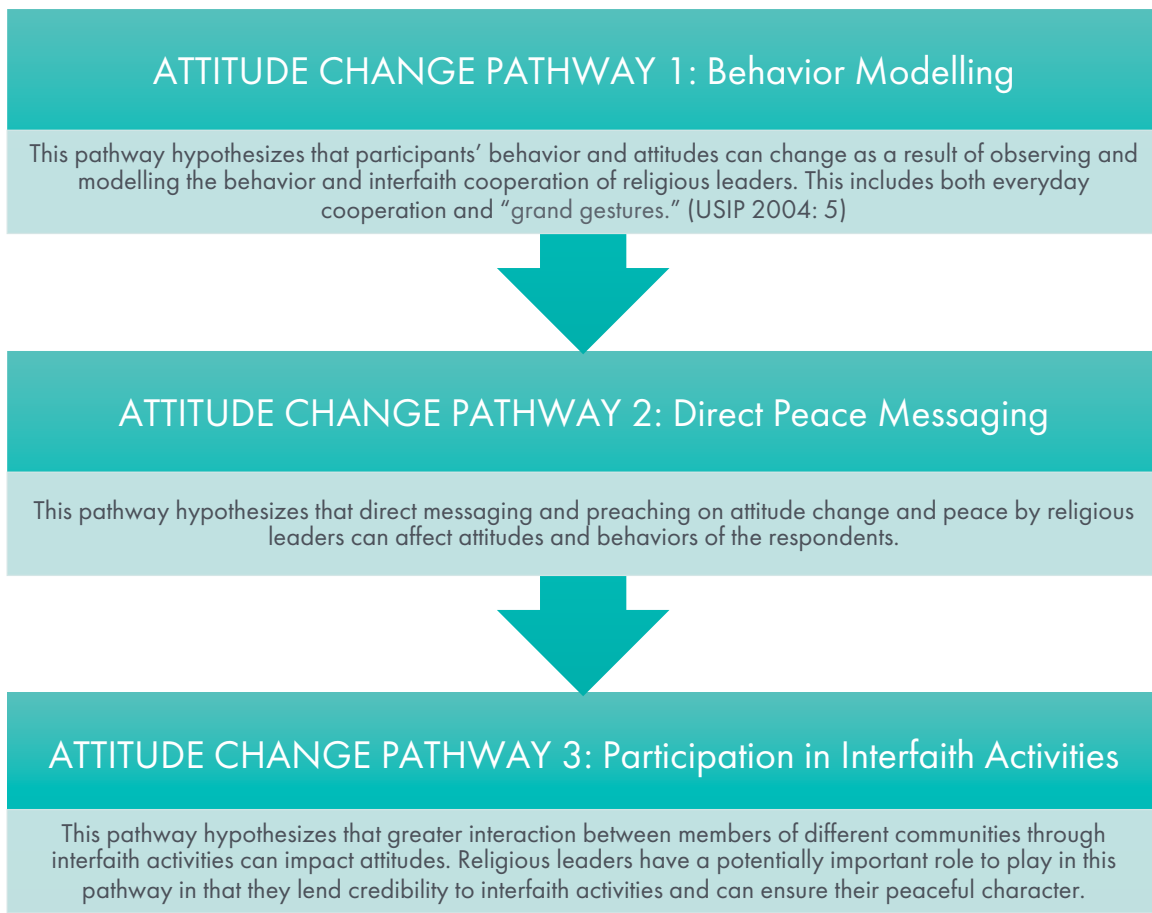


FIGURE 6: PATHWAYS TO ATTITUDE CHANGE

The research also attempted to establish how religious leaders affect the attitudes of their community members. To do so, the researchers set up a theoretical framework outlining the possible pathways to attitude change, as outlined in Figure 6.⁴² The three possible pathways include (1) behavior modeling; (2) internalization of direct peace messaging; and (3) participation in interfaith activities. The empirical research probed for the impact of each of these pathways on the behavior of members of target communities.

Phase II research found limited evidence for the potential of attitudinal change through the first pathway. While some promising observations were made by some participants, for example that a "religious leader is like a mirror" or that meetings between religious leaders from conflicting communities "made the communities believe it is possible to cooperate," these viewpoints were largely the exception.^{43,44} In fact, such viewpoints were concentrated among a small number of Muslim respondents and groups, which may suggest differences in the role of the religious leaders within Muslim and

⁴² This framework was based on IPNN's Theory of Change and the literature review.

⁴³ June 2015 FGD 6.

⁴⁴ June 2015 KII 7.

Christian communities. Overall, very few participants in Phase II discussed, explained or accounted for the role, impact or contribution of religious leaders to peacebuilding and conflict resolution in terms of these leaders serving as role models.

Phase III research set out to explore these findings in more depth, by including more questions directly probing for the role of religious leaders in behavior modeling. The FGD participants did not mention “acting as a role model” as one of the main ways that religious leaders promote peaceful attitudes. It was only indicated as such by one key informant.⁴⁵



In almost all discussions, participants described religious leaders as having an exclusively positive role in reducing violent conflict.

Nonetheless, several groups mentioned the meetings between community and religious leaders from both groups as one of the reasons for the decrease in conflict. Interaction between the religious leaders is perceived as instrumental to their ability to resolve conflicts. As participants of one FGD put it, religious leaders are perceived as influential because “they can go to the [leader of the conflicting community] to resolve disputes.”⁴⁶ While this does not indicate that participants mimic the behavior of their leaders, it shows that they are aware of the level of interaction between religious leaders and that they perceive cooperation between them as positive and as a factor in increasing the religious leaders’ authority and ability to mediate and resolve disputes.

Furthermore, all participants said that if their religious leader met more often with the religious leader of the conflicting community, there would be less conflict. When the researchers asked for reasons, they said it was due to the respect community members have for religious leaders. Because of this respect, more interaction between religious leaders would lead to more interaction between communities, which would help build trust and peace. Thus, religious leaders have a potential to change attitudes through behavior modelling.

With regard to the second path, relying on direct peace messaging, researchers asked the participants how their leaders promote peaceful messages. FGD and KII participants identified two types of messaging that religious leaders used. First, they focused on the content of the religious texts, moral and spiritual discourse (e.g., using ideas such as “all men come from Adam and Eve,” saying that vengeance belongs to God and setting Jesus’ and Mohammad’s lives as examples of peacefulness, forgiveness). Second, they focused on the benefits of peace for the community.

With regards to the third pathway, participation in interfaith activities, the research found that religious leadership serves as a means of securing support and facilitating the completion of agreements and partnerships in such activities. However, this involvement primarily reflects the elevated status of religious leaders and their role in the community (discussed above), rather than a unique contribution by religious leaders as faith-based actors. The impact of interfaith economic activities on conflict is discussed in more detail in the section below.

⁴⁵ March 2016 KII 7.

⁴⁶ March 2016 FGD results—Tool 6. FGD 3.

Section 3: Impact of Inter-Faith Economic Activities on Peacebuilding Outcomes

Phase IV of the research evaluated the impact of inter-faith economic activities supported by Mercy Corps in each of the IPNN communities. The economic activities complement monthly inter-faith peacebuilding meetings, led by women from the conflicting communities. Each community chose an economic project they wanted to embark on and realized it with support from Mercy Corps and its partners. A management committee, including members from both the pastoralist and farmer community, leads each project. Religious leaders, in particular women religious leaders, are on the management committee, and play a central role in the management of the economic projects.

The economic activities included:

1. A shared farm in Bisichi;
2. A shared agricultural and livestock market in Butura-Kunet; and
3. Shared grain processing centers in Fokkos and Dambuash-Tahoola.

Trainings on Micro-Enterprise Fundamentals (MEF), which include instruction on saving techniques, keeping accounts of one's business and agricultural techniques complement the activities. At the time when the research was conducted, the grain processing centers had not yet started working. However, the communities were jointly engaged in the initiation of the project and construction of the centers.

The primary objective of the economic projects is to increase the interaction and trust between the conflicting communities, while addressing the economic drivers of conflict. To evaluate the effectiveness of the activities, the researchers asked respondents to share the stories of how their lives changed since the beginning of the economic activity (or, in Fokkos and Dambuash-Tahoola, the beginning of the construction of the grain processing centers.) The researchers then categorized the stories—using categories such as “increased peace,” “increased trust,” “economic loss” and “economic gain”—and validated the categories with the participants to ensure they reflected the impacts economic activity had on their daily lives. The researchers then asked participants to vote for the impacts they found most significant.

The research found that participants considered the impacts relating to their relationship with the other community (e.g., decrease in conflict, increase in interaction and improved relationship) to be more significant than any economic impacts (e.g., economic gain or loss). This may be partially due to the fact that the economic activities have not generated much income, and when they have the profit has been re-invested in communities, leading to further increase in peaceful interaction. For example, respondents in Butura-Kunet reported that their profit from the shared market was used for “community development” work, such as fixing the roads, which was done jointly by members of both conflicting communities.

All communities reported that religious leaders were involved in the running of the economic projects. In some communities, only women religious leaders are members of the management committee (together with traditional leaders and/or other

members of the community). In others, senior religious leaders, such as reverends and imams, are also involved. In all communities, the participation of religious leaders increases the effectiveness of the economic activities.

Respondents said that their presence added credibility to the project and encouraged people to join even if they were reluctant to participate initially.

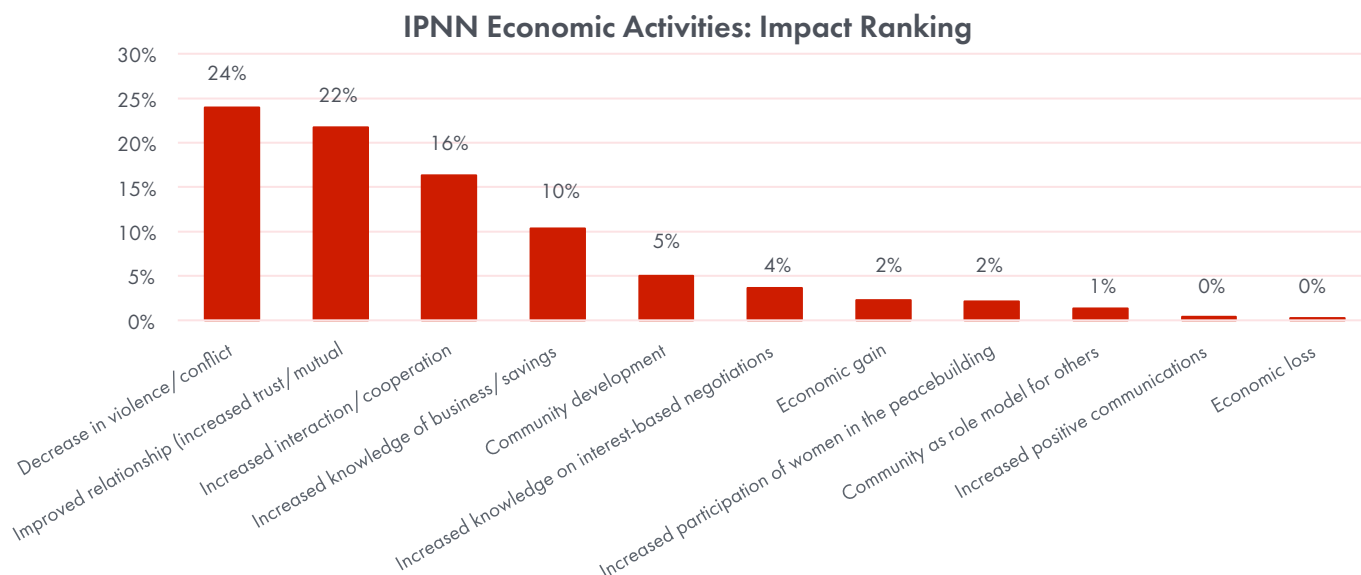


FIGURE 7: IMPACT RANKING OF IPNN ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES

These findings suggest two main conclusions. First, they show that interfaith economic activities have a high potential for increasing peace in conflicting communities. The economic benefits reportedly served as an incentive for the members of the communities, who did not participate in other interfaith activities (e.g., monthly dialogues) to join peacebuilding efforts. Additionally, the engagement of religious leaders adds credibility to the project, encouraging even more community members to join. All communities reported that the increased interaction through joint work on the economic project helped increase their trust towards the conflicting community and decrease conflict between them. It also challenged some negative stereotypes. As one respondent from a farmer community reported, “During the project site construction, I made friends from the pastoralist side. It was the first time I saw pastoralist women get involved in such work.”

Second, the impact of the interfaith project on the underlying economic roots of conflict seems to be limited. More research is required to understand how the economic impact of such interfaith projects can be enhanced.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The above findings point to several key conclusions related to conflict dynamics in target communities, the role of religious leaders in resolving conflicts and building peace, and the potential contributions of interfaith economic activities to peacebuilding.

Concerning the role religious leaders play in peacebuilding, the IPNN research found that their engagement is more valuable in terms of long-term peacebuilding. On the one hand, the process-tracing exercise confirmed that dispute resolution is more often handled by the traditional leaders. This is in line with the legal framework in Nigeria, which places land disputes in the remit of traditional leaders. Nonetheless, some anecdotal evidence suggests that this might not be the only conflict-resolution model. However, there are some indications that the training of religious leaders in mediation skills increases the frequency with which people turn to them for help in negotiations with the conflicting community. More research could be done to better understand these dynamics. On the other hand, the research found that religious leaders have a great potential to influence people's attitudes and behaviors. While the results may be prone to bias and limitations, their support both by answers to behavior-modeling exercises and anecdotal evidence from FGDs and KIIs makes them significant.

In terms of religion's role in conflict escalation and de-escalation, the research found that religion is one of the most important identity categories in target communities. Interviewed community members perceived religion as highly relevant to their conflicting group's behavior. As such, religious identity can form a basis for distrust and suspicion, and therefore contribute to escalation of conflicts, even if the immediate trigger is linked to livelihood and not religious concerns. This too points to the potential of religious leaders in preventing conflict and building peace.

During Phase III, almost all groups reported a decrease in conflict over the preceding six months. This finding can be interpreted as supporting the above conclusions and pointing to the effectiveness of IPNN programming, including the involvement of religious leaders in peacebuilding. The role of religious leaders was often mentioned as one of the reasons for the reduction in conflict. However, it should be noted that the increase in peace has not been steady or uninterrupted. The Bisichi community reported a decrease in conflict during the three months preceding the research and highlighted the crisis they faced when violence erupted between them and the conflicting community.

Recommendations

Based on the above findings, Mercy Corps developed recommendations for other actors working on farmer-pastoralist conflict in the Plateau State. While the recommendations address actors specific to these areas, some of the findings are applicable in other Nigerian states—and beyond Nigeria—in situations with similar resource conflicts where religious and ethnic identities are closely intertwined.

1. Firstly, Mercy Corps recommends all actors **consult and include local religious leaders in all initiatives addressing the grievances between farmers and pastoralists**. It is extremely important to capitalize on the knowledge of local religious leaders. The research showed that they are trusted by their communities and deeply involved in their daily lives. Religious leaders often hold more than one position in the targeted communities, and therefore are familiar with more than one aspect of their lives. Religious leaders may also be aware of already existing initiatives, infrastructure and platforms that can be used for peacebuilding.

2. Secondly, Mercy Corps recommends NGOs and the Plateau State Government **work with religious leaders, including women and youth religious leaders, to increase their peacebuilding capacity, enabling them to engage in peacebuilding from early stages.** The IPNN research found that when it comes to conflict over resources, religious leaders are often not involved during the early stages of dispute resolution (e.g., in conflict mediation). At the same time, it found that the Interest-Based Mediation training provided to religious leaders through IPNN increases their involvement in resolution of disputes over land. Most interviewed leaders shared success stories of having effectively mediated disputes resulting from land encroachment or cattle route blockage, preventing them from escalating into a larger conflict. Religious leaders' authority and social capital makes them well-positioned to resolve disputes. Enabling them to do so by building their capacity is an important strategy to consider when addressing the farmer-pastoralist conflict in Plateau State.
3. Thirdly, Mercy Corps recommends all actors support **greater cooperation among religious and traditional leaders on issues of conflict over resources and other divisive issues.** While religious leaders can be very successful in resolving disputes over resources because of their authority, resource management remains the official remit of traditional leaders. Decisions and actions of traditional leaders can have a great impact on a community, and influence its peacefulness. In some communities, respondents credited a change in traditional leadership (from one leader to the next) with decrease in conflict. Furthermore, the key informant interviews have shown that if a religious leader cannot peacefully resolve an issue over resources, he/she turns to the traditional leader for help. Thus, cultivating cooperation between traditional and religious leaders—through mechanisms such as regular meetings or roundtable discussions—is of paramount importance.
4. Fourthly, based on the reported success of the IPNN women-led peacebuilding meetings—which brought members of the two communities together, increasing their interaction, reportedly reducing distrust and suspicion, and contributing to greater conflict resilience—Mercy Corps recommends **local leaders organize regular peacebuilding meetings, led by religious leaders including women and youth, bringing together the members of the two conflicting communities to discuss the issues they face.** Mercy Corps also encourages all other actors to support such meetings, either financially or technically.
5. Finally, while this study shows initial evidence of the great potential of women and youth leaders in changing the behavior of youth and preventing conflict, **Mercy Corps recommends more research on the role of women and youth in peacebuilding in the context of pastoralist-farmer conflict in the Plateau State.** Nevertheless, Mercy Corps recommends including youth and women religious leaders in all programming linking peacebuilding and religion.

CONTACT

LIZA BARAN

Director of Conflict Management Programs | Mercy Corps Nigeria

lbaran@mercycorps.org

About Mercy Corps

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45 SW Ankeny Street
Portland, Oregon 97204

888.842.0842

mercycorps.org