



**DISCUSSION
PAPER
SERIES**

NO. 9 — DECEMBER 2013

**Can Development Interventions
Help Post-conflict Communities
Build Social Cohesion? The Case of
the Liberia Millennium Villages**

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many people without whom this research would not have been possible. In Liberia, thanks to research manager Andrew Tedesco; enumerators Albert Ballah, Forkpah Carter, Helen Paye, Boffa Jappah, Jeffrey Kpaingbaye, Marchiel Lathrobe, Seleke Kelleh, Sylvester David and Terry Napeh, as well as seven enumerators from the Liberian Institute for Statistics and Geo-Information Services (LISGIS), including team lead Daniel Kingsley; many other LISGIS staff who supported various parts of this research; data-entry personnel at iLab-Liberia and LISGIS; the hospitality of Amlib, John Walker, Stephen Kolee, Samuel Ndingi, Momolu Tolbert and Frances Tempeh (formerly) at the UN Development Programme; and Tricia Gonwa. Thanks to all of the research participants in and around Bong County. At Columbia University, thanks to project manager Caroline Peters and research assistant David Gibian. Thanks to Dana Burde, Noah Buckley, Katie Degendorfer, Macartan Humphreys, Logan McLeod, James Orbinski and Cyrus Samii. I gratefully acknowledge financial support from The Africa Initiative at CIGI; the UNDP; and the Earth Clinic at Columbia University. This study was conducted during my fellowship at The Earth Institute and The Center for the Study of Development Strategies, Columbia University.



One of the Kokoyah Millennium Villages Project communities. (Photograph by Elisabeth King.)

ABSTRACT

This paper evaluates the efforts of one international development intervention — the Kokoyah Millennium Villages Project (KMVP) — to improve welfare and build social cohesion in post-conflict Liberia. This study is based on a preliminary analysis of survey data from a quasi-experimental, difference-in-differences (DID) research design, and shows that social cohesion was already higher than anticipated before the project began. Despite operational challenges with implementation of the KMVP, complaints about the project, and lack of improved perceptions of welfare, there is evidence that the KMVP had positive effects on some measures of social cohesion and no evidence of adverse effects, yet no changes on some factors that may be important to contribute to development. This paper demonstrates that DID measures and quasi-experimental designs that use appropriate comparison groups can yield important insights in social science research conducted in complex and changing contexts such as a post-civil war setting. This paper seeks to foster a conversation about the many relationships between development and social cohesion (particularly in post-conflict contexts), the possibilities and challenges for researchers in studying these relationships and the importance of doing so for intended beneficiaries on the ground.

INTRODUCTION

In post-conflict contexts, it is important to integrate the study of social relations into routine monitoring and evaluation of development projects. This is important for two reasons: First, social cohesion can contribute to

development, which may be critical in a context in which development has already been interrupted by conflict. Second, development interventions can weaken social cohesion, which may already be weakest after war. Nonetheless, establishing the methods and procedures for best studying changes in social cohesion remains a challenge.

Two significant policy challenges prompted this research and paper. First, many communities in the Global South remain far from reaching the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). This is especially true of post-conflict countries, such as Liberia, which have been further set back by years of war. The World Bank has called civil war “development in reverse” (Collier et al. 2003, 13). In an effort to help post-conflict countries move toward the MDGs, many international and local organizations have initiated multi-faceted development interventions. An increasing number of development projects include among their goals harnessing and growing social cohesion in an effort to better reach development objectives. Development donors and practitioners widely believe that strong and inclusive social relations, operationalized as social cohesion (or social capital), contribute to a variety of development outcomes (World Bank 2005).¹ Social cohesion denotes attitudes and behaviours within a community that reflect a tendency of community members to cooperate within and across groups (King, Samii and Snilstveit 2010). Such attributes — collective action, trust and networks, for instance — were presented as the “missing link” in development (Grootaert 1998).

Second, as explained further below, development interventions sometimes weaken social relations by fostering divisions and conflicts. Additionally, many argue that conflict destroys the social fabric and that social relations are already weakest after conflict (Colletta and Cullen 2000).²

As a result of these two challenges — development setbacks that could be tackled by redirecting or cultivating social cohesion, paired with potentially weak social cohesion and the possibility that development interventions negatively affect social relations — development practitioners have become interested in assessing the effects of their work on social cohesion in post-conflict contexts. In response, this research aims to examine two questions: one substantive and one methodological. First, what are the impacts of a specific development project — the KMVP — in post-conflict Liberia on social cohesion? Second, what does this research suggest about research design and tools for measuring the impacts of development interventions on social cohesion?

This paper studies the KMVP in Bong County, Liberia using a quasi-experimental research design. The study finds that social cohesion is

1 Social capital has many definitions, including Robert Putnam’s oft-cited definition of “features of social organization such as trust, norms, and networks, which can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions” (1993, 167). The term social capital is often used interchangeably with social cohesion, although social cohesion emphasizes the paper’s focus on attributes of groups (King et al. 2010).

2 This is the predominant view, but not without challenge. Some relationships, be they desirable or nefarious, are strengthened during war (Colletta and Cullen 2000; Deng 2010).

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already generally higher than anticipated prior to the project. It also finds that despite important setbacks in project implementation, complaints about the project and a lack of evidence of improved perceptions of welfare, the KMVP had positive effects on some measures of social cohesion, and did not affect any undesirable ones; however, it did not effect change on several social factors included in the study that may be important for development. The findings contribute to debates about the effects of development interventions on social cohesion and to conversations about best practices for measuring them.

SOCIAL COHESION AND DEVELOPMENT

The Relationship between Social Cohesion and Development

Social cohesion and the related concept of social capital have been identified as important for a variety of development outcomes (Grootaert and van Bastelaer 2002; Easterly et al. 2006; Ritzen et al. 2000; Hayami 2009; Ferroni et al. 2008). These range from strengthening democracy (Putnam 1993) to educational quality (Coleman 1990), and from ecosystem management (Goldin 2008) to disaster recovery (Aldrich 2012). While there are certainly critiques of the influence and value of social cohesion in development (Mansuri and Rao 2012; Harriss 1997), social cohesion is commonly treated as an input variable.

Social cohesion not only affects development, it is also affected by development interventions. The subset of the literature that best applies to this paper positions social cohesion as an outcome or intervening variable, rather than an input. In some cases, development interventions affect social relations in positive ways. Some studies suggest that development projects can increase certain measures of social cohesion. In an experimental study of a community-driven development initiative in Liberia, for instance, Fearon et al. (2009) find that positive changes in collective action can occur even in a short period of time. A study of a conditional cash transfer program in Colombia, using behavioural games, found that the program had positive effects on some social cohesion measures (Attanasio et al. 2009). In a cluster randomized trial, paired with in-depth qualitative work in South Africa, Pronyk et al. (2008) found that a group-based microfinance program and gender and HIV/AIDS education can generate social cohesion. Some consider improved social relations — including empowerment, increased voice, inclusion and the strengthening of social fabric — as the very goal of development itself (Sen 1999; Narayan et al. 2000).

In other cases, development interventions may create or exacerbate tensions. For example, the benefits of development can be diverted to local power holders through elite capture (Mansuri and Rao 2004; Platteau 2004), or interventions themselves can foster discord (Labonne and Chase 2008; Anderson 1999). One study of social funds (a form of community-driven development wherein communities themselves design and submit proposals for projects) in Zambia and Malawi, for instance, finds substantially negative effects on individuals' perceptions of inter-group relations (Operations Evaluations Department 2002). Geschière (2009) writes similarly of efforts to decentralize development programs in

Cameroon to give local communities control over the development of their resources and how these have led to the emergence of deep divisions in the local population.

As a result of the important potential role of social cohesion, and the myriad possible ways in which development affects social cohesion, scholars and practitioners have become interested in assessing how development interventions affect social relations, looking for both intended and unintended outcomes. Self-reflection following the experiences of the Somalia famine and civil war, and further developed around other conflict contexts, including the 1994 Rwandan genocide and the ongoing war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), led many in the development community to the concept of “do no harm” (Anderson 1999). As a result, some developed the ideas of Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment and conflict sensitive analysis (Bush 1998; Centre for Conflict Resolution et al. 2004). There remains much to learn about how to study social cohesion and the ways in which development interventions affect relations between individuals and groups in post-conflict contexts.

The Challenges of Measuring the Effects of Development on Social Cohesion

There are a number of common challenges to studying the effects of development projects on social cohesion. Relatively few studies are methodologically rigorous, making it difficult to attribute changes to a specific cause or project intervention. First, in order to determine the impact of a given development project on social cohesion, some researchers conduct research only after a project is complete. In many cases, this is because of resource or feasibility constraints. Yet, without baseline data from before a project begins or perhaps before it is even announced, it is very difficult to know the magnitude of a project’s effect. For example, if social cohesion is measured after a given development project, but not before, it may not be possible to determine the extent to which the project affected the outcomes of interest. This is especially important for questions of social cohesion and development, since these variables are prone to circularity: while strong social relations can lead to better development outcomes, improved development outcomes can also lead to strong social relations. Carvalho and White (2004) find, for instance, that “social funds have operated as users rather than producers of social capital,” since communities with high levels of social capital are likely to be more successful in self-selecting themselves into social fund projects.

Second, many development evaluations are designed in a way that only the communities or beneficiaries that experience a project are studied, ignoring those that do not experience the project (Savedoff et al. 2006). This has been a common critique of the wider Millennium Villages Project (see Clemens and Demombynes 2010). Without comparing what happens for project beneficiaries with what happens to similar non-beneficiaries (i.e., a control group), it is difficult to know if it is the project or some other factor driving the changes observed. To address these concerns, many argue that randomized control trials (RCTs) represent the gold standard in impact

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evaluation.³ While RCTs are not the best methodology for all research questions or development projects (Roetman 2011), and are not always feasible, they can provide very useful findings in contexts where they are a good fit (Humphreys and Weinstein 2009; Karlan and Appel 2011). Other designs, such as quasi-experiments and regression discontinuity designs can also address these challenges (Angrist and Pischke 2009). In addition, integrating quantitative with qualitative approaches (which is not done often enough) can provide a more complete picture of social capital (Jones and Woolcock 2007). The research design must match the specific questions being posed and take into account logistical and ethical issues.

After choosing a research design to study changes in social cohesion, specifying measures and designing specific instruments is also difficult. Social issues are usually more difficult to measure than more typically quantifiable outcomes, such as agricultural output, educational achievement or income. Most researchers measure cognitive dimensions (such as norms, values, attitudes and beliefs) and structural dimensions (such as networks, roles and rules) (Krishna and Shrader 2000, 5). Most existing studies inquire into self-reported attitudes and behaviours (King, Samii and Snilstveit 2010), though integrating behavioural measures is becoming an increasingly common best practice in measuring social cohesion (King 2013).

A key difficulty of studying social cohesion is that indicators need to be context specific, perhaps identified by project participants themselves, and may include subjective perceptions, such as individual and/or cultural beliefs about security and perceptions of other groups, as well as objective indicators, such as level and type of public participation (Centre for Conflict Resolution et al. 2004; Bush 1998, 21–2). Context is important since the same indicators may reflect opposite trends in different contexts. For example, a rise in the number of community meetings (a common measure of social cohesion) might show that social cohesion is increasing, but it could alternatively indicate that social cohesion is declining, since there are more community problems that necessitate meetings (Gugerty and Kremer 2002, 219). The vagaries of context may lead to an inability to compare or even understand findings using similar methods across different contexts.

On the other hand, researchers often use entirely different measures to examine a similar set of social outcomes, while they could be working toward at least some standardization to increase comparability (Paffenholz and Reyhler 2005, 18). For instance, in a synthetic review of eight development interventions in Sub-Saharan Africa, evaluated to rigorous impact evaluation standards, only a few repeated measures were found and even those were often put into operation in distinct ways (King, Samii and Snilstveit 2010; see also King 2013).

The most widely used instrument seems to be the World Bank’s *Integrated Questionnaire for the Measurement of Social Capital*, a household-level

³ See, for example, Innovations for Poverty Action (www.poverty-action.org/), the Abdul Lateef Jamal Poverty Action Lab (www.povertyactionlab.org/about-j-pal) and the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (www.3ieimpact.org/en/) for discussions.

survey to generate quantitative data on social capital, possibly as part of a larger household poverty or livelihoods survey. It aims to measure six dimensions of social capital: groups and networks; trust and solidarity; collective action and cooperation; social cohesion and inclusion; information and communication; and empowerment and political action (Jones and Woolcock 2007). Although this instrument is subject to some criticism, its creators have endeavoured to balance general applicability with local implementation (Grootaert et al. 2004, 6–8), components of this tool have been used in many different contexts, and researchers are also able to build on these tools. Indeed, it was with these bodies of literature, tools and challenges in mind that this research in Liberia was designed.

RESEARCH AND METHODS IN LIBERIA

Development, Social Cohesion and the Millennium Villages in Liberia

Liberia experienced 14 years of civil war in three periods of fighting (1989–1991, 1992–1996 and 1999–2003). The two policy challenges introduced above — development setbacks and weakened social cohesion — are arguably evident in Liberia’s conflict and post-conflict periods.

Liberia’s level of economic development was low even before the war, and scholars often attribute the conflict, at least in part, to failures of development (Humphreys and Richards 2005, 38–9). Liberia’s economy suffered throughout the war. Per capita income declined 80 percent between 1980 and 1997 (ibid., 11). Today, GDP per capita remains low at US\$247 (Ministry of Planning and Economic Affairs 2010, 1). Liberia ranks near the bottom (182) of 187 countries and territories in the Human Development Index, a ranking that has declined between 1980 and 2011 (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP] 2011). Since the MDGs were set in 2000, but based on 1990 benchmarks, most developing countries had a 10-year head start in achieving the goals, while Liberia was already set back (Humphreys and Richards 2005, 15). According to the 2010 *Millennium Development Goals Liberia Report* (Ministry of Planning and Economic Affairs 2010), despite successes in promoting gender equality (Goal 3) and progress toward combatting HIV/AIDS (Goal 6), most goals are unlikely to be achieved. These include the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger (Goal 1), universal primary education (Goal 2), reduction in child mortality (Goal 5), improvement in maternal health (Goal 6) and environmental sustainability (Goal 7).

It is also widely believed that social cohesion is low in the aftermath of conflict in Liberia, as is often the presumption in other cases. Many argue that exclusion was at the root of the conflict and that any social cohesion that did exist was ruptured by the conflict (Richards et al. 2005; Ellis 2007). The war in Liberia left between five and 10 percent of the population dead and more than 33 percent displaced (Richards et al. 2005). Some Liberians recount having been displaced six or seven times during Liberia’s three periods of fighting (Humphreys and Richards 2005, 13). A report based on a nationwide survey of 4,500 Liberians identifies rebuilding trust between citizens — a key element of social cohesion — as a major preoccupation for building peace (Vinck, Pham and Kreutzer 2011, 7). Communications

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carried out during this study revealed that development practitioners working in Liberia generally work on the presumption that social cohesion is low. On the other hand, social cohesion may have in some ways strengthened over the course of the conflict and since. For instance, increased migration led to information sharing across communities during the war (Humphreys and Richards 2005, 14). At least one study has shown that social cohesion is relatively high in some areas of post-conflict Liberia (Fearon, Humphreys and Weinstein 2009).

In response to these issues, international and local actors have initiated a number of projects in Liberia. Among these was the KMVP, led by the UNDP in cooperation with the Liberian government and based in Kokoyah, Bong County, Liberia. Kokoyah is located about 240 km (a 4.5-hour drive) from the capital, Monrovia. While situated in Bong County, it borders Nimba and Grand Bassa. It has a population of approximately 24,000 people and an area of 930 km². The KMVP is funded principally by the government of Norway, which has committed more than US\$5.4 million over five years to the project (UN Deputy Envoy, n.d.).

The KMVP is a spinoff — albeit with important differences in leadership, investment and size — of the well-publicized Millennium Villages Project, run in cooperation with the United Nations, the UNDP, the Earth Institute at Columbia University, Millennium Promise, 10 national and countless local governments, and rural villagers (Konecky and Palm 2008). The Millennium Villages Project is a multi-dimensional development intervention aimed to help reach the MDGs at the local level in rural Africa. It is a science-based intervention meant to be a “proof of concept” that the goals can be reached with concerted international investments and cooperation with governments, even in “hunger hotspots” and subsistence farming communities across Sub-Saharan Africa. Complementarities, or synergies, are intended to emerge through simultaneous and broad-based interventions in health, infrastructure, education, agriculture and nutrition, and water, sanitation and the environment (Konecky and Palm 2008; Sanchez et al. 2007). The 12 original Millennium Villages (called MV-1s) were established in 2004 and 2005 in 10 countries (Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Mali, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Tanzania and Uganda). Each village has a population of approximately 5,000 people. Nearby villages were included in the project about one year later (MV-2s), making “clusters” of Millennium Villages, though secondary sites did not always receive the full range of interventions. The idea was that other development practitioners and governments would borrow from the Millennium Village concept and implement the third generation, MV-3s.

The KMVP represents the first MV-3 and in this case, the government of Liberia had already decided to focus on development in Kokoyah. As early project documentation states, UNDP Liberia was then “inspired by the Millennium Village Project concept headed by Professor Jeffery Sachs, MDGs Advisor to UN Secretary General,” and consequently planned the Kokoyah “Millennium Village, as part of a new global approach to lift developing country villages out of the poverty trap that afflicts more than a billion people worldwide.” The idea was that the KMVP would show how

“challenges can be met, with known, proven, reliable and appropriate technologies interventions,” with a level of investment on par with existing global commitments. While the KMVP borrows from the Millennium Villages Project model, the differences between this project and the other Millennium Villages emerged as too great to generalize findings.

According to project documents, the aim of the KMVP, self-described as “community-based and community-led,” is to “integrate and implement the interventions required to achieve the MDGs at the district level within a five-year timeframe.” The specific areas of focus are agriculture, health, education, water and sanitation, community development and local governance, while gender and youth serve as cross-cutting themes. The project puts “human security” at its centre “by empowering villagers (through capacity-building support) to implement and manage a comprehensive set of rural development strategies that will contribute to the achievement of the MDGs that are context-specific and tailored to meeting the beneficiary communities’ development priorities and aspirations.” Given these efforts, living in a project community may improve social cohesion, indicated by such measures as increased membership in community-based groups, increased collective action, improved trust among community members and of state and community organizations, and strengthened networks and reciprocity. At the same time, the social disruptions of the project could decrease social cohesion, warranting systematic study.

The many interventions that were planned are too numerous to list comprehensively. They are based on community consultations, meetings with district development committees and Liberia’s Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper, and they target all of the MDGs. They include, for instance, increasing access to improved production inputs and agricultural services to eliminate hunger and malnutrition; developing a gender strategy to improve the livelihoods of men and women; constructing facilities, providing supplies and training teachers, school administrators and committees in the goal of universal primary education; constructing new health clinics, helping secure access to safe drinking water and conducting awareness campaigns in schools to improve community members’ health; and building capacity for participation, governance and collective action through research, supporting recreational peace-building activities, working with the Ministry of Gender, and providing community training and workshops. Complementary relationships are intended to emerge through simultaneous and broad-based interventions.

The interventions that took place over the course of the study (December 2008 to December 2011) were significantly less than those planned, though this list, too, is not exhaustive. One of the most completely implemented aspects of the intervention has been in the agricultural realm, in agricultural training and distribution of improved rice seed to select smallholder farmers and farming groups, and farming tools to select farming groups. The other most significant part of the intervention has been in health: the project funded and supervised the construction of two new primary health care facilities and also procured a new ambulance. Project staff additionally lent technical and logistical support to immunization campaigns and monitored existing

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clinics and patients' access. The project has also repaired 50 damaged hand pumps to improve access to clean water and trained villagers to undertake repairs themselves. Project staff conducted several workshops on gender sensitization and awareness in an effort to increase women's participation in community activities and decision making. No significant interventions have taken place in the education sector, and plans for meaningful community development and local governance — explicit efforts to build social cohesion — have yet to materialize. Project staff explained stalled implementation with challenges common to many development interventions: intermittent funding, weak capacity among contractors to deliver infrastructure projects and, most important, deplorable infrastructure that hampers access to project sites (project documents; personal communications).

Research Design and Fieldwork

This research aims to answer the counterfactual question, “What would have happened to social cohesion in the project communities if the project had not taken place?” It employs a quasi-experimental, DID design, comparing the outcomes for individuals within project communities (the treatment group) with outcomes for individuals in matched comparison communities that did not receive the project (the control group). A quasi-experiment differs from a randomized control trial in that communities (or individuals) are not randomly assigned to “treatment” and “control” groups. A DID design measures the differences between pre- and post-project indicators within the differences of the project and comparison communities (Angrist and Pischke 2009, 227–43). As such, data was collected in two stages. Stage one collected the pre-project baseline data, and stage two collected end line data three years into the project. Outcomes were compared before the intervention and again three years into the project. This paper represents the first quasi-experimental evaluation — with control and treatment groups, and pre- and post-project data — of any Millennium Village Project.

A village-level matching strategy was used to find comparison communities outside (but close to) the project communities in Kokoyah. Liberia had not had a census in 24 years, so matching on household-level data was not possible, and even collecting reliable village-level data was problematic. Matching was based on village-level data collected by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and various non-governmental organizations, and based on a number of characteristics: proximity (within 25 km of a surveyed project village), number of households, predominant ethnicity, reported level of migration and key socio-economic proxies (road access, school and health clinic). The comparison sample included 30 villages (a total of 428 respondents), matched two-to-one with the project communities.⁴ Most of the comparison communities were located in Bong County, like the project communities, but some were in the neighbouring counties of Nimba and Grand Bassa.

⁴ The survey was not administered in two matched villages as a result of unforeseen logistical issues, making the total number of comparison communities 30 rather than 32.

STAGE ONE: PRE-PROJECT BASELINE STUDY

The baseline survey was completed in project communities in Kokoyah in December 2008 and in matched comparison communities surrounding it in May 2009.⁵ The project sample included 16 randomly selected villages in Kokoyah (a total of 360 respondents), representing 10 percent of the villages in Kokoyah and roughly 10 percent of the households. The baseline was carried out in two parts in project communities. The UNDP carried out a household survey on food security and nutrition, to which a separate survey on social cohesion was added. The social cohesion survey included questions on group membership (types and diversity within groups); who to turn to in need of help; trust of a variety of groups; generalized trust and feelings of acceptance; conflicts and conflict management; and collective action. In an effort to make results comparable with those of other studies, the study drew heavily on the World Bank social capital modules and surveys conducted by other researchers. In an effort to make questions locally appropriate, questions were pre-tested and the surveys translated and back-translated. Identifiable data on participants was collected to permit a panel for the second end line round. The surveys for the comparison community were carried out entirely by the research team for this study.

Table 1 presents select household characteristics of the project and comparison communities at baseline. Findings indicate that the project and comparison communities have no statistically significant differences on the key demographic dimensions examined, representing good baseline balance. While neither the predominant ethnicity, Kpelle, nor the second most common ethnicity, Bassa (21.3 percent of respondents in comparison communities versus 27.6 percent in project communities), are significantly different, there are many more Mano respondents in the comparison communities (17.6 percent) as opposed to the project communities (0.6 percent) due to erroneous village-level estimates used in matching. This imbalance is discussed in the section on limitations below. The baseline values on the outcomes of interest are significantly different, also discussed in the limitations section below.

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ROUGHLY 10
PERCENT OF THE
HOUSEHOLDS
”

⁵ Four project communities were also re-surveyed in May 2009 to check if there had been any major changes since the 2008 baseline, but no such changes were found.

“ THIS STUDY ULTIMATELY EXAMINES NOT ONLY THE IMPACT OF THE DEVELOPMENT INTERVENTION, BUT ALSO THE IMPACT OF DASHED EXPECTATIONS ”

Table 1: Select Household-level Socio-economic Demographics at Baseline

Demographics of Head Household	Comparison Communities	Project Communities	Difference Between Groups
Literacy	50.2%	49.2%	-1.1%
	(0.0417)	(0.0226)	(0.0475)
	[424]	[360]	[784]
Christian	95.0%	86.0%	-9.0%
	(0.0118)	(0.0585)	(0.0597)
	[422]	[30]	[452]
Houses made of durable materials	35.6%	33.3%	-2.3%
	(0.0409)	(0.1205)	(0.1274)
	427	30	457
Cellphone ownership	26.3%	29.1%	2.8%
	(0.0253)	(0.048)	(0.0543)
	[426]	[358]	[784]
Kpelle ethnicity	56.0%	65.1%	9.1%
	(0.0819)	(0.057)	(0.0998)
	[427]	[352]	[779]
Number of meals eaten by adults per day	1.95	1.92	-0.03
	(0.016)	(0.0231)	(0.0281)
	[424]	[351]	[775]
Residing in village where born	68%	70%	2%
	(0.0297)	(0.0909)	(0.0958)
	[425]	[30]	[455]
Outcome Variables			
Number of groups in which respondent is a member	2.02	1.53	-0.49***
	(0.0489)	(0.0913)	(0.1037)
	[403]	[358]	[761]
Trust rating in national government	2.43	2.07	-0.36***
	(0.0434)	(0.068)	(0.0807)
	[421]	[353]	[774]
Trust rating in local government	2.42	2.15	-0.27***
	(0.0487)	(0.0779)	(0.0919)
	[422]	[344]	[766]
Trust rating in neighbours	2.61	2.43	-0.18**
	(0.0418)	(0.0548)	(0.07)
	[425]	[352]	[777]
Would turn to community members for help	73%	69%	-4%
	(0.0288)	(0.0377)	(0.0475)
	[419]	[359]	[778]

Note: Clustered standard errors are in round brackets and sample sizes in square brackets.

** p < 0.05; *** p < 0.01

STAGE TWO: END LINE SURVEY THREE YEARS INTO THE PROJECT

The end line survey included the same questions as the baseline survey, and these are the results upon which this discussion paper concentrates.⁶ In order to create a panel data set, the same individuals who participated in the baseline were re-contacted for the end line survey. The overall attrition rate was 25 percent between baseline and end line surveys, with enumerators able to re-contact 75 percent (592 of 788) of baseline respondents. However, the attrition rate differed between project and comparison communities. In project communities, 252 of 360 respondents were re-surveyed, for an attrition rate of 30 percent. In comparison communities, 340 of the 428 baseline respondents were re-surveyed, representing an attrition rate of 21 percent. Part of the reason for this difference in rates of attrition between comparison and project communities was the unfortunate loss of contact information for participants from five project communities surveyed in the baseline. These five communities could not be removed from the study without loss of geographic coverage of Kokoyah and statistical power given the cluster sampling strategy. In order to replace those participants who dropped off from the original survey, a random refreshment sample totalling 237 participants was selected from the same communities where drop-off occurred.⁷

Limitations, Biases and Challenges

There are a number of limitations, biases and challenges in this study. First, given limited implementation of project initiatives as compared to plans, this study ultimately examines not only the impact of the development intervention, but also the impact of dashed expectations. Field notes show that enumerators encountered many comments from community members such as, “[The project staff said they would] make this place a city and they’re doing nothing!” (see also Ushahidi 2010). Evaluating the impact of a package of interventions, such as the KMVP, rather than one specific intervention (for example, a school feeding program) is a particular challenge. With multi-faceted interventions, some researchers try to parse the effects by varying the components of the development project to which different subpopulations are exposed. The logic of the KMVP is that the whole package of interventions works together, thereby prompting a packaged study design. Nonetheless, poor implementation hindered the ability to draw conclusions. The intervention also lacked a clearly articulated theory of change, a common challenge for synergistic projects.

Second, the main road through Kokoyah was substantially improved at the same time as the KMVP was implemented, which may lead to erroneous attributions of change to the project; however, not all project communities

6 The end line study was also updated to include longer modules on welfare and politics. It also included a module specifically for community chiefs targeting village-level experiences and dynamics, social cohesion and welfare. It added several open-ended questions directly asking about the experiences of the KMVP in project communities. The study team also took detailed notes about perceptions and experiences in each of the surveyed communities. These additional data sources are not included in this discussion paper.

7 This number represents required replacements, plus any chiefs from sampled communities who were not surveyed in the baseline.

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are very near the new road. In order to address this concern, a variable for proximity to the road was created and tested for correlations against the seven key outcomes of interest included in this paper. Being near to the new road was not significantly correlated with any of these outcomes.

Third, research partnerships should ideally begin prior to implementing the development project (preferably during the design phase) to leave open the most methodological options to best answer implementers' questions. The beginning of this study, virtually coinciding with the beginning of project implementation, limited the study design and may have affected baseline results on outcomes of interest. In response to the latter concern, this paper focuses on DID results.

Fourth, this study also focusses on DID results since there was one significant demographic imbalance between project and comparison communities at baseline. As identified above, there were more Mano in comparison than project communities, which is significant since ethnicity is correlated with some of the social cohesion outcomes. Self-identifying as Kpelle at baseline is correlated with being a member of fewer groups ($p < 0.10$). In contrast, self-identifying as Mano at baseline is correlated with higher group membership ($p < 0.01$). These differences likely help explain the higher baseline group membership in comparison communities as compared to baseline project communities. Self-identifying as Kpelle at baseline was also correlated with lower trust in national and local government ($p < 0.10$), and in neighbours at baseline ($p < 0.05$). These differences again make DID a good strategy.

Fifth, attrition between baseline and end line leads to potential biases in the results. Appendix 1 presents an analysis of missingness. Appendix 2 presents the characteristics of the refreshment sample compared with the panel. There were many similarities between those who were part of the panel and those who were part of the baseline only. In terms of characteristics, they were nearly identical. The difference in cellphone ownership reflects the dramatic increase of cellphones across all groups between 2008 and 2011. A significant difference is that those who were part of the baseline only were more likely to have been born somewhere other than the village in which they were interviewed, in comparison with those who were part of the panel. In addition, respondents who were part of the baseline only had a higher mean trust in people from neighbouring villages compared with those who were part of the panel. These two differences make sense, given that the most frequent reason the survey team reported for not finding a respondent was, according to neighbours, that they had moved; with post-conflict migration, people may have still been returning to their homes between 2008 and 2011. Another difference, a counterintuitive one, was that participants who were not available at the end line had a higher mean trust in local government and neighbours than those who participated in the baseline and end line surveys. It was reasoned that since replacements were fairly evenly spread over project and comparison communities, these differences would not likely have affected the DID figures.

A sixth limitation is that this study focusses almost exclusively on social impacts. The decision was based on the fact that the broader Millennium

Villages Project has been criticized for being overly technocratic and inadequately focussing on social and political factors (see Munk 2013). The logic was that this study would complement a host of other evaluations of the KMVP and be analyzed alongside them. Given that these did not materialize, the results here are only a partial picture of the KMVP impact.

Finally, while the enumerators generally believed that people were telling the truth, team members considered that interviewees might have been distorting some of their responses in the hope of some kind of gain, such as new projects or increased funding. In addition, team members believed that chiefs, in particular, were worried about expressing their opinions about government. As one member remarked, “The chiefs can be frightened about saying that they don’t believe in their government superiors. They’re frightened for their jobs.” A related limitation is that this study employs exclusively survey-based measures and thus lacks behavioural observations that have since become a best practice in the field (see King 2013). While the measures included here have been used in a number of studies, lending to the ability to compare and generalize across findings, more detailed context-specific measures would also have added much value.

FINDINGS

Exposure to Project and Reception of the Community

When respondents in project communities were interviewed in late 2011, 339 respondents (89 percent) had heard of the KMVP. Just over 50 percent (n=166) of respondents included agriculture in their unprompted description of what the “Millennium Village Project involves”; 38 percent indicated the project involved health (n=127); 32 percent said the project involved education (n=108); and 16 percent (n=52) said the project involved community organizations. Forty percent of respondents (n=138) reported that the KMVP had built something in their community. Forty-seven percent said they “kn[e]w about any community meetings that happened for the Millennium Village projects” and 75 percent of those reported having attended at least one meeting, with the average number of meetings attended per individual at 1.8. Thirty-three percent of the respondents in project communities reported having given money, supplies or time to the carrying out of the KMVP projects. The most common contribution was clearing brush, swamp or land around sites designated for new buildings.

Respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with a number of positive and negative statements, phrased as “different ways of looking at how the Millennium Village Projects can work” (responses are summarized in Table 2). Overall, the reception of the community was negative, with negative statements garnering much more support than positive ones. When asked to identify *the most significant* problem from the list included in Table 2, the top three answers were: that the project was too slow (21 percent); that the projects didn’t help many people (13 percent); and that the workers misused the money (12 percent).

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Table 2: Perceptions of the KMVP (in percent)

Negative Statements	Disagree	Agree	Don't Know
The whole way of doing things was too slow.	11.69 (n=38)	62.15 (n=202)	26.15 (n=85)
The project workers did not know their job well.	22.80 (n=75)	41.95 (n=138)	35.26 (n=116)
The projects they did were not the most important ones for the community.	33.13 (n=109)	43.16 (n=142)	23.71 (n=78)
The projects did not help many people in the community.	27.11 (n=90)	48.49 (n=161)	24.40 (n=81)
The workers spoiled (meaning misused) the money.	15.11 (n=50)	47.73 (n=158)	37.16 (n=123)
Problem and confusion (meaning conflicts) in the community was not settled well.	20.48 (n=68)	48.49 (n=161)	31.02 (n=103)
The work was too hard [for community members].	27.52 (n=90)	49.37 (n=132)	32.11 (n=105)
People in the community could not easily know about how the work will go [lack of information on project].	15.92 (n=53)	59.46 (n=198)	24.62 (82)
Workers were stealing the money.	12.23 (n=40)	43.43 (n=142)	44.34 (n=145)
The dividing of the money was not fair.	14.55 (n=48)	30.91 (n=102)	54.55 (n=180)
Positive Statements	Disagree	Agree	Don't Know
The work moved faster than I expected.	61.65 (n=209)	10.62 (n=36)	27.73 (n=94)
The project workers knew their job well.	39.88 (n=136)	24.63 (n=84)	35.48 (n=121)
The project helped the important needs of the community.	51.18 (n=174)	25.00 (n=85)	23.82 (n=81)

Overall, 37.7 percent believe that the KMVP in their communities was mostly helpful for their communities; 23.8 percent believe that it was neither helpful nor harmful (“bad”); and 37.6 percent believed that, overall, the projects were “bad” for their communities. These questions were borrowed from an impact evaluation of a community-driven development program in the DRC where, despite no evidence of positive social, economic or welfare outcomes, 81 percent of the population reported the project to be “helpful” and only two percent reported it to be harmful (Humphreys, Sanchez de la Sierra and van der Windt 2012, 19).

How Did the KMVP Affect Social Cohesion?

Tables 3, 4 and 5 present survey findings for seven key variables in response to the main questions of this study. The DID estimate is calculated by subtracting the difference between end line and baseline in comparison

communities from the difference between end line and baseline in project communities. Causal interpretations rely on the presumption that in the absence of the development intervention, the project communities would have the same difference as the comparison communities. The standard errors are clustered at the community level. Tables 4 and 5 also report the mean outcomes in the project and comparison communities at baseline and end line. Some of the variables represent self-reported behaviour, such as the number of groups of which respondents are members. Other variables represent self-reported attitudes, such as those referring to trust, and still others refer to beliefs, such as the questions that target perceptions of economic welfare.

The core findings offer a first answer to questions about the impacts of the KMVP on social cohesion. The results, reported in Table 3, suggest the project increased some desirable measures of social cohesion, while not affecting undesirable outcomes. The KMVP had a positive and statistically significant effect on group membership, increasing the average number of groups in which respondents are members by 0.4. Although trust in national government declined in project and comparison communities, the decline was less in project communities, and calculations show a positive statistically significant effect of the KMVP on trust in national government. There is no statistically significant effect on trust of local government or trust in neighbours, however. To put these results into perspective, these questions were measured on a three-point scale — “no, sometimes or yes” — in response to questions about whether the respondent can trust that X will do what she or he says. The study also shows no significant results in perceptions of community networks (whether respondents would turn to other people in their communities for help). These latter three community-level measures of social cohesion may be particularly important for development gains. Participants at both baseline and end line were also asked about their perceptions of their welfare “compared with other villages” and “compared with one year ago.” The study found no statistically significant effect compared with non-project villages.

Overall, according to the measures used, some indications of social cohesion improved and the project did not affect social cohesion in undesirable ways. Given the perceptions that welfare had not improved, the fairly negative perceptions of the project and the reality that stalled project implementation may have arguably decreased social cohesion, these findings are encouraging in the light of efforts to, at a minimum, “do no harm.” In the aim of more maximalist goals, however, of building increased social cohesion to foster development and peace building, the three years of the KMVP measured here fall short.

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Table 3: Social Cohesion and Welfare Findings

Baseline	Comparison Communities	Project Communities	Difference between Groups
Social Cohesion			
1. Change in number of groups in which respondent is a member	-0.13	0.39***	0.53***
	(0.085)	(0.1264)	(0.15)
	[403, 451]	[355, 378]	
2. Change in respondent trust rating in national government	-0.39***	-0.2**	0.2**
	(0.0522)	(0.0806)	(0.094)
	[421, 442]	[353, 374]	
3. Change in respondent trust rating in local government	-0.4***	-0.32**	0.07
	(0.0479)	(0.002)	(0.1)
	[422, 443]	[344, 374]	
4. Change in respondent trust rating in neighbours	-0.06	0.09	0.15
	(0.0467)	(0.0797)	(0.09)
	[425, 440]	[352, 371]	
5. Change in strength of community network rating	0.02	0.03	0.01
	(0.0344)	(0.0525)	(0.0618)
	[419, 445]	[359, 370]	
Welfare			
6. Change in opinion of village economic conditions compared to other villages	-0.03	-0.15	-0.12
	(0.067)	(0.242)	(0.246)
	[420, 449]	[30, 374]	
7. Change in opinion of village economic conditions compared to one year ago	0.29***	0.39*	0.1
	(0.066)	(0.206)	(0.212)
	[424, 449]	[30, 374]	

Note: Clustered standard errors are in round brackets and sample sizes in square brackets.

* $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

At the same time, these preliminary research findings suggest that social cohesion is not as low as might be predicted after Liberia’s war, at least at the community level in and around Kokoyah. Amid concerns about backsliding in Liberia’s efforts at peace building (International Crisis Group 2012), most social cohesion findings were robust in both project and comparison communities, at baseline and end line, although the study focussed primarily on cohesion within the community, rather than broader cohesion across communities. This finding has implications for development project and evaluation design moving forward. Rather than importing models developed too separately from context, policy makers and practitioners should measure and understand existing social cohesion before beginning a project and examine how best to harness what is already there.

Social Cohesion Around the KMVP

Providing resources to one group to the exclusion of another can sometimes prompt discord. Exclusion has also been a critique of the broader Millennium Villages Project: “the international community cannot neglect the moral implications of selecting a happy few to receive medical care,

education, sanitation, and the like while leaving the large majority outside the fence” (Keyzer and Van Wesenbeeck 2009, 498). Since tensions may increase between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries of a project, this study inquired as to whether people from neighbouring villages knew about the KMVP and about the impacts of the project in comparison communities. In response to a question about whether they had heard of the KMVP, 26 percent of respondents in comparison communities (n=114) replied in the affirmative. Of those, 23 percent (n=26) reported having spoken to people in the communities that took part in the project. Of those that knew about the KMVP, 31 percent (n=32) included agriculture in their unprompted description of what the “Millennium Village Project involves.” Eleven percent (n=11) included health, 18 percent (n=19) included education, and 11 percent (n=11) included community organizations in their answer. Of those that had heard of the KMVP, 64 percent deemed it helpful, 21 percent deemed it neither helpful nor harmful and 16 percent deemed it “bad” for their *own* communities, significantly more positive ratings than responses to the same question from those living within project communities. Direct experience with the project, and unmet expectations, may have led to more frustrations from respondents living in project communities. Those living in comparison communities, in contrast, may have been reflecting more on the idea of the project and hopeful of the project expanding to them.

Reflections on This Quasi-Experiment

Beyond findings specific to the KMVP, the experience and results of this study, while recognizing limitations and biases, also speak to the value of this type of research design. Tables 4 and 5 illustrate the value of using an experimental or quasi-experimental research design for answering questions about the impact of development interventions on social cohesion. Table 4 reports estimates for the variable “number of groups in which respondent is a member” and illustrates the importance of collecting baseline data. In the project communities, the baseline measure was 1.52, while the end line measure was 1.92 (a significant [$p < 0.01$] difference of 0.4). In the comparison communities, the baseline measure was 2.04, while the end line measure was 1.91 (a difference of -0.13 [not statistically significant]). If the study had collected information only at the end line, it would have likely concluded, since the number of groups in which individuals in project and comparison communities were members was about the same, that the project had no impact on group membership. Having the results from the baseline, however, allows for drawing a different, more accurate, conclusion. The DID estimate was 0.53 (=0.4 - [-0.13] significant at [$p < 0.01$]), suggesting the project increased the number of groups in which a respondent was a member in the project communities by approximately 33 percent over baseline (=0.53/1.52). Most of the groups to which people reported belonging were secret societies (common in Liberia), church groups and brush-clearing groups. Some of the positive effect is representative of programmatic features of the intervention, however, rather than of meaningful social cohesion results, since some of the groups are specifically related to the KMVP (see also King, Samii and Snilstveit 2010, 356).

“ SINCE TENSIONS MAY INCREASE BETWEEN BENEFICIARIES AND NON-BENEFICIARIES OF A PROJECT, THIS STUDY INQUIRED AS TO WHETHER PEOPLE FROM NEIGHBOURING VILLAGES KNEW ABOUT THE KMVP ”

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 ACHIEVEMENT OF
 COMMUNITIES’
 DEVELOPMENT
 GOALS**

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Table 4: Change in Number of Groups in which Respondent Is a Member

	Baseline	End Line	Difference
Project communities	1.52	1.92	0.39***
	(0.0927), [355]	(0.0917), [378]	(0.1264)
Comparison communities	2.04	1.91	-0.13
	(0.0477), [403]	(0.0694), [451]	(0.085)
Difference between groups	-0.52	0.00	0.53***
	(0.1043), [758]	(0.1152), [829]	(0.15)

Note: Clustered standard errors are in round brackets and sample sizes in square brackets.

* $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

Table 5: Change in Respondent Trust of National Government

	Baseline	End Line	Difference
Project communities	2.07	1.87	-0.2**
	(0.068), [353]	(0.068), [353]	(0.0806)
Comparison communities	2.43	2.03	-0.39***
	(0.0434), [421]	(0.0434), [421]	(0.0522)
Difference between groups	-0.36	-0.16	0.2**
	(0.0807), [774]	(0.0807), [774]	(0.094)

Note: Clustered standard errors are in round brackets and sample sizes in square brackets.

* $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

Table 5, which reports on change in respondents’ trust of national government, suggests the importance of conducting research in project and comparison communities as opposed to project communities only. In project communities, the baseline measure was 2.07, while the end line measure was 1.87 (a difference of -0.20 [$p < 0.05$]). In the comparison communities, the baseline measure was 2.43 while the end line measure was 2.03 (a difference of -0.39 [$p < 0.01$]). Although trust in national government declined in both project and comparison communities, the DID estimate was 0.20 ($= -0.20 - [-0.39]$), which suggests the project increased trust in the national government in the project communities by approximately 10 percent over baseline ($= 0.20/2.07$). Had research only been conducted in project communities, it likely would have been concluded that the project contributed to a statistically significant decline in trust of government. The surveys in the comparison communities, however, show that respondents experienced a similar change in trust, leading to an explanation beyond the KMVP interventions.

CONCLUSION

A better understanding of social cohesion in post-conflict contexts could help development programs improve social cohesion and, ultimately, facilitate achievement of communities’ development goals. In that vein, this study presents a preliminary differences-in-differences analysis of a panel survey to investigate the impact of the KMVP on social cohesion in

Liberia. It presents the first quasi-experimental evaluation — with control and treatment groups, and pre- and post-project data — of any Millennium Villages Project. It shows that social cohesion was already higher than anticipated before the project began. The study finds that there were operational challenges with implementation of the KMVP, complaints about the project and lack of improved perceptions of welfare. At the same time, it provides evidence that social cohesion was already high at baseline and that the Kokoyah project had positive effects on some measures of social cohesion and no evidence of adverse effects, although no changes on some factors which may be important to contribute to development. These findings have important implications. Firstly, DID measures and quasi-experimental designs that use appropriate comparison groups can yield important insights in social science research conducted in complex and changing contexts such as a post-civil war setting. Secondly, policy makers and practitioners should measure existing social cohesion before beginning a project and examine how best to harness what may already be there. Thirdly, development policy makers, donors and practitioners working in post-conflict countries should, wherever possible, integrate the examination of social cohesion into research as well as program monitoring and evaluation.

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APPENDIX 1: MISSINGNESS — COMPARISON OF BASELINE ONLY AND PANEL RESPONDENTS AT BASELINE

	Baseline Only	Panel at Baseline	Difference Between Groups
Demographics of Head of Household			
Literacy	48.5%	50.2%	0.02 %
			(0.0484)
	[194]	[590]	[784]
Christian	92.0%	95.0%	3.0%
			(0.036)
	[86]	[366]	[452]
House made of durable materials	48.5%	50.2%	0.02 %
			(0.0484)
	[194]	[590]	[784]
Cellphone ownership	16.4%	15.3%	0.01 %
			(0.0364)
	[122]	[543]	[665]
Kpelle ethnicity	56.0%	62.0%	6.0%
			(0.0802)
	[194]	[585]	[779]
Number of meals eaten by adults per day	1.81	1.8	-0.01
			(0.064)
	[195]	[590]	[785]
Residing in village where born	58.6%	70.9%	12.3%**
			(0.0507)
	[87]	[368]	[455]
Outcome Variables			
Number of groups in which respondent is a member	1.77	1.79	0.02
			(0.0901)
	[188]	[573]	[761]
Trust rating in national government	2.25	2.27	0.02
			(0.0793)
	[194]	[580]	[774]
Trust rating in local government	2.41	2.26	-0.152*
			(0.0827)
	[190]	[576]	[766]
Trust rating in neighbours	2.60	2.50	-0.102**
			(0.0471)
	[192]	[585]	[777]

Would turn to community members for help	73.0%	70.0%	-3.0%
			(0.0371)
	[194]	[584]	[778]

Note: Clustered standard errors are in round brackets and sample sizes in square brackets.

* p < 0.10; ** p < 0.05

APPENDIX 2: HOW GOOD IS THE REFRESHMENT SAMPLE?

Since it is expected that the social cohesion variables may have changed over the course of the project, only the demographic variables are considered here.

	Baseline Only Respondents (measured in 2008/2009)	Refreshment Sample (end line only, measured in 2011)	Difference in Means
Demographics of Head Household			
Literacy	48.5%	48.1%	-0.4%
			(0.0492)
	[194]	[231]	[425]
Christian	91.9%	97.4%	5.5%
			(0.0354)
	[86]	[229]	[315]
House made of durable materials	30.7%	29.3%	-1.4%
			(0.0572)
	[88]	[229]	[317]
Cellphone ownership	27.8%	52.1%	24.3%
			(0.0397)***
	[194]	[215]	[409]
Kpelle ethnicity	56.0%	62.0%	6.0%
			(0.0802)
	[194]	[585]	[779]
Number of meals eaten by adult per day	1.8	1.8	0.0
			(0.064)
	[195]	[590]	[785]
Residing in village where born	58.6%	70.6%	11.9%
			(0.0679)*
	[87]	[214]	[301]

Note: Clustered standard errors are in round brackets and sample sizes in square brackets.

* p < 0.10; *** p < 0.01

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