

Post-conflict reconciliation led to societal healing, but worsened psychological health

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A new study published in *Science* suggests reconciliation programs promote societal healing, but that these gains come at the cost of reduced psychological health, worsening depression, anxiety, and trauma. Credit: Jeffrey Steinberg

Civil wars divide nations along social, economic and political lines, often pitting neighbors against each other. In the aftermath of civil wars, many

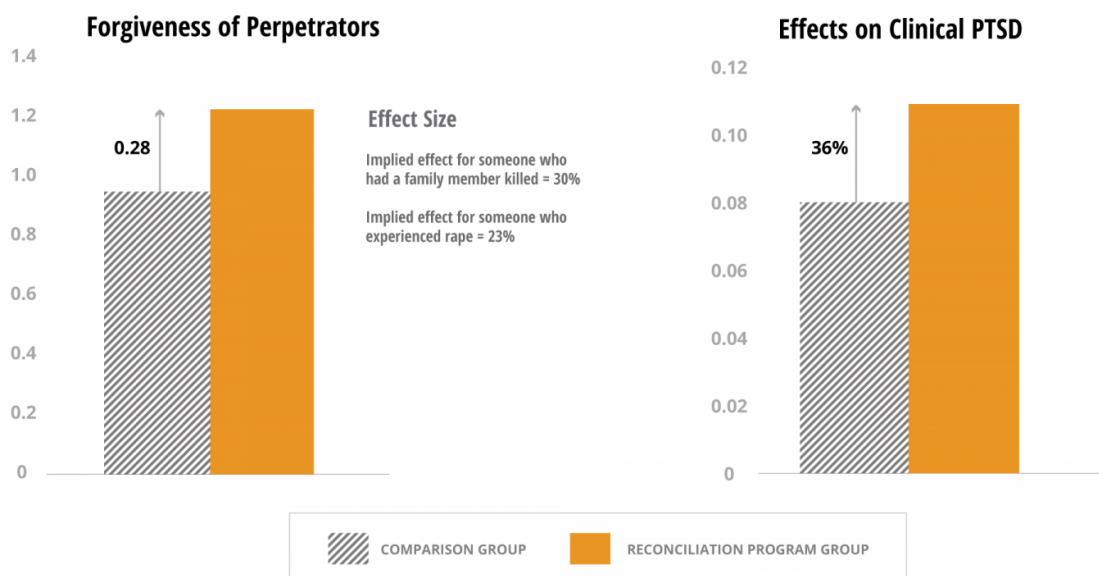
countries undertake truth and reconciliation efforts to restore social cohesion, but little has been known about whether these programs reach their intended goals. A new study published in *Science* today suggests reconciliation programs promote societal healing, but that these gains come at the cost of reduced psychological health, worsening depression, anxiety, and trauma.

"Our research suggests that talking about war atrocities can prove psychologically traumatic for people affected by war. Invoking war memories appears to re-open old war wounds," said Oeindrila Dube, Assistant Professor of Politics and Economics at New York University and one of the authors of the study. "At the same time, the reconciliation program we examined was also shown to improve social relations in communities divided by the war," Prof. Dube said.

The program, which was designed and implemented by Fambul Tok ("Family Talk" in Krio), a Sierra Leonean NGO, brought victims face to face with perpetrators in community forums. Victims detailed war atrocities; perpetrators admitted to crimes and sought forgiveness for their actions; and no one was compensated financially or punished for participating. The forums in the study took place 2011-2012, a decade after the civil war ended.

Researchers Jacobus Cilliers, of the McCourt School of Public Policy at Georgetown University, Oeindrila Dube of New York University, and Bilal Siddiqi, an Economist at the World Bank's Development Research Group, worked with the research and policy nonprofit Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) to conduct an independent, randomized evaluation of the program. The study took place across 200 villages, 100 of which were randomly chosen to be offered the reconciliation program. The research team tracked 2,383 people in both sets of villages, recording their attitudes towards former combatants, their mental health, and the strength of their social ties 9 and 31 months after the program.

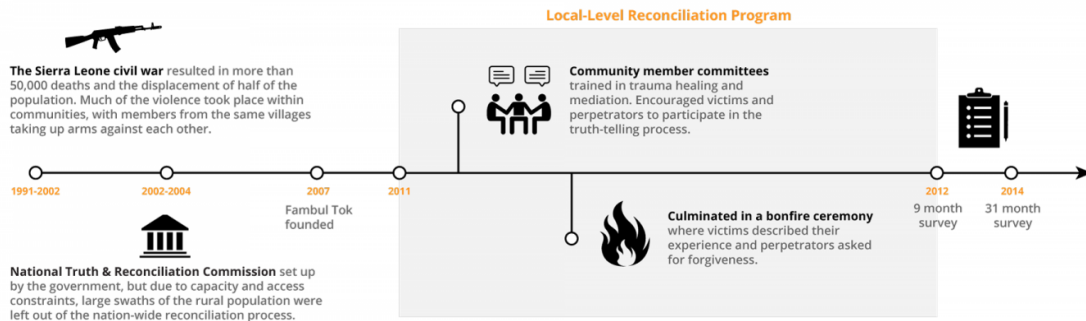
Effects of Community Reconciliation



A new study published in *Science* today found a post-civil war program did promote societal healing, but came at the cost of reduced psychological health, worsening depression, anxiety, and trauma. Credit: Innovations for Poverty Action

Results, published today, revealed that reconciliation had both positive and negative consequences. On the one hand, it promoted societal healing: forgiveness of former perpetrators increased substantially in program villages relative to control villages, as measured by an index of questions which gauged emotional and behavioral responses toward this group. Trust of former combatants also increased by 22.2 percent while trust of migrants (many of whom are perceived to be former combatants) increased by 6.7 percent. In addition, social network strength increased by 11 percent, as individuals formed more friendships and relied more on one another for advice and help.

Additionally, those living in program villages participated more in community groups such as Parent Teacher Associations and religious organizations, and contributed more resources toward public goods, including those used to build schools and health clinics.



A new study in *Science* reports on the effects of a post-civil war reconciliation program in Sierra Leone. While the program led to increased forgiveness, it also worsened the psychological health of those who participated. Credit: Innovations for Poverty Action

On the other hand, these gains came at the cost of reduced psychological health: the program worsened depression, anxiety and trauma. For example, the prevalence of clinical PTSD, or severe trauma, was 36 percent higher in program villages than in comparison villages, where the prevalence of clinical PTSD was 8 percent. Both positive and negative effects persisted for up to 31 months after the program ended.

"Our results in no way undermine the need for reconciliation, but suggest that policymakers need to find ways to mitigate the negative effects of confronting war memories when designing these programs," said Prof. Cilliers. "This is a fruitful avenue for future research."

"This study is the first of its kind, and provides valuable evidence about an approach used to heal [war](#) afflicted communities across the world," said Annie Duflo, Executive Director of Innovations for Poverty Action. "While more research should be conducted on this topic, this study suggests that policymakers may need to restructure reconciliation processes in ways that reduce their negative psychological costs, while retaining their positive societal benefits," Duflo said.

More information: "Reconciling after civil conflict increases social capital but decreases individual well-being," [DOI: 10.1126/science.aad9682](#)

Provided by Innovations for Poverty Action

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