



MITIGATING CONFLICT THROUGH PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT AND COMMUNITY-BASED TRAUMA HEALING

Evidence from the EKISIL Program in Uganda

NOVEMBER 2023

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Introduction

USAID’s Securing Peace and Promoting Prosperity in Karamoja Activity (EKISIL - transliterated as “peace” in the Ng’akarimojong language) is a conflict mitigation and management program that has been implemented by Mercy Corps in the four districts of Abim, Kotido, Kaabong, and Moroto in Uganda since November 2017. EKISIL is designed to create positive peace in the Karamoja region with the aim of enhancing the lives and future for Karamojong people of all ages - adults and youth alike.¹

EKISIL seeks to achieve this goal by employing both people-to-people and systems approaches that facilitates collaboration across Karamojong communities divided across lines of conflict. EKISIL activities bring these divided communities together to address underlying issues (social, ecological, economic, and political) that have the potential to exacerbate conflict, violence, and insecurity in the region. The interconnected objectives of the program aim to simultaneously contribute to addressing underlying root causes of conflict while also promoting healing and reconciliation across communities (see Figure 1).²

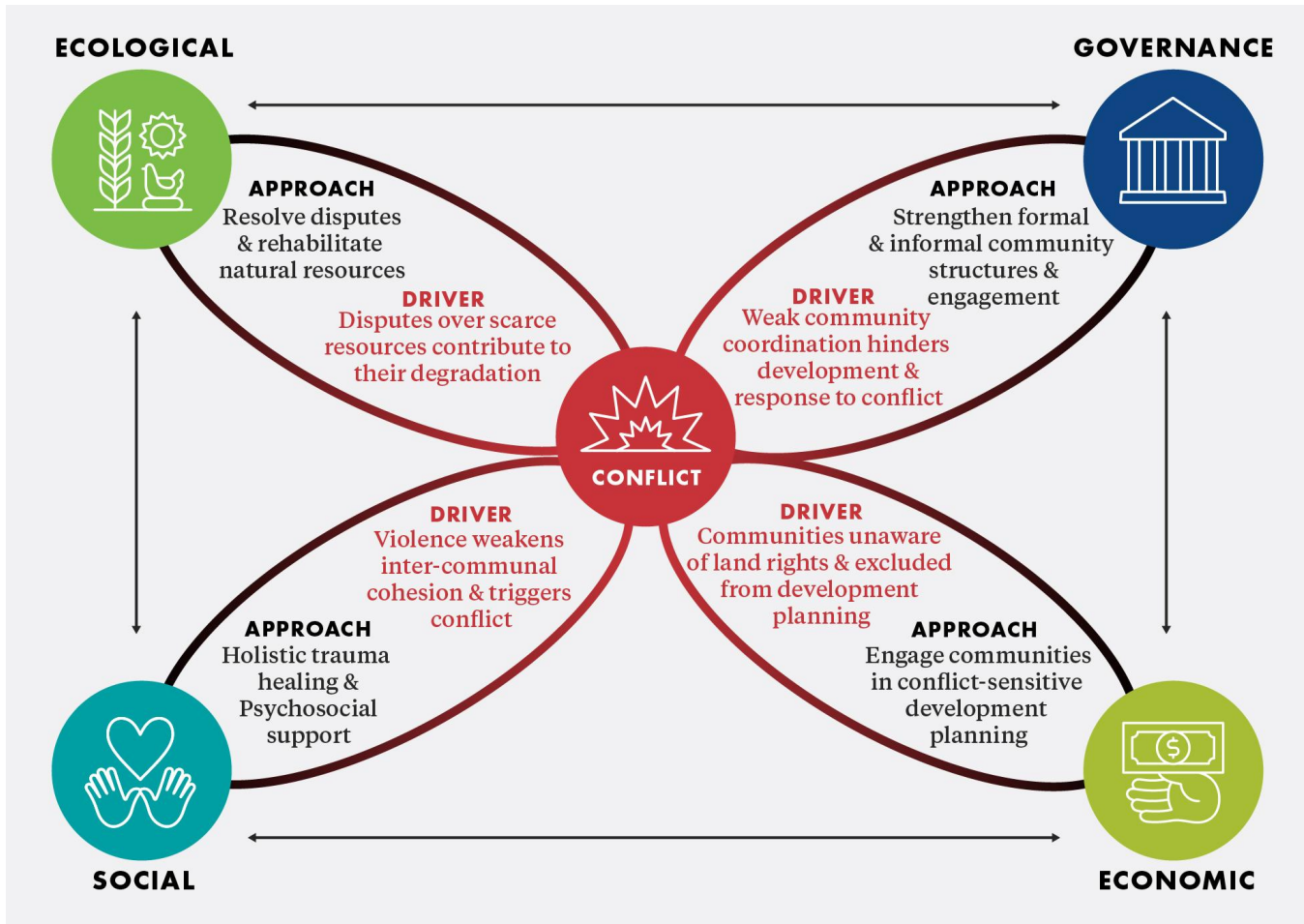


Figure 1: EKISIL’s Systems Approach to Peacebuilding: Addressing Root Causes of Conflict in Karamoja³

¹ Mercy Corps Uganda 2022

² Mercy Corps Uganda 2017; 2022

³ Mercy Corps Uganda 2017

In order to address the underlying social issues driving conflict in the region, a key objective of EKISIL is to advance reconciliation by empowering traditional women leaders and councils of elders to provide holistic trauma healing and psychosocial support via formal and informal structures in their communities.⁴ One of these structures includes a community-based trauma healing approach called Rising Sun. The Rising Sun approach aims to rebuild broken relationships by giving space to victims and perpetrators to reflect on their past, venting their pains and feelings, in order to offer a chance to look forward to the future - toward a “collective community rebirth”.⁵ This trauma-healing approach is specifically designed for the Karamoja region and builds on indigenous and homegrown healing methods as well as adapting approaches from around the world that includes components from evidence-based trauma-healing programs based on neuroscience.⁶

KEY FINDINGS AND CONSIDERATIONS

Analysis from survey data shows that the Rising Sun program in particular is especially effective in strengthening the following:

- **Agency** to make decisions about one’s own future.
- **Agency** to seek out access to trainings and educational resources to gain new skills.
- **Horizontal** (inter-community) social cohesion via increased civic engagement
- **Vertical** (state-society) social cohesion related to trust and confidence in authorities and government actors.

Considerations for peacebuilding programs:

- Include trauma healing as a **foundational component** in programs
- Prioritize **localization and adaptation** in trauma healing programming
- Invest in **more robust, holistic, and comprehensive research** on trauma healing programs, including those using an **integrated systems approach**.

This report highlights key findings from exploratory data collected in May 2022 to examine the effects of the Rising Sun approach above and beyond other trauma-healing approaches being implemented through the EKISIL program.

As noted above, the effects of the Rising Sun approach are the foci of the current, exploratory study, with the overarching research question being: **What - if any - effects of the Rising Sun approach go above and beyond the effects of the other trauma-healing/awareness programs implemented by EKISIL?** Specifically, this research sought to answer whether the Rising Sun program had a stronger effect than other trauma-healing programs on outcomes, such as: attitudes and behaviors towards violence, incidents of violence, agency, empathy, resilience, views on women and youth, perceptions of governance, and dimensions of social cohesion.

⁴ Mercy Corps Uganda 2017; 2022

⁵ Mercy Corps Uganda 2015, 1

⁶ Mercy Corps Uganda 2015; Mansfield 2017

Overall, findings from this exploratory research suggest that the Rising Sun trauma-healing approach is particularly effective at strengthening individual agency as well as specific dimensions of both horizontal (inter-community) and vertical (state-society) social cohesion. Although exploratory, these findings add to a growing body of literature highlighting the importance of integrating mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) approaches into international peacebuilding programming.⁷ This report therefore concludes with some key considerations for peacebuilding programming that integrates psychosocial support elements, such as community-based trauma healing work.

Program Context

When the EKISIL program began in 2017, the Karamoja sub-region of Uganda was recovering from years of conflict and insecurity. Large-scale violent incidents and unpredictable attacks such as cattle raids and road ambushes were on the decline and rare overall.⁸ The region seemed to be on a new trajectory, progressing towards a future characterized by increased economic opportunities and positive social change.⁹ However, the interconnected social, ecological, and economic frameworks supporting the primary means of livelihood for the Karamojongs of Uganda were in transition, accompanied by shifts in social norms and institutional change - which together made for a fragile situation. It was acknowledged by program teams that maintaining this positive trend and ensuring sustainable positive change in the region would require significant effort.¹⁰

Unfortunately, after nearly a decade of relative peace, the northeastern part of Karamoja sub-region is experiencing violent conflict and insecurity once again. The security situation began to deteriorate around September 2019. The 2018 and 2019 livestock quarantine that restricted trade and movements of livestock across the Karamoja broke social and economic activities that had developed across the region. For instance the Jie of Kotido and the Dodoth of Kaabong had entered into deep trade in livestock and cereals that saw on-foot free movements to various livestock and commodity markets mainly between the two districts. The consequences of the restriction of movement and trade were worsened by the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in further economic and social hardships.

The types of violent activities vary by location and occurrence. However, in general, the various forms of insecurity seen to be on the rise include: livestock raids, small-scale thefts, road ambushes, killing in urban areas, disputes over land, and sexual violence against women and girls. As a result, women have become hesitant to venture out to do tasks such as collecting firewood, food, and water. In addition, communities are increasingly placing their animals back into protected kraals¹¹ near Uganda People's Defense Force (UPDF) barracks. Furthermore, certain types of violent activities in Karamoja developed a technical shift - revolving now more around theft of livestock and commercial goods than conflicts over natural resources. This shift has resulted in 'raids as business' - carried out by various parties, including youth. Despite the reduction in arms from the previous disarmament, youth have still been able to engage in these types of armed violent activities due to having access to guns and bullets by way of the porous borders of Kenya and South Sudan.

⁷ See, for example: United Nations Development Programme 2022a; 2022b; Hertog 2019. For a summary of UNDP's research findings see : United Nations Development Programme. 2022a. "Research Findings: Summary Report - Integrating Mental Health and Psychosocial Support into Peacebuilding." UNDP.

⁸ Mercy Corps Uganda 2016; Howe, Stites, and Akabwai 2015

⁹ Mercy Corps Uganda 2016

¹⁰ Mercy Corps Uganda 2016

¹¹ A *kraal* is a Karamojong homestead for livestock.

In April 2021, during this period of increased instability, EKISIL received a 24-month extension to the original 2017 program in order to continue their programming. As of 2021, a main activity under the EKISIL program’s first objective was to “support traditional women leaders, youth, and councils of elders to scale up trauma healing to reach more people in the same parishes of targeted conflict-affected sub-counties in Karamoja”¹². In order to address this objective, EKISIL implemented three separate initiatives related to trauma-healing/awareness: 1) communal trauma-healing groups, which are not geared towards a specific, targeted group, but rather are open to everyone in the community; 2) the Trauma Informed Community Empowerment (TICE) initiative, which targets leaders in Moroto, Kotida, Abim, and Kaabong with the aim of increasing their awareness of trauma and its effects; and 3) the “Rising Sun”, a multi-fold community trauma healing approach that targeted specific groups of men, women, and youth in “hot spot” communities (see Figure 2 for more details). The data collection for the current report was conducted under this 2021 extension - with a focus on exploring the effects of EKISIL’s trauma-healing activities, specifically the effects of the Rising Sun approach.

	Type of Program	Primary Target(s)	Schedule	Primary Goal(s)
Rising Sun	Trauma-Awareness & Trauma-Healing	-Women & adolescent girls affected by conflict -Reformed warriors -Influential men in the community	8 sessions over 4-6 months.	Heal past traumas and shift mindsets of those affected by conflict. Intended to have a multiplier effect in that Rising Sun graduates go on to do trauma-healing and social reconciliation work in their communities.
TICE (Trauma Informed Community Empowerment)	Trauma-Awareness	-Community Leaders (Local Councils (LC3s); members of parliament; administrative leaders)	Every three months: Three day training. Each day is targeted to a different type of community leader.	Raise awareness about the effects of trauma as well as the value of social reconciliation in communities. This ensures community leaders can be peacekeepers in their communities.
Communal Trauma-Healing Groups	Trauma-Awareness	-No specific target, all community members are welcome	Once per month.	Raise awareness about the different experiences and effects of trauma in the community. Meant to be a way to help people in the community find resources that eventually lead to trauma-healing (ex: support from Rising Sun program or Rising Sun graduates)

Figure 2: Comparison of EKISIL Program Trauma-Awareness and Trauma-Healing Activities

¹² Mercy Corps 2022, 1

Data and Methods

This brief draws on survey data for Mercy Corps' EKISIL program, in which 911 individuals were surveyed across 34 parishes where the program was operating in May 2022. Each of these 34 parishes were receiving EKISIL programming in multiple forms. For each of the 34 parishes EKISIL programming included: 1) peacebuilding activities, 2) community trauma-healing groups, and 3) Trauma Informed Community Empowerment (TICE) initiatives.¹³ However, the Rising Sun approach was only implemented in specific "hot spot" communities, which consisted of 19 out of the 34 total parishes. For the purpose of this study, these 19 parishes are considered the intervention parishes (the intervention being the Rising Sun trauma-healing approach) and the remaining 15 parishes are considered control parishes. The purpose of the survey was to examine potential differences between the intervention and control parishes that could potentially be attributed to the implementation of the Rising Sun approach.

Carefully selected enumerators from Karamoja who speak the local languages were trained in the use of the survey tool and in data collection. The tool was tested with select communities in Moroto before the enumerators then visited and administered the survey tool in the selected parishes across the districts of Abim, Kotido, Morot, and Kaboong. To enhance data quality, each district had a supervisor from the consulting firm who functioned as a data quality control officer. The Mercy Corps technical team provided technical accompaniment throughout the study.

Measures

Agency

The survey included six self-report items related to participants' level of agency. Participants responded on a 5-point Likert-scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"). Higher scores reflected higher levels of agency. (See Table 1).

Table 1: Survey Questions Measuring Agency

Survey Question

"I am helpless to prevent violence in my community"
"My community respects me"
"If I stand by while others commit evil actions, I am also responsible"
"I have the ability to decide my future"
"I feel confident about my ability to provide for myself and my family"
"I have access to trainings and educational opportunities to learn new skills"

Horizontal Social Cohesion

The survey included multiple measures related to horizontal social cohesion (between groups and communities), including items that tapped into various dimensions of horizontal social cohesion, such as: civic engagement, interpersonal (bonding and bridging relationships) trust, interactions (bridging relationships), and sense of belonging (see Table 2 for a detailed list of the measures).

¹³ Peacebuilding activities included: peace dialogues, dispute mediations, land awareness sessions, youth initiatives, elders' peace dialogues, peace caravans, reconciliation events, and women's peace forums.

Civic Engagement. The survey included two items related to civic engagement.¹⁴ The first item regarding civic engagement seeks to measure the degree to which participants engage in community efforts to improve conditions for others and/or to help shape the future of their respective communities. Participants responded to this item on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“Never”) to 6 (“Several times a week”). Higher scores reflected higher levels of civic engagement.

The second item related to civic engagement taps into respondents' perception of the extent of collective participation to improve conditions in their community. Respondents were given four statements and noted which of those statements they most agreed would be true if a problem affected their entire community. The higher scores reflected higher levels of perceived civic engagement related to collective action in the community.

Sense of Belonging. The final item that examined participants' level of horizontal social cohesion, tapped into participants' perception of the overall sense of belonging within their community.¹⁵ Participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”). Higher scores reflected a perception of a higher sense of overall belonging within the community.

Interpersonal Trust. The survey included items concerning interpersonal trust as it relates to both bonding and bridging relationships. For items tapping into interpersonal trust within *bonding* relationships, participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”). Items were reverse coded, so that higher scores reflected higher levels of trust.

Prior to being asked about bridging relationships, enumerators were instructed to first pose a primer question. For this, enumerators stated the following: “I understand your community has tensions or disputes with another group or community from time to time. What is the name of the primary (main) group or community your community has clashes or disputes with?” Enumerators then used the name of the group or community when referring to [Group/Community X] in the following questions, which included four survey items measuring interpersonal trust as it relates to *bridging* relationships. For the first item, participants responded to their overall level of trust with the group they mentioned in the primer question on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (“do not trust at all”) to 5 (“trust completely”). For the following three items, participants responded on a 4-point Likert scale from 1 (“not comfortable at all”) to 4 (“very comfortable”) in response to questions offering how comfortable the respondent would be if interacting with [Group/Community X] under various circumstances and scenarios. Higher scores reflected higher levels of interpersonal trust within bridging relationships.

Interactions. In the final section related to horizontal social cohesion, the survey included items about interactions relevant to bridging relationships, specifically in regards to interactions with the community that participants noted in the primer question noted above. For the first interaction item regarding how often participants interacted with [Group/Community X], participants responded on a 4-point Likert scale from 1 (“regularly”) to 4 (“never”). Items were reverse coded, so that higher scores reflected higher levels of interaction. The next item assessed what these types of bridging interactions entailed, with participants answering whether the interactions were “mostly economic/trade” or “mostly socializing”. If these two options did not best explain participants' interactions, they also had the option to specify any “other” type of

¹⁴ These items were adapted from Kim, J., R. Sheely, and C. Schmidt. 2020. Social Capital and Social Cohesion Measurement Toolkit for Community-Driven Development Operations. Washington, DC: Mercy Corps and the World Bank.

¹⁵ These items were adapted from Kim, J., R. Sheely, and C. Schmidt. 2020. Social Capital and Social Cohesion Measurement Toolkit for Community-Driven Development Operations. Washington, DC: Mercy Corps and the World Bank.

interaction. Under the “other” option, a number of respondents noted that their interactions mostly revolved around “dialogue/peace talks”; therefore, this was added as a third category for the subsequent analyses. Finally, for the third interaction item, participants were asked to rate their typical interactions with [Group/Community X] on a 4-point Likert scale from 1 (“very negative”) to 4 (“very positive”).

Table 2: Survey Questions Measuring Horizontal Social Cohesion

Dimension	Survey Question
Civic engagement	How often do you participate in meetings to improve public spaces or work on issues in your area?
Civic engagement	If there was a problem that affected the entire community, which of the following statements do you most agree with: 1. Each individual would try to solve the problem independently; 2. Individuals in each ethnic/religious group would try to solve the problem together; 3. The individuals in each livelihood group would try to solve the problem together. 4. The individuals in the entire community would try to solve the problem together.
Sense of Belonging	“Everyone living in this community feels like they are a part of this community.”
Interpersonal Trust (Bridging relationships)	On a scale of 1-5, how much do you trust people from [Group/Community X]?
Interpersonal Trust (Bonding relationships)	“People in this area generally do not get along together”
<i>Note: For questions related to bridging relationships below, a primer question was posed. Participant’s response to the primer question was then used in lieu of [Group/Community X] in the following questions.</i>	
<i>Primer question</i>	What is the name of the primary (main) group or community your community has clashes or disputes with?
Interpersonal Trust (Bridging relationships)	On a scale of 1-5, how much do you trust people from [Group/Community X]?
Interpersonal Trust (Bridging relationships)	How comfortable would you be having someone from [Group/Community X] as your neighbor?
Interpersonal Trust (Bridging relationships)	How comfortable would you be having someone from [Group/Community X] work or trade goods with you?
Interpersonal Trust (Bridging relationships)	How comfortable would you be having someone from [Group/Community X] marry a close relative?
Interactions (Bridging relationships)	In general, how often do you interact with members of [Group/Community X]?
Interactions (Bridging relationships)	How do you typically interact (with members of [Group/Community X])?
Interactions (Bridging relationships)	Are the interactions (with members of [Group/Community X]) mostly...

Vertical Social Cohesion

The survey also included three items that examined elements of vertical social cohesion (between communities and the government). Participants responded on a 5-point Likert-scale ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”). Higher scores reflected higher levels of vertical social cohesion (See Table 3).

Table 3: Survey Questions Measuring Vertical Social Cohesion

Survey Question

“I trust authorities”

“I feel confident when dealing with the government”

“I have opportunities to participate in making decisions about my community”

Other Outcomes

The survey also included items related to multiple additional outcomes, such as: attitudes and behaviors related to violence, incidences of violence, empathy, resilience, views on women and youth, and perceptions of governance. However, as discussed below, analyses only revealed significant differences between intervention and control parishes related to specific agency items and certain aspects of social cohesion. Analyses did not reveal any significant differences on other outcome measures. Therefore, for the sake of brevity, the specific items and response options for each of these additional outcomes will not be explained in detail here.

Analytic Strategy

As noted above, 911 individuals were surveyed for this study, spanning 34 parishes where the EKISIL program is operating. This included 19 intervention parishes (i.e., where the Rising Sun approach was implemented) and 15 control parishes. The intervention parishes were identified by the EKISIL program team as “hot spot” communities and therefore chosen as the targeted areas for the implementation of the Rising Sun approach. Control parishes were selected via convenience sampling by the data collection firm.

Preliminary comparison testing revealed significant differences between intervention and control groups on two demographic items: 1) ethnicity/clan and 2) livelihood. No significant differences between intervention and control groups were found on the other demographic variables (i.e., sex, age, income, and education level). Each of the aforementioned demographic items were used as control variables in the subsequent analyses.

For the primary analyses of the study, we conducted multiple two 2-step hierarchical regressions in order to examine the relations between intervention/control parishes and the outcome variables while also taking potential control variables (sex, age, income, livelihood, education, and ethnicity/clan) into consideration. In addition to providing insight into whether a significant difference is present between intervention and control parishes on certain items, hierarchical regression analyses also provide insight into specifically how much variance in a certain outcome variable is related to whether a participant is from an intervention or control parish. Because the Rising Sun approach was implemented at the parish-level, we conducted these analyses with clustered robust standard errors, clustering by parish.

In all analyses, control variables (sex, age, income, livelihood, education, and/or ethnicity/clan) were entered at step 1, and intervention/control assignment was entered at step 2. (For the purpose of this brief, only significant controls were included in the findings and tables below.) Results indicated that in addition to certain control variables, whether or not a participant was in an intervention parish was significantly associated with elements of each of the following dimensions: agency, horizontal social cohesion, and vertical social cohesion. Furthermore, in each of these cases, being in an intervention parish explained variation in the outcome variable above and beyond any significant controls.

Limitations

Despite its strengths, this study also had several limitations. The majority of limitations are a result of the fact that the research related to the trauma-healing component of EKISIL was added after the Rising Sun approach had already been implemented for multiple years across the intervention parishes. Therefore, intervention/comparison parishes were not randomly assigned. Rather, intervention parishes were identified due to being “hot spot” communities and being most in need of an additional trauma-healing intervention. We attempted to mitigate the effects of the lack of randomization by creating a matching mode to construct a list of acceptable comparison/control parishes. However, due to changes in the context on the ground, the data collection firm was unable to collect data from some of the parishes identified via the matching mode and instead selected substitute control parishes via convenience sampling.

The fact that the research component was added later to the programming approach also means that a baseline was not established. The data collected for this report was the first round of data collection related to the trauma-healing research and - as noted above - took place after program activities, including the various trauma-healing programs, had been going on for multiple years.

Finally, because EKISIL has been implementing a number of activities, including other trauma-healing approaches, across all of the parishes under their purview, the comparison parishes were not a “pure” control group. The only difference between intervention and control parishes was that the Rising Sun approach was implemented in the intervention parishes, but not the control parishes. This made it more difficult to determine specific effects of this EKISIL program above and beyond the other trauma-healing approaches.

Key Findings

Below is a snapshot of the key findings from this exploratory study, focusing on two dimensions of the EKISIL Rising Sun program: agency and social cohesion.

Agency

As noted above, the survey included six self-report items related to participants’ level of agency. Four of the agency items did not reveal any significant differences between intervention and control parishes. For the two agency items that did reveal significant differences, being in an intervention parish was positively associated with higher levels of agency. These findings suggest that participating in the Rising Sun approach may strengthen certain dimensions of agency over others. Agency items that revealed significant differences are bolded in Table 4. Details regarding the significant findings on the specific agency items are detailed below.

Table 4: Significant Differences in Agency Items¹⁶

Survey Question

“I am helpless to prevent violence in my community”
“My community respects me”
“If I stand by while others commit evil actions, I am also responsible”
“I have the ability to decide my future”
“I feel confident about my ability to provide for myself and my family”
“I have access to trainings and educational opportunities to learn new skills”

“I have the ability to decide about my future.” Being in an intervention parish was positively associated with this agency item, revealing that survey respondents in intervention parishes were more likely to feel they had the ability to make decisions about their future than participants in control parishes. In fact, being an intervention parish explained an additional 0.5% of variance in participants’ responses to this agency item above and beyond what had been accounted for by any significant demographic controls (see Appendix, Table 6). Specifically, participants who identified their livelihood activity as solely crop farming were more likely to disagree with this agency statement; whereas, individuals with higher levels of education were more likely to agree with the statement.

“I have access to trainings and educational opportunities to learn new skills.” Being in an intervention parish was also positively associated with this agency item, revealing that participants in intervention parishes were more likely to feel they had access to trainings and educational opportunities to learn new skills than participants in control parishes. Furthermore, being in an intervention parish explained an additional 0.45% of variance in this agency item above and beyond what had been accounted for by any significant demographic controls (see Appendix, Table 7). Specifically, in terms of significant control variables, participants who identified their livelihood activity as both crop farming and pastoralism equally as well as younger participants were both more likely to disagree with this agency statement; whereas, individuals with a higher level of education were more likely to agree with the statement.

Social Cohesion

Horizontal Social Cohesion

As noted above, the survey included multiple items that assessed various dimensions of horizontal social cohesion, such as: civic engagement, belonging, interpersonal (bonding and bridging relationships) trust, and interactions (bridging relationships) (see Table 2 for a detailed list of the measures). However, only one item related to horizontal social cohesion revealed significant differences between intervention and control parishes. This item tapped into participants’ level of civic engagement in their communities. The lack of significant differences among other items related to horizontal social cohesion does not necessarily mean that the Rising Sun approach does not improve other dimensions of horizontal cohesion, but rather that it does not improve these other dimensions of horizontal cohesion above and beyond the other EKISIL trauma-healing approaches. However, the findings do suggest that the Rising Sun approach strengthens dimensions of horizontal social cohesion via increased levels of personal civic engagement above and beyond the other EKISIL trauma-healing/awareness approaches. These findings are detailed below.

¹⁶ Bolded items are significant at at least $p < .05$.

Civic Engagement

“How often do you participate in meetings to improve public spaces or work on issues in your area?” Participants in intervention parishes reported higher levels of participation in meetings to improve public spaces or work on issues in their area than participants in control parishes. Specifically, being in an intervention parish explained an additional 3.1% of variance in this item above and beyond what had been accounted for by any significant demographic controls (see Appendix, Table 8). For control variables, participants who identified their livelihood activity as solely crop farming and participants who reported higher incomes were more likely to report higher levels of civic engagement.

Vertical Social Cohesion

As noted above, the survey included three items that assessed elements of vertical social cohesion (between communities and the government). Two of these items revealed significant differences between intervention and control parishes (significant items are bolded in Table 5). For the two agency items that did reveal significant differences, being in an intervention parish was positively associated with higher levels of trust in authorities and confidence when dealing with the government. These findings suggest that participating in the Rising Sun approach may strengthen attitudes towards authorities and government actors; however, it may not result in how many opportunities participants’ feel they have to effect actual change in terms of making decisions about their community, above and beyond the other EKISIL trauma-healing approaches.

Table 5: Significant Differences in Vertical Social Cohesion¹⁷

Survey Question

“I trust authorities”

“I feel confident when dealing with the government”

“I have opportunities to participate in making decisions about my community”

“I trust authorities.” Being in an intervention parish was also positively associated with participants’ level of trust in authorities and explained an additional 0.6% of variance in this item above and beyond what had been accounted for by any significant demographic controls (see Appendix, Table 9). Participants’ who identified with certain ethnic clans (Jie, Dodoth, or Matheniko) were more likely to report lower levels of trust in authorities; whereas, participants’ level of education and income were both positively associated with trust in authorities.

“I feel confident when dealing with the government.” Similar to the findings regarding participants’ trust in authorities, participants in intervention parishes were more likely to report feeling more confident when dealing with the government than those in control parishes. This effect was slightly larger than in the finding regarding trust in authorities; whereas, being in an intervention parish explained an additional 0.8% of variance in this item above and beyond what had been accounted for by significant demographic controls (see Appendix, Table 10). The significant controls for this item were the same as those related to trust in authorities. That is, participants’ who identified with certain ethnic clans (i.e., Jie, Dodoth, or Matheniko) were more likely to report lower levels of confidence when dealing with the government; whereas, participants’ level of education and income were both positively associated with feeling confident when dealing with the government.

¹⁷ Bolded items are significant at at least $p < .05$.



EKISIL dialogue sessions allow people to peacefully voice grievances and work together to find resolutions.

Photo Credit: Mercy Corps

Discussion of Key Findings

As noted above, Karamoja has been experiencing a resurgence of violent events since 2019. Research and practice shows that living in a context of insecurity and protracted violent events can result in individual and collective traumatization.¹⁸ In fact, experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event can literally rewire and fundamentally change the human brain.¹⁹ Trauma can also cause the brain to get caught in a cycle of alerting someone of danger even when there is none. Furthermore, sometimes the effects and triggers due to past trauma are so subtle that individuals may not even realize that past traumatic experiences are motivating some of their actions and behaviors. All of these factors combined can make it especially difficult to break the cycle of violence and revenge, and ultimately escape a fear-based, victim mentality for victims of trauma.²⁰ Although exploratory, the findings suggest that the community based trauma-healing activities, that build on indigenous healing knowledge, being implemented by the EKISIL program - the Rising Sun approach in particular - are indeed having an impact in the Karamoja region. In particular, the Rising Sun trauma-healing activities seem to be helping participants address their underlying traumas, leading to a shift in attitudes and behaviors that in turn promote social cohesion and reconciliation among their communities.

Agency

In comparison to individuals in control parishes, individuals in intervention parishes were more likely to agree on two items: “I have the ability to decide about my future” and “I have access to trainings and educational opportunities to learn new skills”. These are the two items on the scale that most tap into individual agency, suggesting that the Rising Sun approach strengthens individual agency above and beyond the other EKISIL trauma-healing and awareness programs.

Why does Rising Sun affect some agency items and not others? This could be due to the fact that the other items on the scale could be interpreted as referring to elements in someone’s life over which they do not have control. Therefore, they may not be as strong of indicators of an individual’s sense of agency in certain contexts. For instance, despite one’s best efforts, they may not be able to completely prevent violence in their community nor can they control how others view them (i.e., if they are respected by others in their community). In addition, the majority of participants in this study gain their livelihoods from activities such as

¹⁸ Amir 2023; Ginwright 2022a; 2022b; Maté and Maté 2022; Hübl 2020

¹⁹ Van der Kolk 2014

²⁰ Van der Kolk 2014

pastoralism and crop farming - both of which are largely affected by climate change. Individuals have no control over how climate change may affect their crops or their livestock's access to pastures and water; in other words, one's ability to provide for their family may be negatively affected by things outside of their control. Considering these contextual factors, it is therefore understandable that individuals in intervention communities would perhaps be wary of agreeing with the statement, "I feel confident about my ability to provide for myself and my family".

The fact that a significant difference was found between the item "I have the ability to decide about my future", but not in the item "I feel confident about my ability to provide for myself and my family" is initially puzzling. However, when looking at these findings within the context of the EKISIL program, this difference makes logical sense. Taken together with other agency findings – overall, the results suggest that individuals from intervention communities have a sense that even in the face of adversity, they will find a way to gain new skills and find a way to redirect and determine their own futures.

One aspect of the neuroscience component of the Rising Sun approach focuses on teaching participants how trauma affects the human brain. By gaining a deep understanding of how trauma affects the brain and body, and therefore their lives - from manifesting as physical to psychological symptoms - the Rising Sun approach empowers participants to not only better understand themselves and their fellow community members, it also gives them the opportunity to understand and retrain their brains and, more importantly, build new neural pathways that are not based in fear. It allows them to break out of their old patterns of victimhood and, instead, regain control of their lives. In short, the program helps individuals and communities re-establish a sense of agency in their lives.²¹

Social Cohesion

In comparison to individuals in control parishes, individuals in intervention parishes were more likely to report higher levels of civic engagement (horizontal social cohesion) as indicated by reported levels of participation in "meetings to improve public spaces or work on issues in your area". However, perhaps surprisingly, analyses did not reveal significant differences on any other items related to horizontal social cohesion between intervention and control parishes.

Individuals from intervention areas were also more likely to agree on two items related to vertical social cohesion: "I trust authorities" and "I feel confident when dealing with the government". However, no significant differences were found between intervention and control parishes when it came to individuals feeling they had opportunities to participate in actually making decisions about their community. Taken together, these findings suggest that the Rising Sun approach strengthens certain dimensions of both horizontal and vertical social cohesion above and beyond the other EKISIL trauma-healing and awareness progress, specifically in regards to items related to personal civic engagement and attitudes toward authorities and government actors.²²

These findings could be due to many factors related to the Rising Sun approach. For example, in addition to learning how violence and trauma affect individuals, the Rising Sun approach also teaches participants about the effects of trauma on the broader society. Through Rising Sun, participants learn about different types of traumatic experiences that communities go through, such as on-going/structural, collective/societal, historical, secondary, and participatory trauma. They also learn how these types of communal experiences

²¹ For more information on the effects of trauma and trauma-healing methodologies, see: Amir 2023; Ginwright 2022a; 2022b; Maté and Maté 2022; Hübl 2020, and Van der Kolk 2014.

²² For more information on connections between conflict and political engagement/social cohesion/capital, see: Bauer et al. 2016; Blattman, 2009; Somasundaram 2014; Galluccio and Beck 2015.

can affect social relationships, corrupt institutions, destroy natural resources, and influence people to accept violence as a normal part of daily life. Overtime, participants come to understand that more than just one individual who has experienced trauma, they are also part of a broader society and governance institutions that have experienced trauma on a collective level. Their lives are intertwined with the history of their society.

A main objective of the Rising Sun approach - in addition to individual healing - is to show how trauma-healing can contribute to social reconstruction programs in communities and the broader society. This element of the Rising Sun approach is something that is demonstrated after the regular curriculum. After graduating from the program, Rising Sun trauma-healing groups actually engage in a variety of social reconstruction programs across their communities. Social reconstruction programs (i.e., mediation, negotiation, and disarmament programs) - by their very nature - aid in strengthening social cohesion and are tied to the goal of improving one's community. The fact that the Rising Sun approach motivates participants to become active in their community through social reconstruction programs may help explain why individuals in intervention parishes reported higher levels of civic engagement. By engaging in these social reconstruction programs, Rising Sun participants are demonstrating individuals' ability to improve their community and create positive change. This may motivate other community members to become more proactive in working towards positive change in their communities, resulting in higher levels of civic engagement overall. Rising Sun participants transform from viewing themselves as victims of violent conflict to becoming agents of change in their own communities.

Furthermore, although increasing trust and confidence in governance is not an inherent goal of the Rising Sun approach, there are strategic elements throughout the curriculum that allow participants to have positive interactions with local authorities and village leaders. Leaders are not involved directly during the trauma-healing sessions, but they are incorporated throughout the curriculum in different ways and valued for their indigenous knowledge on the history of conflicts and cultural pathways to healing. For example, local leaders are encouraged to attend the launch of each trauma-healing group. In fact, the Rising Sun facilitation guide notes, "It is important to involve the local leadership and the village heads during the launching process in order to get a buy-in and enhance ownership of the program."²³

Trauma-healing group organizers are also encouraged to invite community leaders to participants' graduation as part of validating their experiences. The graduation is a ceremony with participants, their broader families, and local community leaders. This celebration also includes a forum where participants share their testimonies. Local leaders are encouraged to attend specifically in order to hear these testimonies. The final goal of the graduation celebration is to "enhance the participants' relationship and create a large family of healers and graduates of a process that identifies them with a collective rebirth."²⁴ Finally, participants often continue to engage with local leaders after graduating from Rising Sun through their on-going involvement in social reconstruction programs. Allowing time and space for participants to have positive interactions with local authorities and leaders at various times through the Rising Sun curriculum may be the key component that explains why the Rising Sun approach strengthens certain elements of vertical social cohesion above and beyond the other EKISIL trauma-healing and awareness approaches.

²³ Mercy Corps Uganda 2015, 5

²⁴ Mercy Corps Uganda 2015, 22

Considerations for Peacebuilding Programs

Although the findings of this study were exploratory, they highlight several important considerations for peacebuilding programming:

- 1. Community based trauma healing is a foundational component to peacebuilding programs and can contribute to significant individual behavioral and attitudinal changes - especially when implemented within an integrated systems approach.** Findings from this study revealed that participants in the Rising Sun program showed significant changes in both behavioral (increased civic engagement) and attitudinal changes (increased personal agency; attitudes towards authority and government) above and beyond survey respondents in control villages. Furthermore, previous focus group discussions with Rising Sun participants suggest that trauma healing affects changes to one's ecological system in stages.²⁵ Through the Rising Sun approach, change first begins through individual healing. In time, changes at the individual level begin to affect relationships and interactions in the microsystem (i.e., immediate family, peers) until eventually impacting the broader community, including attitude and behavioral changes in the exo- and macrosystems.²⁶ For example, Rising Sun graduates' are working towards achieving communal impact through their continued efforts in community social reconciliation programs, such as engagement in conflict mediation and negotiation processes and disarmament programs. And it seems to be working: focus group participants across each of the four districts where EKISIL is operating mentioned their communities being overall more united as a result of the trauma-healing activities; one participant even attributed a reduction in revenge killings to EKISIL's trauma-healing activities.²⁷ These preliminary findings therefore suggest that community based trauma healing should be integrated into future interventions in order to enhance the stability of communities through various forms and levels of development. By using trauma healing as part of an integrated systems approach, peacebuilding programs can strengthen community support systems, which in turn sustain healing efforts.
- 2. Localization and adaptation of programming is key.** The Rising Sun program is based on evidence-based trauma-healing practices as well as indigenous and homegrown healing methods used around the world. It was also designed and adapted specifically for the Karamoja context. For example, the Rising Sun program was designed around an understanding of the clan systems set up in Karamoja that specifically worked to address the trauma and cycles of violence (ranging from the individual to the communal level) based on shocks and stressors specific to the region. Examples of the regional-specific shocks taken into account when designing the Rising Sun program included: potential changes in political and economic shocks and stresses; governance structures (i.e., a decline in traditional conflict management structures) as well as conflict development and dynamics that go beyond historical causes and retaliations (i.e., intra-livestock raids emerging as a new source of conflict in the Karamoja).

Community-level approaches are essential when addressing the impact of conflict shocks and stressors. It is also crucial to capitalize on local knowledge, practices, and skills as well as mechanisms and resources when incorporating a trauma-healing program into a peacebuilding program. This can be accomplished by integrating local peace infrastructures (including traditional and informal structures) into the program design. Building off of current peace infrastructures that

²⁵ REEV Consultant International 2022

²⁶ Mercy Corps Uganda 2015

²⁷ FGD 3, Men, Abim

can adapt to unexpected shocks and stressors ensures that the trauma healing programming approaches are culturally and contextually appropriate, validated, locally-led, and accompanied throughout the entire programming cycle.

- 3. More research on the effects of trauma healing programs is needed. This includes research across various trauma-healing methodologies as well as more holistic analyses of programs that use a systems approach.** As evidenced by the EKISIL program, trauma-healing/awareness programs can come in many forms and variations. It can be difficult to disentangle the outcome(s) of some trauma-healing programs and methodologies over others. Therefore, future peacebuilding programs should invest in research alongside trauma-healing components in their programs in order to help fill in gaps and contribute to the overall evidence and learning regarding the effects of psychosocial dimensions of peacebuilding, such as trauma-healing programs and methodologies.

Research and evaluation on programs that take a systems approach need to use evaluation and research designs that allow them to both understand the holistic impact of the whole set of interventions/activities as well as the specific contributions of each component (and the impacts of sequencing and layering those components in different ways). For embedding research/evaluation in this kind of program, that means moving towards longer-term approaches in various ways in order to increase opportunities for learning over the life cycle of a single program as well as increasing the time to gain insights and lessons from several related programs within a given portfolio. Within that long-term approach, peacebuilding programs should invest in research work that implements randomized controlled trials (RCTs) and quasi-experimental methods to both understand the impacts of the full bundle of activities as well as targeted evaluations of specific activities/interventions. Finally, research on peacebuilding programs following a systems approach requires complementing quantitative impact evaluations with qualitative methods. Qualitative methods that can be especially fruitful in this regard include participatory methods, process tracing, and systems analysis. Participatory methods can offer incredible insight by centering participant definitions of impact and understandings/experiences of a program. Complexity aware methods like process tracing and systems analysis can help explain the complex interactions among various program components as well as interactions between the program and the context.

This report highlights promising exploratory findings related to the Rising Sun methodology in regards to its potential role in shifting attitudes and behaviors - particularly in areas related to strengthening individual agency and social cohesion. This report also adds to the current literature emphasizing the importance of integrating community trauma-healing practices as well as other mental health and psychosocial support approaches into international peacebuilding programming.

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Appendix: Regression Model Tables

Table 6: “I Have the Ability to Decide About My Future”

Predictors	ΔF	ΔR^2	β	$SE B$
Step 1	25.74***	.044		
Crop Farming			-.195***	.055
Education			.101***	.018
Step 2	6.18*	.051		
Crop Farming			-.206***	.054
Education			.101***	.018
Intervention Parish			.138*	.055

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 7: “I Have Access to Trainings and Educational Opportunities to Learn New Skills”

Predictors	ΔF	ΔR^2	β	<i>SE B</i>
Step 1	17.35***	.062		
Crop farming & Pastoralism			-.427*	.162
Age			-.097*	.037
Education			.147***	.040
Step 2	15.80***	.045		
Crop farming & Pastoralism			-.422*	.162
Age			-.105**	.034
Education			.145***	.039
Intervention Parish			.506***	.128

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 8: “How Often Do You Participate in Meetings to Improve Public Spaces/Work on Issues in Your Area?”

Predictors	ΔF	ΔR^2	β	<i>SE B</i>
Step 1	7.85**	.019		
Crop Farming			.342*	.136
Income			.167**	.055
Step 2	10.16**	.031		
Crop Farming			.300*	.123
Income			.165**	.056
Intervention Parish			.542***	.170

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 9: “I Trust Authorities”

Predictors	ΔF	ΔR^2	β	<i>SE B</i>
Step 1	22.88***	.060		
Education			.104***	.023
Ethnicity			-.313***	.087
Income			.088**	.026
Step 2	4.73*	.006		
Education			.101***	.024
Ethnicity			-.272**	.089
Income			.087**	.025
Intervention Parish			.170*	.078

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 10: “I Feel Confident When Dealing With the Government”

Predictors	ΔF	ΔR^2	β	<i>SE B</i>
Step 1	17.00***	.058		
Education			.075*	.028
Ethnicity			-.342***	.085
Income			.083**	.029
Step 2	6.96*	.008		
Education			.079*	.030
Ethnicity			-.299***	.085
Income			.083*	.030
Intervention Parish			.177*	.067

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.