Pushing the Boundaries of Governance, Crime, and Conflict Research: Innovations in Research, Measurement, and Design

By David Alzate, Aprille Knox, Nessa Kenny, and Alison Fahey

Over the past four decades, the share of the global population living in extreme poverty has fallen substantially. But progress remains uneven. Countries facing political instability, conflict, and violence have experienced increasing rates of poverty during this same period. By the year 2030, roughly two-thirds of the world's poor are expected to be living in fragile settings. The COVID-19 pandemic threatens to push an additional 150 million people into extreme poverty by 2021.

With these challenges in mind, in 2017, with support from fthe UK's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (formerly the Department for International Development), J-PAL and IPA jointly launched the Governance, Crime, and Conflict Initiative (GCCI) to increase our understanding of effective policies to promote peace and good governance, reduce crime, and support individuals and communities recovering from conflict.

With three years of research behind us, we write today to reflect on lessons from this effort and to announce an upcoming webinar series that will delve further into research results and lessons for policy design.

New Contexts, New Questions, and Actionable Lessons: Expanding the Evidence Base on Governance, Crime, and Conflict

Since 2017, the three research initiatives under GCCI—J-PAL's Governance Initiative and Crime and Violence Initiative and IPA's Peace and Recovery Program—have funded a combined 98 new research projects.
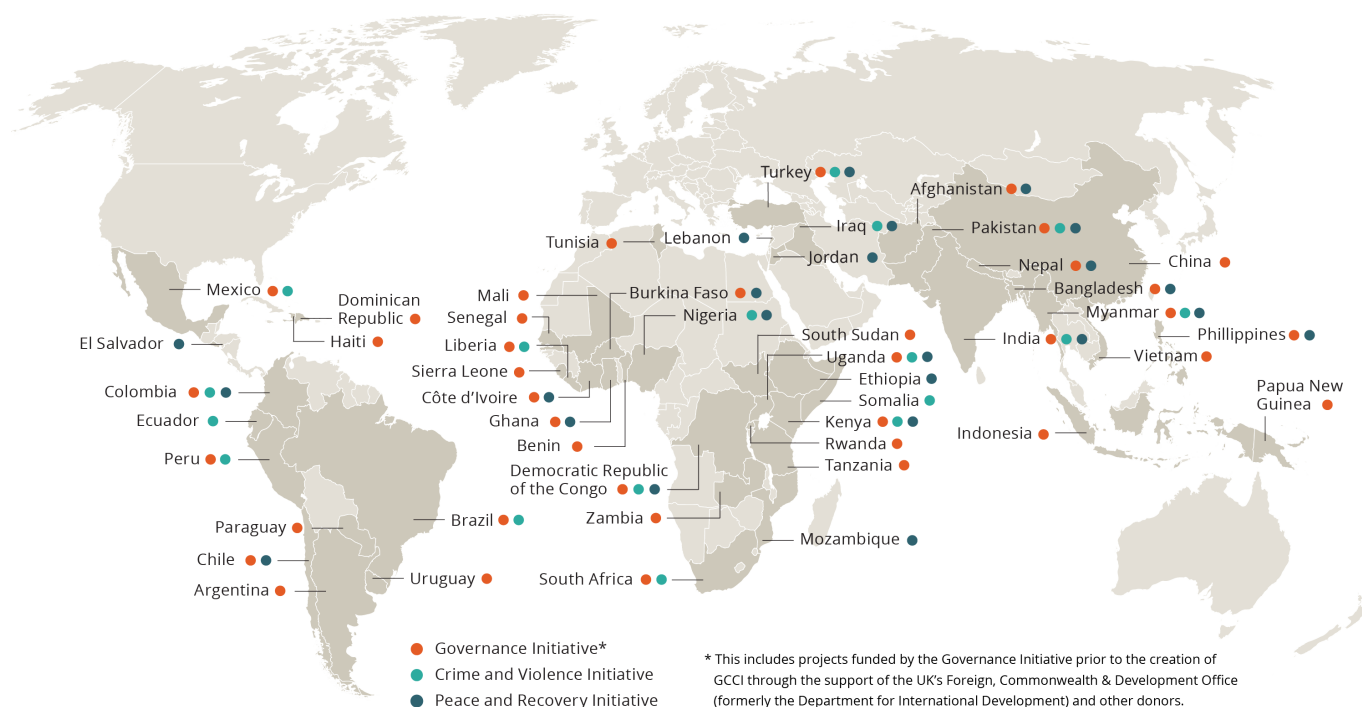
This research portfolio is breaking new ground on several important dimensions: examining theories previously untested in fragile environments, developing innovative measurement strategies and establishing new research infrastructure, conducting research with unconventional partners, and responding to the new challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The results of these studies are already beginning to lead to concrete policy change.

To explore some of the innovative research that is underway, read more below:

Expanding Research in Fragile Countries

Field experiments require research infrastructure, absent which researchers may be deterred from working in a particular setting. GCCI-funded research efforts are supporting the development of valuable research infrastructure, which is paving the way for supporting future evaluations in settings that have previously been understudied due to lack of research support systems.

The GCCI portfolio covers 33 countries, including several countries where prior RCT research has been limited—places like the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Somalia (two of Africa's "scarce seven" countries that account for just 3.5 percent of all economics journal articles on African countries, as highlighted by researcher Obie Porteous), as well as Afghanistan, Iraq, Myanmar, and more.

For example:

- **Building a research hub in a humanitarian setting:** In Bangladesh, Peace & Recovery Program support has been instrumental in the establishment of an IPA research hub to collect high-quality data and run rigorous evaluations in Cox's Bazar, providing early evidence on programs serving forcibly displaced populations and the first rigorous evidence on the Rohingya refugee response. This infrastructure supports both yearly waves of the Cox's Bazar Panel Survey and several randomized evaluations of innovative humanitarian response programs.

- **Supporting research infrastructure in fragile contexts:** In the DRC, the Governance Initiative (GI) has supported multiple evaluations in collaboration with the

Government of the Kasaï Central Province in the city of Kananga, producing policy-relevant insights on tax collection and bribery. With the support of GI and other funders, researchers have been able to set up the infrastructure to more easily collect data, which facilitates more work with local government, such as the ongoing evaluation of innovations to strengthen tax collection.

Examining Theories Previously Untested in Fragile Contexts

GCCI's portfolio has contributed to our understanding of which governance, crime reduction, and peacebuilding programs are most effective, and why—shedding light on many assumptions underlying common programs that have not previously been evaluated in fragile contexts and adding to our basic understandings of human behavior.

Two cases help illustrate this point:

- **Trust in conflict-affected settings:** A goal of many peacebuilding programs has been to increase trust between communities and promote social bonds that could play a role in preventing further conflict, but relatively little is known on what types of interventions are most effective in promoting community healing. In Iraq, a GCCI-funded researcher conducted one of the first randomized evaluations examining the impact of "social contact" theory in a conflict-affected context.

- The study found that bringing Christians and Muslim soccer players together on mixed-religion teams improved players' tolerance towards their Muslim teammates, though these sentiments did not extend to Muslims in the broader community. Taken together, these findings suggest that intergroup contact can build community-level social cohesion with peers and acquaintances after war but that these effects may not generalize to strangers from the outgroup.

- **Tax collection in settings with limited administrative capacity:** Tax compliance is a challenge in many low- and middle-income countries, particularly in fragile states. How can governments improve tax collection and enforcement in these settings?

- In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), GCCI-funded researchers have partnered with the provincial government of Kasai Central to address questions of optimal tax policies, including through the implementation of one of the first field experiments to identify the tax rate that maximizes government revenue. In Haiti, GCCI-funded researchers are partnering with the Mayor of the City of Carrefour–one of the largest cities in the country, and a setting where tax payment rates are close to zero–to determine the impacts of an increased tax collection effort together with a new service provision and tax notification campaign.

- Insights from these settings can not only help inform a government's tax strategy, but also shed light on whether increased taxation leads citizens to increase their political participation and their oversight over government spending.

Supporting Innovations in Measurement

The outcomes that matter most in governance and peacebuilding—topics like trust, forgiveness, or corruption—are often difficult to observe. GCCI has supported innovations in measurement that are adding nuance to our understanding of what interventions are most effective and why. For instance:

- **Measuring corruption:** A challenge in anti-corruption research is measuring actual incidence of corruption, as illicit behavior is generally concealed and perceptions often differ from reality. One innovative way of addressing this challenge, developed by researchers in an ongoing GCCI-funded study in Kenya, entails combining GPS-tracked company vehicle data with administrative data to measure corrupt behavior among bureaucrats of a large public service provider.

- **Measuring attitudes and prejudice:** Outcomes like changes in attitudes and perceptions, which are often the focus of peacebuilding and social cohesion interventions, can be skewed by self-reporting bias. Drawing on the above work in Iraq, researchers are now using GCCI funds to test whether intergroup contact through mixed soccer teams can improve refugee-host relations, social integration, and prejudice in Lebanon by measuring whether they choose to attend mixed social events, patronize shops owned by members of the outgroup, or diversify their network of Facebook friends.

Collaborating with New Partners

At J-PAL and IPA, we not only conduct research and policy outreach but also help develop cultures of evidence-informed decision making within our partner organizations. Expanding the type of partner organizations involved in rigorously evaluating their programs is therefore an important element of our work.

We have forged relationships with a diverse range of partners, many of which had not previously conducted randomized evaluations of their programs and policies, including with:

- **Multinational companies**—for example, to evaluate the impact of privately enforcing local labor laws on local supplier factories in Bangladesh.

- **Tax collection agencies** and local governments in Brazil, Côte d'Ivoire, the DRC, Haiti, Kenya, and Paraguay to determine ways to improve tax collection, tax compliance, and tax enforcement.

- **Police departments** in India, Pakistan, and Uganda to study methods aimed at improving police units' responsiveness to citizens and increase citizens' trust in security services.

Responding to COVID-19

Teams are also adapting their research and leveraging prior data collection and randomization to assess the impacts of various interventions initiated before the onset of the pandemic on COVID-19 response and recovery. This research is exploring questions like:

- **How are gangs and other organized criminal groups reacting to the crisis?** In Medellin, Colombia, GCCI-funded researchers built on a recently-completed field experiment to see whether gangs cooperate with official ordinances (particularly in areas where the state lacks authority) or whether they undermine the state's response. They find evidence that gang response to the pandemic is relatively idiosyncratic and unconnected to their pre-pandemic power—in most cases, the state played the largest role in promoting and enforcing COVID-19 response, even in settings where gangs had high levels of pre-pandemic governance over civilians.

- **How has the pandemic affected cross-border traders and merchants?** In the Kenya-Uganda border, researchers are leveraging a census of around 1,800 traders conducted at the beginning of an ongoing field experiment to study how traders' livelihoods have changed as a result of COVID-19.

- **What is the impact of the pandemic on refugee and host community members, and how might crowded living conditions increase the risk of virus spread?** In Bangladesh, researchers adapted an ongoing P&R-funded panel survey of refugees and host community members in Cox's Bazar to measure COVID-19 symptoms, risk factors, and health behaviors. Results, released through the WHO, suggest that while respondents generally reported high levels of knowledge about respiratory hygiene and COVID-19 transmission, attendance at religious and social gatherings threatened to accelerate the spread of the disease.

Influencing Policy and Moving Towards Scale

GCCI-funded researchers are working directly with policymakers, from government officials to civil society organizations, to adapt, pilot, and scale programs based on their evaluation findings. Three years in, these efforts are beginning to lead to evidence uptake and policy change. For instance:

- **Reforming labor law to improve workers' outcomes:** Courts often function poorly in many low- and middle-income countries. Outcomes are unpredictable, parties are often misinformed, and processes can be inefficient. In Mexico, overburdened labor courts can result in long delays for dismissed workers seeking severance pay who typically have a limited understanding of the legal process.

- A GCCI-funded study found that providing customized information on predicted case outcomes to workers or asking them to meet with court mediators increased settlement rates of labor court cases and led to higher-valued payouts for workers.

- Informed by the research, the Government of Mexico passed a national labor law reform that requires workers to meet with a mediator before filing a severance case.

- **Integrating refugee children to reduce violence and exclusion in schools:** Given unprecedented levels of forced displacement globally, policymakers need effective ways to foster social cohesion, especially between ethnic groups. In Turkey, a school-based intervention to support the social integration of Syrian refugees lowered peer violence and victimization, reduced social exclusion and ethnic segregation, and enhanced prosocial behavior.

- Based on these findings, the Ministry of Education has decided to scale up the curriculum throughout the country to all schools hosting refugee students as part of the second phase of its refugee integration program.

Given the long-term nature of GCCI-funded research, we expect to see more examples of study findings directly influencing policy decisions.

Emerging Insights Are Shaping Policy Consensus

Research also has influence beyond the setting where a study was conducted. Over time, evidence can help shift consensus on broader policy issues. GCCI-funded research has been contributing to our library of Policy Insights, highlighting areas where there is emerging consensus and exploring the mechanisms that may explain these results. These insights include:

- **Increasing accountability and reducing corruption through government audits:** Government audits have often increased political accountability, reduced misuse of public resources, and improved compliance with laws and regulations. In low- and middle-income countries, audits have been more effective when the government had a stronger enforcement capacity, when audit results were widely publicized, or when the audit system incentivized the auditors and those being audited to be honest and truthful.

- **The risks and rewards of voter information campaigns in low- and middle-income countries:** Providing information on candidates' qualifications, policy positions, and performance in office can affect voter turnout and who people vote for. In low-income countries, this type of information has been most effective when it was widely disseminated from a credible source.

- **Reducing criminal behavior through cognitive behavioral therapy:** Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) can reduce criminal behavior among both at-risk youth and criminally engaged men, likely by helping them focus more on the future, change their self-perceptions, and/or slow their decision-making.

As more GCCI-funded studies publish results, those findings will further shape our understanding of human behavior and approaches that may be most effective in tackling the

drivers of crime, violence, and corruption in a given context.

Future Horizons

In the years ahead, levels of poverty and aid spending are likely to increase in countries with weak institutions or in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. In the face of complex challenges, governments, civil society, and donors need sharper insights into what kinds of programs can actually improve government accountability, reduce conflict, and promote stability.

While GCCI has made significant headway expanding innovative research on conflict and governance, many open questions remain which will guide our work in the years ahead.

In the coming weeks and months, we will host a series of webinars during which researchers funded through GCCI grants will share results from their recently completed studies. **Tune in for the first webinar in this series on November 18 at 3pm EST. Salma Mousa and Matt Lowe will each present their research on social contact as a means for reducing outgroup prejudice and building social cohesion.**

To stay informed of upcoming webinars in this series, click here to join our mailing list. We will also add links to recordings of past webinars to this blog post, so you can always circle back here to catch up on any you may have missed.

This blog post features research by: Sule Alan, Sarah Baird, Ceren Baysan, Augustin Bergeron, Michael Best, Robert Blair, Chris Blattman, Laura Boudreau, Lorenzo Casaburi, David Cerero, Ali Cheema, C. Austin Davis, Gustavo Duncan, Pascaline Dupas, François Gerard, Guy Grossman, Silvia Guglielmi, Mert Gumren, Ali Hasanain, Sebastian Hernandez, Deivy Houeix, Nicola Jones, Benjamin Kachero, Benjamin Krause, Evan Kresch, Gabrielle Kruks-Wisner, Elif Kubilay, Matt Lowe, Benjamin Lessing, Paula López-Peña, Jeremy Magruder, Akshay Mangla, Juan Felipe Martinez, Juan Pablo Mesa-Mejía, Khadija Mitu, Mushfiq Mobarak, Helena Montoya, Salma Mousa, Jennifer Muz, Joana Naritomi, Nathan Nunn, Benjamin A. Olken, Gaston Pierri, Dina Pomeranz, Otis Reid, Joyce Sadka, Evan Sadler, Alex Scacco, Enrique Seira, Jacob Shapiro, Sandip Sukhtankar, Santiago Tobon, Gabriel Tourek, Jonathan Weigel, Anna Wilke, Eleanor Wiseman, Christopher Woodruff, and Laura Zorrato.

November 05, 2020