

From coexistence to cohesion in refugee-host relations

Cory Rodgers

Improving ‘cohesion’ has become a common objective in refugee-hosting contexts. But the term is often used without clear definition, which has consequences for policy and programming.

Over the past decade there has been increasing attention to tensions between refugees and host communities, especially in contexts of protracted displacement. UNHCR has long recognised that mass displacement can have negative impacts on receiving communities. The 2016 New York Declaration recognised that most refugees live in low- and middle-income countries, where they are often seen as a strain on already over-burdened social infrastructure or as competitors for limited economic opportunities.

As early as the 1970s, the refugee aid and development agenda attempted to reduce these burdens by leveraging refugee assistance as an investment in local infrastructure.¹ Even in the absence of formal policy, UNHCR has introduced ad hoc entitlements to assistance in response to local demands, such as allowing host populations to access camp services or giving locals priority in employment opportunities.

Aside from concerns about the purported burden of hosting refugees, local communities may also display discriminatory attitudes based on race, ethnicity, religion, nationality or culture. These attitudes can be deeply entrenched, especially when they are grounded in painful memories of historical violence and injustice. For example, displaced Syrians in Lebanon are sometimes conflated with the Syrian regime that occupied the country from 1990 until 2005. In Kenya, Somali refugees have been treated as a security threat due to atrocities committed by Al Shabaab militants, including the 2012 Westgate mall attack and the 2015 Garissa University massacre.

There is nothing new about the problem of tension in refugee-hosting contexts. What is novel is the application of the concept

of ‘cohesion’ by refugee protection actors. In Bangladesh, declining tolerance among communities near the Cox’s Bazaar camp has prompted calls for greater attention to social cohesion in aid programming.² At the Kalobeyei settlement in Kenya, a 2019 study commissioned by UNHCR investigated the impact of cash-based assistance on social cohesion.³ And in the regional refugee response plans for Syria and Venezuela, aid actors are now incorporating cohesion into their programming in neighbouring countries.

In the past, refugee protection actors focused on conflict prevention, peace-making and ‘coexistence’. These terms relate to mitigating tensions and instilling minimal values of tolerance. This is relatively modest compared to the agenda entailed by ‘cohesion’, which implies a more ambitious vision for the promotion of trust, social belonging, economic inclusion and political participation. Moreover, while coexistence pre-supposes that multiple groups are living alongside each other, cohesion de-emphasises the boundaries between these groups. The grammatical differences are telling: we speak of coexistence ‘between’ refugees and their hosts, but cohesion is encouraged ‘within’ a diverse community, as exemplified in the area-based approaches⁴ to assistance that have become increasingly mainstream.

A fragmented and imported policy objective?

Although cohesion is increasingly prevalent in the refugee protection discourse, UNHCR has no formal policy on social cohesion. Rather, the concept appears across diverse policy domains, with differing and unarticulated definitions. The Global

Compact on Refugees (GCR) mentions cohesion as a potential benefit of sports and cultural activities. This defines cohesion primarily in terms of ‘horizontal’ or ‘inter-communal’ relations. However, UNHCR’s Operational Guidance on Accountability to Affected People (AAP) requires that all communities (including hosts) be included in decision-making and feedback mechanisms to ensure that everyone has a voice in policy-making. This corresponds with the ‘vertical’ or ‘community-to-institution’ dimension of cohesion.

UNHCR has largely imported its policy approach to social cohesion through partnerships with other organisations. The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration was developed under the leadership of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and addresses cohesion more explicitly than the GCR, with Objective 16 committed to “Empower[ing] migrants and societies to realise full inclusion and social cohesion”. IOM has made cohesion central to its migrant integration strategy and has launched an initiative on Diversity, Inclusion and Social Cohesion.⁵

Similarly, social cohesion is a long-standing element in the development strategies of UNDP and the World Bank. UNDP engages UNHCR through the Partnership on Forced Displacement, which informs the regional refugee response for Syria. The World Bank has partnered with UNHCR on its Development Responses to Displacement Impact Project in the East and Horn of Africa, as well as on its Window for Host Communities and Refugees.

Bringing coherence to cohesion policy

Although UNHCR draws on its partners’ approaches to social cohesion, there is a need for a more explicit strategy about the specific role of social cohesion in UNHCR’s mandate. Interviews with practitioners in Lebanon and Kenya have suggested widespread uncertainty and even disagreement about the meaning of cohesion, as well as about the ways that it could be integrated into refugee aid programming and measured for monitoring and evaluation.

Interviews with current and former UNHCR staff suggest that cohesion has a role to play in at least two of its Divisions. For the Division of International Protection, cohesion can help prevent harm to refugees in the places where they seek asylum. Host communities hostile to refugees or resentful about refugee-centric aid may take action against them, including through forced evictions, theft or even physical violence. If they feel that assistance is distributed unfairly, there is also a risk of host countries or communities taking action to prevent aid provision. Managing refugee-host tensions is therefore crucial to maintaining the ‘protection space’.

For the Division of Resilience and Solutions, cohesion can contribute to the attainment of ‘local solutions’, defined by the International Council of Voluntary Agencies as “arrangements that do not replace but [rather] complement and facilitate access to durable solutions”.⁶ Refugees are often stuck in situations where full legal integration, including naturalisation, is not politically feasible in the short term. Here, social cohesion programmes push for a less ambitious aim of making exile more tolerable and facilitating limited forms of social and economic inclusion. When refugees can participate in the social, economic and political life of their host communities, they have greater capacity to pursue durable solutions on their own terms. This may create a stepping stone towards local integration, or a launch pad for either voluntary repatriation or the pursuit of complementary pathways to third countries.

Integrating cohesion into aid programming

With a clearer sense of policy aims, social cohesion objectives can be incorporated more coherently and effectively into refugee assistance programming. This includes developing the metrics upon which improvements in cohesion are measured, as well as the evidence upon which interventions are designed. Key questions requiring research and evidence include:

Does cohesion imply integration, inclusion or interaction? The term cohesion is applied to a broad array of intervention models. One approach is to invest in shared infrastructure such as roads, electrical grids and water systems and services such as education, health care and waste management, which can be put under pressure after the arrival of displaced populations. A second approach is to include hosts as beneficiaries in programmes that are conventionally intended for refugees. This approach responds to accusations of refugee-centric aid, and aims to reduce resentment among the host population. However, the logic of programmes supporting this approach is skewed toward economic perspectives – that is, measures of the costs and benefits of hosting – rather than anthropological and sociological perspectives. A third model focuses on increasing and improving interactions among different communities. This approach is supported by studies that show a positive correlation between interactions and inter-group perceptions.

Should cohesion be a distinct area of programming, or mainstreamed into other sectors? Some projects take cohesion as the primary objective, such as those focused on peace education, dispute resolution mechanisms, and community dialogue. But many projects have incorporated cohesion into other sectors, such as infrastructure projects that employ both refugees and locals during construction, or livelihood projects that extend business support to both groups.

Should cohesion programmes be targeted? Whereas some approaches to social cohesion programming are broadly inclusive or community-wide, others focus on targeted sub-populations. Vulnerability-based programmes presume that the worst-off members of the host population are the most likely to mobilise over accusations of refugee-centric assistance. Including them as aid recipients therefore reduces tensions over aid distribution. Some projects target youth as the most likely to engage in physical confrontations; others engage women as potential bridge-builders between communities.

How are tension and cohesion best monitored? Monitoring social tensions often relies on perception surveys, which elicit sentiments about members of other groups. However, such surveys often rely on abstract categories based on nationality or legal status, which prime respondents to think in terms of stereotypes rather than their actual relationships with real people.⁷

Finally, what are the unintended effects of managing refugee-host relations?

It is sometimes assumed that increased attention to host communities is a step in the right direction. But extending aid to local citizens risks side-stepping the state and driving up future expectations for ‘host entitlements’, which forces refugee protection organisations to deviate from their mandate and increases costs. These additional costs could undermine the protection space in an already under-funded aid system. Additionally, such entitlements can create further tensions within the host population.⁸ Refugee-host tensions are inherently political, and attempts to address them can further politicise existing labels.

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2. Olney J, Badiuzzaman M, Azizul Hoque M (2019) ‘Social Cohesion, Resilience and Peace Building Between Host Population and Rohingya Refugee Community in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh’, Centre for Peace and Justice, BRAC University, Dhaka
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4. See Schell J, Hilmi M and Hirano S (2020) ‘Area-based approaches: an alternative in contexts of urban displacement’, *Forced Migration Review* Issue 63 www.fmreview.org/cities/schell-hilmi-hirano
5. See IOM *Migrant Integration and Social Cohesion* www.iom.int/migrant-integration-and-social-cohesion
6. UNHCR and ICVA (2020) *Local Solutions for Refugees: Key Considerations* bit.ly/UNHCR-ICVA
7. This question is addressed in the piece by Hunt and Rodgers in this feature.
8. Rodgers C (2021) ‘The ‘Host’ Label: Forming and Transforming a Community Identity at the Kakuma Refugee Camp’, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol 34 Issue 2