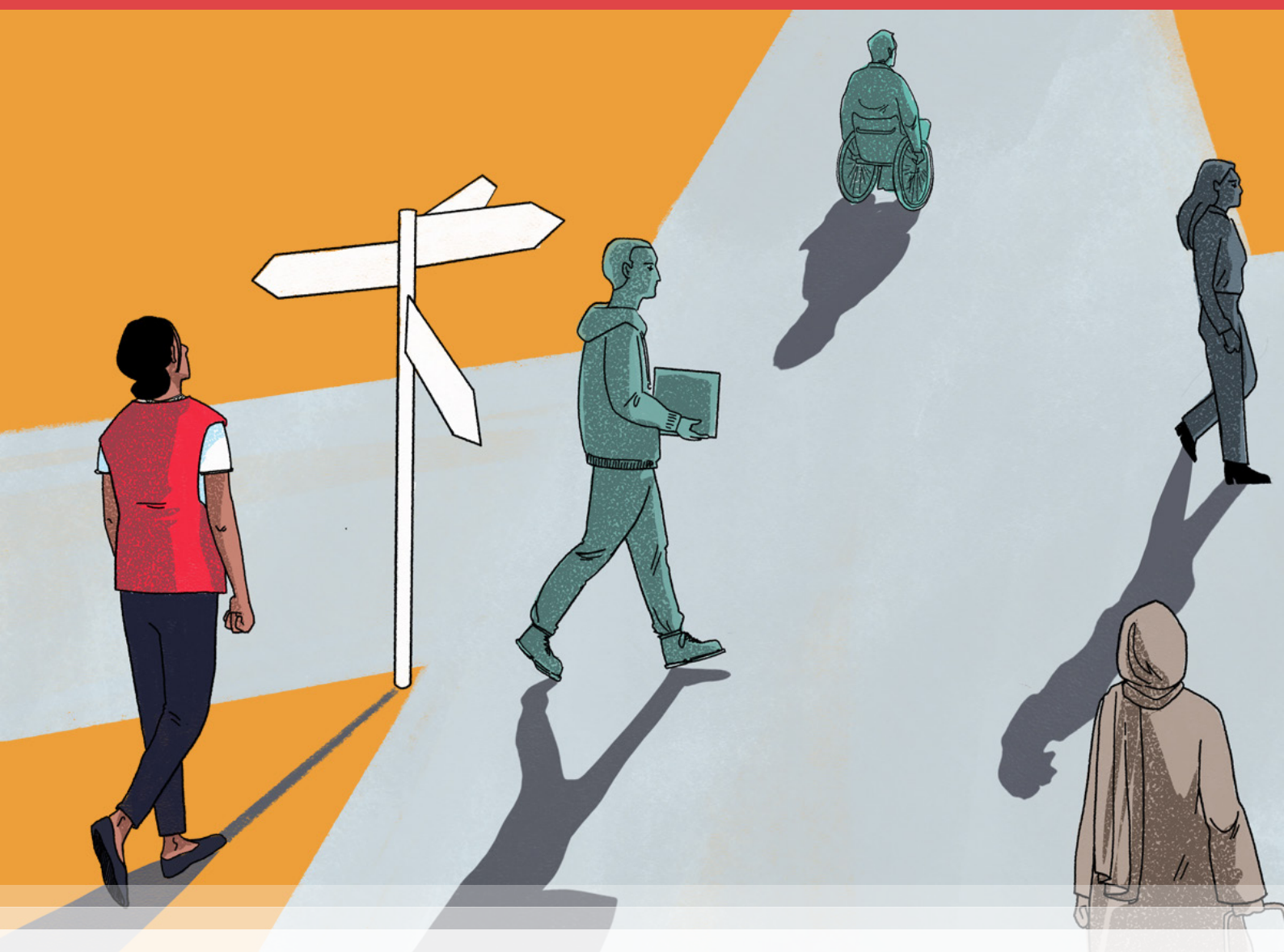# Social cohesion in displacement: when aid actors should step back

Caitlin Sturridge[ID], Amanda Gray Meral[ID], Kerrie Holloway[ID] and Simon Levine

**HPG**
Humanitarian
Policy Group

**ODI**

# Acknowledgements

**About the authors**

**Caitlin Sturridge**[ID] is a Senior Research Fellow in HPG.

**Amanda Gray Meral**[ID] is a Research Fellow in HPG.

**Kerrie Holloway**[ID] is a Research Fellow in HPG.

**Simon Levine** is a Senior Research Fellow in HPG.

**Note on the text**

The 'Global South' is an increasingly common term used to categorise many countries around the world. Often it is employed as a substitute for referring to nations that have been historically exploited through colonisation. The authors would like to acknowledge current international debates on the usefulness of this term, which question whether another generalising and binary framework (Global North–Global South) is productive for reconstituting and challenging global power relations.

---

**How to cite:** Sturridge, C., Gray Meral, A., Holloway, K. and Levine, S. (2024) 'Social cohesion in displacement: when aid actors should step back'. HPG policy brief. London: ODI (www.odi.org/en/publications/social-cohesion-in-displacement-when-aid-actors-should-step-back).

Cover illustration by Ada Jušić

# Introduction

This paper presents our policy analysis of the findings from a two-year research project exploring social cohesion between refugees and host communities and within refugee communities. The research sought to address two fundamental questions: How important is social cohesion in refugee settings? And what role should aid actors play in supporting social cohesion? Our conclusions draw on a literature review, data collection in Pakistan and Tanzania (see Resources list), and an expert roundtable. The project also builds on earlier ODI research on humanitarian assistance and social protection in Greece, Colombia and Cameroon (see Lowe et al., 2022).

Our research focused on the people affected by displacement – refugees and hosts – and the aspects of social cohesion that matter to them. Critical reflection and pragmatism were also at the heart of our research approach. While we critique current approaches to social cohesion programming and challenge aid actors to do better, this paper offers practical and workable recommendations for policymakers and practitioners to take forward.

A key question that emerged during the research was: Should social cohesion be a primary goal of aid interventions or a secondary objective of wider practice? In other words, should aid actors seek to orchestrate social relations through specific interventions designed to build social cohesion? Or, should they integrate social considerations across their policy and practice in order to guard against the unintended consequences that all kinds of programming can have on social relations? We recommend that aid actors avoid addressing social cohesion as a primary objective unless their interventions meet four requirements:

1. **Clarity of thought and purpose** – does the intervention address a specific aspect of social cohesion rooted in people's own experiences and priorities?
2. **Pragmatism about the limitations and risks** – does the intervention recognise its own limitations and mitigate against the risks of unintended consequences?
3. **Equity and transparency** – does the intervention combine fair targeting with clear messaging about how aid is distributed?
4. **Political coherence** – does the intervention consider the wider politics of social cohesion?

When interventions do not meet these requirements, aid actors should step back from implementing interventions with the primary goal of social cohesion. In practical terms, stepping back can mean pausing – in order to take stock and adapt programming (D'Onofrio and Bennett, 2015). It can also mean narrowing the focus to specific aspects of social cohesion where aid can have most impact. In other cases, stepping back ultimately means standing down: ceding space and funding to those better positioned to address social cohesion – often local actors and communities with first-hand experience of displacement. Most importantly, stepping back doesn't mean ignoring social cohesion. All aid interventions influence social relations, often in unintended or unpredictable ways. Aid actors thus have an obligation to take social relations seriously – and, at the very least, to ensure that their own interventions are conflict sensitive and aren't driving social tensions.

# Clarity of thought and purpose

The vague language of 'building social cohesion' is frequently used as a catch-all, or afterthought – often for accessing the growing amount of funding targeting social cohesion outcomes, but without committing to specific outcomes.[1] Of the 93 interventions claiming to improve social cohesion reviewed for this project, most used the term in promotional materials, but went no further than this (Holloway and Sturridge, 2022). Only a handful were supported by a logical theory of change or robust tracking indicators. If programmes *are* measuring and evaluating their impact by tracking indicators, they are not, by and large, publishing the results (de Berry and Roberts, 2018). Social cohesion interventions need to be designed around a specific problem, with a clear objective that can be achieved, and with a convincing theory of change to articulate it.

But the roots of the problem go deeper than a technical monitoring and evaluation fix. A key issue is the widespread use of top-down approaches and definitions designed in the Global North that take precedence over localised, context-specific approaches to social cohesion (Jenson, 2010; de Berry and Roberts, 2018; Ozcurumez and Hoxha, 2020). Many interventions build on the assumption that external approaches can be translocated and translated to refugee-hosting contexts in the Global South, often following the inclusion of additional context-specific aspects, or after commissioning risk and conflict assessments (Mookherjee and Easton-Calabria, 2017; Holloway and Sturridge, 2022).

We argue that the starting point should always be the aspects of social cohesion that are important to affected people, and why – and elaborating a convincing theory of change from there. Our research in Pakistan and Tanzania uncovered the richness and diversity of social relations that are rooted in a complex mix of religious, cultural language, gendered and generational identities. Social relations were further influenced by economic incentives, living configurations, and the duration of displacement, among other factors. Imported definitions and approaches cannot capture these complex and context-specific dynamics.[2]

So what would a better approach look like? A local lens is critical. Instead of seeking to engineer social cohesion for people, aid actors would do better to ask themselves – or rather, to ask refugees and host communities – how best they can support them to build social cohesion in the ways that reflect their own priorities and preferences. 'We are consulted, but our opinions are neglected', was a common refrain articulated by a Burundian refugee in Tanzania. To ensure that interventions make sense in their context and are sensitive to local power relations and conflict dynamics, aid actors should co-design and implement interventions with local actors as a matter of course. Local actors have first-hand understanding of what matters about their social relations. Meaningful co-design would help to inject a local lens into the valuable lessons and best practice about social cohesion emerging from elsewhere.

---

1   Social cohesion programming rose from zero in 2001 to $140 million in 2020 (Cox et al., 2023).

2   For example, in South America, high levels of economic and political inequality mean that social cohesion is more closely related to family than to the 'usual' approach of reducing social disparities or ensuring participation in democratic societies (Márquez, 2010).

# Pragmatism about the limitations and risks

Aid actors tend to make overly optimistic claims about the ability of their programmes to build social cohesion (King et al., 2010; Finn, 2017; de Berry and Roberts, 2018). While the desire to (be seen to) deliver is understandable in a competitive funding environment, aid actors need to be more realistic and honest (with themselves, donors and, most importantly, with communities) about the extent to which their programmes can achieve 'social cohesion'. Failure to do so risks setting unrealistic expectations on all sides, and glossing over – and therefore failing to prepare for – possible risks or unintended consequences.

This statement is not meant to be a critical reflection on the quality of project design or implementation. Our research suggests that it is unreasonable to expect that any individual project (however well designed and implemented) can meaningfully influence social cohesion in displacement in the ways intended – for two reasons.

Firstly, aid isn't that influential in the grand scheme of social cohesion. (Although when aid is not fairly or transparently distributed, the unintended effects on undermining social cohesion can be significant – see next section). In most cases, aid represents a tiny part of the wider mosaic of actors and factors that influence social cohesion. How, for example, can individual projects designed to build social cohesion compete with restrictive national policies, powerful media narratives, deep-seated cultural and religious prejudices, or the polarising politics of migration? In places where the underlying political agenda is to segregate and isolate refugees and host communities (through encampment, forced expulsions, restrictions on movement and work, etc.) aid interventions will only scratch the surface of more meaningful change. Under these circumstances, aid actors would do better to step back – by narrowing their efforts to specific aspects of social cohesion that are rooted in affected people's own experiences, preferences and priorities.

A second justification for pragmatism relates to the risk of unintended consequences. In places where restrictive national policies limit refugees' rights and movements, social encounters and interactions can be dangerous. Many undocumented refugees are forced to stay indoors in order to keep a low profile, hide their identity, and avoid arrest, fines and deportation. While this may indicate a wider context lacking in social cohesion (rather than a shortcoming of social cohesion programming per se), aid actors have to recognise that social cohesion isn't always everyone's priority. While there is an argument for 'doing social cohesion better', there is also a case for 'doing social cohesion less' in places where social cohesion isn't the priority, or where programming risks putting people in danger or making social tension worse.

# Equity and transparency

It is widely accepted that social tensions emerge when aid is unfairly distributed across communities. This has motivated many aid organisations to extend aid to hosts – who are often equally poor and vulnerable (Walton, 2012). While a 70:30 split in aid spending between refugees and hosts has traditionally been common practice, refugee responses increasingly divide resources equally between the two communities, or adopt area-based approaches, whereby all groups in a targeted geographic area are considered for aid allocations.[3]

Our research casts doubt on the idea that giving equally to all necessarily improves social relations. Most host community respondents in Pakistan and Tanzania did not begrudge refugees a higher proportion of assistance, in recognition of their limited opportunities for earning their own living.[4] 'Unequal' is not always seen as 'unfair' when it comes to allocations of aid. Indeed, hosts' sense of fairness was more sophisticated than mainstream narratives of resentment and hostility would suggest. A split that is more favourable to host communities may help international agencies appease national governments that are weary of hosting refugees. But its impacts on refugee–host relations may be less significant than is often assumed.

A different picture emerged among refugees. Competition over aid (but also jobs with non-governmental organisations, and resettlement places) has created a brittle backdrop that can easily flare up when there is a lack of communication, transparency or understanding in the way that aid is targeted and delivered. In Tanzania, these grievances occurred along national and ethnic lines, but also towards groups identified as 'vulnerable' and subsequently prioritised for assistance over the general refugee population.

Giving aid equally to all is not the answer to building social cohesion – especially in the face of funding shortfalls, rising displacement and accelerating humanitarian needs. A more effective approach would be for aid actors to invest in understanding the different constraints and needs faced by people and population groups, and ensuring that support is given to address these. Better and more coherent design and targeting would enable clearer messaging so that refugees and hosts understand why some groups receive aid (including how much and of what kind) and others do not (Grandi et al., 2018; Smith, 2019; Samuels et al., 2020; Baseler et al., 2023). Greater transparency and more proactive community engagement would also help to avert rumours or suspicions of unfairness which, when left unchallenged, can seriously unravel social relations between all groups in society – refugees and hosts included.

---

3   The 70:30 split appears in Bangladesh (Food Security Cluster, 2018), Ukraine (Harris, 2018) and Uganda (O'Callaghan, 2018). A 50:50 split appears in the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan, which targeted 1.5 million Lebanese and 1.5 million Syrians (UN Lebanon, 2022).

4   While social tensions are well documented in Lebanon, a minority of hosts recognise that Syrians deserve to receive aid given their difficult situation, and blame instead the government for its handling of the crisis (Samuels et al., 2020).

# Political coherence

Social cohesion tends to be presented as a positive foundation for development, growth, peacebuilding and conflict resolution. This builds on the assumption that social processes – such as cohesion, networks or inclusion – are 'social goods' to be worked towards (Pelling and High, 2005). From this perspective, addressing social cohesion can appear less political than other types of peacebuilding support, and less contentious than thornier conversations around local integration, economic inclusion and good governance (Cox et al., 2023).

In practice, however, social cohesion is politically charged. In hosting countries like Tanzania, where the policy priority is return and repatriation (and not local integration), strengthening refugee–host relations is viewed by the national government as a dangerous stepping stone to long-term local integration. Social cohesion (and the programmes associated with it) are thus viewed as risks to be avoided – and the priority is instead on limiting social and economic interactions by restricting refugees' opportunities to move, work or study outside of camps.

For other hosting governments, like Lebanon, social cohesion (or 'stability', as it is coined) is seen as the 'lesser of two evils' (Guay, 2015). By sidestepping the legal implications of integration and inclusion, social cohesion becomes something of a halfway house, where questions around legal rights, status and access to services are glossed over or ignored altogether. This can suit the political agendas of national governments reluctant to allow more than temporary protection to refugees.

For countries in the 'Global North' looking for ways to reduce immigration, social cohesion can be viewed as a convenient strategy for keeping refugees in their regions of origin. This builds on the assumption that refugees who settle 'peacefully' with their hosts in the 'Global South' (thanks to improved social relations) will be less likely to move onwards. This calculation disregards the fact that migration decision-making is notoriously difficult to predict, and social dynamics are part of a much wider puzzle of immediate practical and legal considerations.

Governments are clearly alert to the political implications and opportunities of social cohesion programming. Aid actors should be cognisant of these too. After all, the politics of social cohesion make navigating a role for external aid actors increasingly sensitive in refugee contexts – particularly in places where it is framed as a domestic issue associated with social engineering, state-building and national identity formation (Strang and Ager, 2010; Portes and Vickstrom, 2011; Browne, 2013; Holloway and Sturridge, 2022).

The politics of social cohesion reinforces again the need for aid actors to take a step back – to take stock and adapt interventions, to narrow the focus to specific and manageable aspects of social cohesion, or to cede space to local actors whose activities may be seen as less politically sensitive.

# References

**Baseler, T., Ginn, T., Hakiza, R., et al.** (2023) *Can redistribution change policy views? Aid and attitudes toward refugees in Uganda. Washington DC: Center for Global Development* (www.cgdev.org/publication/can-redistribution-change-policy-views-aid-and-attitudes-toward-refugees-uganda).

**Browne, E.** (2013) *State fragility and social cohesion. Birmingham: GSDRC* (www.gov.uk/research-for-development-outputs/state-fragility-and-social-cohesion-gsdrc-helpdesk-research-report-1027).

**Cox, F.D., Fielder, C. and Mross, K.** (2023) 'Strengthening social cohesion in conflict-affected societies: potential, patterns and pitfalls'. IDOS Policy Brief 3/2023. German Institute of Development and Sustainability (https://doi.org/10.23661/ipb3.2023).

**de Berry, J.P. and Roberts, A.** (2018) Social cohesion and forced displacement: a desk review to inform programming and project design. Washington DC: World Bank (https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/125521531981681035/social-cohesion-and-forced-displacement-a-desk-review-to-inform-programming-and-project-design).

**D'Onofrio, A. and Bennett, S.** (2015) *Community-driven? Concepts, clarity and choices for community-driven development in conflict-affected countries. London: International Rescue Committee* (www.rescue.org/resource/community-driven-concepts-clarity-and-choices-community-driven-development-conflict).

**Finn, A.** (2017) *Social cohesion and displacement: rapid literature review. (www.researchgate.net/publication/337195062_Social_Cohesion_and_Displacement_Literature_Review*).

**Food Security Cluster** (2018) 'Host community operational response – JRP 2018'. Cox's Bazar: Food Security Cluster (https://fscluster.org/sites/default/files/documents/fss_livelihoods_wg_ presentation_jrp_host_communities_ppt_january_2018_0.pdf).

**Grandi, F., Mansour, K. and Holloway, K.** (2018) *Dignity and displaced Syrians in Lebanon: 'There is no karama here'. HPG working paper.* London: ODI (https://odi.org/en/publications/dignity-anddisplaced-syrians-in-lebanon/).

**Guay, J.** (2015) Social cohesion between Syrian refugees and urban host communities in Lebanon and Jordan. London: World Vision (www.wvi.org/disaster-management/publication/socialcohesion-between-syrian-refugees-and-urban-host-communities).

**Harris, S.** (2018) *Final internal independent evaluation of the project 'Integration and stabilization support through livelihoods for IDPs and the conflict-affected population in Ukraine'. Kyiv: International Organization for Migration* (www.alnap.org/system/files/content/resource/files/main/Stabilisation%2520IDP%2520Ukraine%25202018.pdf).

**Holloway, K. and Sturridge, C.** (2022) *Social cohesion in displacement: the state of play. HPG working paper.* London: ODI (www.odi.org/en/publications/social-cohesion-in-displacement-the-state-of-play/).

**Jenson, J.** (2010) *Defining and measuring social cohesion. London: Commonwealth Secretariat* (https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/785809?ln=en).

**King, E., Samii, C. and Snilstveit, B.** (2010) 'Interventions to promote social cohesion in subSaharan Africa' *Journal of Development Effectiveness 2(3): 336–370* (https://doi.org/10.1080/1744 9057.2010.504552).

**Lowe, C., Salomon, H., Hagen-Zanker, J. and Gray Meral., A.** (2022) *Humanitarian assistance and social protection in context of forced displacement.* London: ODI (https://odi.org/en/publications/humanitarian-assistance-and-social-protection-in-contexts-of-forced-displacement-effects-on-social-cohesion/).

**Márquez, R.** (2010) 'A critical review of the eclac approach to social cohesion, and challenges to putting it into practice' in A. Barcena, A. Prado, L. Beccaria and S. Malchik (eds) *Social cohesion in Latin America: concepts, frames of reference and indicators*: pp17–35. Santiago: Economic Commission for Latin America (www.cepal.org/en/publications/3143-social-cohesion-latinamerica-concepts-frames-reference-and-indicators).

**Mookherjee, Y. and Easton-Calabria, E.** (2017) 'The many selves in self-reliance: why words and definitions matter' *The New Humanitarian, 15 December* (https://deeply.thenewhumanitarian.org/refugees/community/2017/12/15/the-many-selves-in-self-reliance-why-words-and-definitions-matter).

**O'Callaghan, S.** (2018) *Are integrated services a step towards integration? Uganda case study – 2018.* Nairobi: Regional Durable Solutions Secretariat (https://regionaldss.org/index.php/2019/03/21/newpublication-integrated-services-step-towards-integration).

**Ozcurumez, S., and Hoxha, J.** (2020) 'Practicing social cohesion in the dark: diverse processes and missing indicators in forced migration contexts' *Frontiers in Human Dynamics 2* (https://doi.org/10.3389/fhumd.2020.569682).

**Pelling, M. and High, C.** (2005) 'Understanding adaptation: what can social capital offer assessments of adaptive capacity?' *Global Environmental Change 15(4): 308–319* (https://doi.org/10.1016/j. gloenvcha.2005.02.001).

**Portes, A. and Vickstrom, E.** (2011) 'Diversity, social capital, and cohesion' *Annual Review of Sociology 37(1): 461–479* (https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-081309-150022).

**Samuels, F., Bastagli, F., Stavropoulou, M., et al.** (2020) *World Food Programme multipurpose cash assistance in Lebanon: social cohesion and stability between Syrian refugees and host communities.* Oslo: Norwegian Refugee Council (https://odi.org/en/publications/world-food-programme-cash-assistance-in-lebanon-social-cohesion-between-syrian-refugees-and-host-communities/).

**Smith, G.** (2019) *Cash assistance in Lebanon: accountability to affected populations (AAP) research report on AAP in the World Food Programme's multi-purpose cash programme. CAMEALEON and CALP* (www.calpnetwork.org/publication/cash-assistance-in-lebanon-accountability-to-affected-populations).

**Strang, A. and Ager, A.** (2010) 'Refugee integration: emerging trends and remaining agendas' *Journal of Refugee Studies 23(4): 589–607* (https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feq046).

**UN Lebanon** (2022) 'Launch of the 2022 Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP): government, UN and partners appeal for US $3.2 billion'. Press release, 20 June (https://lebanon.un.org/en/186879-launch-2022-lebanon-crisis-response-plan-lcrp-government-un-and-partners-appeal-us-32).

**Walton, O.** (2012) Good practice in preventing conflict between refugees and host communities. GSDRC Helpdesk Research Report. Birmingham, UK: Governance and Social Development Resource Centre, University of Birmingham (https://gsdrc.org/publications/preventing-conflictbetween-refugees-and-host-communities/).

# Resources generated by this project

**Holloway, K. and Sturridge, C.** (2022) *Social cohesion in displacement: the state of play. HPG working paper. London: ODI* (www.odi.org/en/publications/social-cohesion-in-displacement-the-state-of-play/).

**Levine, S.** (2023) 'There's no such thing as social cohesion! What aid actors need to understand about the social relations of displaced people'. ODI Insight (www.odi.org/en/insights/no-such-thing-as-social-cohesion-pakistan/).

**Levine, S., Ullah, Z., Ahmad, M., et al.** (2023) *The nature of social cohesion? Lessons from relations between Afghan refugees and their neighbours in Pakistan. HPG case study.* London: ODI (www.odi.org/en/publications/the-nature-of-social-cohesion-lessons-from-relations-between-afghan-refugees-and-their-neighbours-in-pakistan).

**Sturridge, C.** (2023) 'How national policy shapes social cohesion programming: lessons from Tanzania'. ODI Insight (www.odi.org/en/insights/how-national-policy-shapes-social-cohesion-programming-lessons-from-tanzania/).

**Sturridge, C.** (2023) 'Why the refugee label undermines social cohesion: lessons from Tanzania'. ODI Insight (www.odi.org/en/insights/why-the-refugee-label-undermines-social-cohesion-lessons-from-tanzania/).

**Sturridge, C.** (2023) 'What is the connection between social cohesion and local integration? Lessons from Tanzania'. ODI Insight (www.odi.org/en/insights/what-is-the-connection-between-social-cohesion-and-local-integration-lessons-from-tanzania/).

**Sturridge, C., Kamanga, K.C., Ruhundwa, J., et al.** (2023) *What aid actors need to know about social cohesion in displacement. HPG case study. London: ODI* (www.odi.org/en/publications/what-aid-actors-need-to-know-about-social-cohesion-in-displacement-a-tanzania-case-study/).

**Sturridge, C and Rodgers, C.** (2023) 'Social cohesion or social coercion? How policies to improve refugee–host relations can go astray'. ODI Insight (www.odi.org/en/insights/social-cohesion-or-coercion-refugee-host-relations/).

**HPG**
Humanitarian
Policy Group

**ODI**

The Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) is one of the world's leading teams of independent researchers and communications professionals working on humanitarian issues. It is dedicated to improving humanitarian policy and practice through a combination of high-quality analysis, dialogue and debate.