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review

Special feature

Social cohesion in refugee-hosting contexts

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Introduction to the special feature

This special feature of *Forced Migration Review* is made up of seven contributions from academics and practitioners involved in a two-year research project titled *Social Cohesion as a Humanitarian Objective* (SoCHO). Broadly, SoCHO is a critical study of the growing emphasis on host communities in humanitarian responses to displacement, a trend that gained momentum at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit. Host community concerns also feature prominently in the 2016 New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants and the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework, as well as the Global Compact on Refugees and the Global Compact for Migration.

More specifically, the project examines one consequence of this focus on host communities: the proliferation of policies and programmes to promote 'social cohesion' in displacement-affected communities. This includes projects that bring together refugees and hosts in interactive activities, as well as aid distribution strategies that extend a share of assistance to affected host communities and their governments.

This 'host turn' has generally been embraced as a self-evident good that can reduce conflicts between refugees and hosts, oppose xenophobia, and create synergy between humanitarian and development agendas. However, the evidence base underlying these programmes is largely *economic*, that is, focused on the material burdens and benefits for host communities. Until now, there has been little qualitative work on the ways these programmes influence personal interactions, community relations, popular narratives and political contexts.

The SoCHO project is a mixed methods study that examines 'social cohesion' projects with attention to their ethnographic, historical and spatial contexts. The project focuses on two refugee-hosting countries – Kenya and Lebanon – which also allows for a cross-regional comparison of the local implementation of a global policy trend. Both countries have received much international attention from aid organisations and donors, but have nonetheless been affected by the rise of intolerance and resentment towards refugees and asylum.

Lebanon hosts more refugees per capita than any other country; it is estimated that Syrian refugees constitute a sixth to a quarter of the resident population. While many displaced Syrians were able to find housing and local support in Lebanon early in the Syrian conflict, the political tide has turned to create a less hospitable legal environment, with restrictions on employment and greater barriers to legal residency. Since late 2019, host community fatigue has been deepened by an economic crisis that has pushed over half of the Lebanese population into poverty. In June 2022, the government announced plans to repatriate as many as 15,000 Syrians per month, against the advice of UNHCR.

Kenya is host to the Dadaab and Kakuma camps, some of the largest refugee camps in the world, which were established in the early 1990s and currently host over 450,000 refugees. While refugees were previously permitted to register and reside in the capital city Nairobi, the government tightened their restrictions in 2016, largely due to security concerns related to terrorists operating out of Somalia. In the vicinity of the camps, host communities have expressed concerns about the loss of land and environmental damage associated with the arrival of refugees. At the Kakuma camps in Turkana County, tensions have at times culminated in violence, displacing people already living in protracted displacement in the camps.

The following is a brief summary of the research conducted by the SoCHO project. The articles in this special feature provide a synthesis of key policy lessons emerging from the SoCHO research project. The in-depth findings of the research activities described below will be submitted for peer review in relevant journals and published on the project webpage: *www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/research/social-cohesion-as-a-humanitarian-objective-socho.*

Conceptualising social cohesion

In order to understand how different institutions define social cohesion within refugee policy and programming, we reviewed the full range of programmes that address refugee-host relations in both Kenya and Lebanon. Combining internet searches and key informant interviews, we identified 55 to 70 interventions in each country that address social cohesion – along with a number of related terms such as 'socio-economic integration', 'peaceful co-existence' and 'reconciliation' – with special attention to refugee-host relations. For each intervention, we reviewed available documents to identify key characteristics, such as the targeting strategy for beneficiaries and participants, the domain of activities (including livelihoods, peace programming, and education), and the theory of change. We also attempted to conduct interviews with staff from at least a third of the organisations implementing projects. We found that, while 'social cohesion' has become a common policy objective, this objective is often weakly conceptualised by planners and implementers. Many rely on redundant definitions such as the 'cohesiveness' of a society or vague references to social bonds between people, relationships within groups, and solidarities between communities.

One issue that emerged during the course of the study was that social cohesion in Lebanon is often understood in a preventative sense as part of a stabilisation agenda, in terms of attempts to reduce tensions and prevent conflict. In order to better understand what this means to affected communities, we conducted a participatory ethnographic study of community relations in Bourj Hammoud, a neighbourhood that was heavily affected by the 2020 Beirut Port Explosion. After the blast, aid poured in from various sources but lacked central planning and coordination. This led to accusations of aid bias, which exacerbated tensions, especially between local Lebanese and displaced Syrians. Local participants examined these issues through journaling and neighbourhood mapping exercises. Findings suggested that mainstream narratives about inter-

communal tensions often overlook the inter-personal bonds among neighbours, which give people a sense of everyday belonging despite concerns about aid distribution.

This research was facilitated by the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), who operate a community centre in Bourj Hammoud. Based on the findings of the research, JRS commissioned a documentary film to examine and challenge stereotypes about inter-communal tensions in Bourj Hammoud.
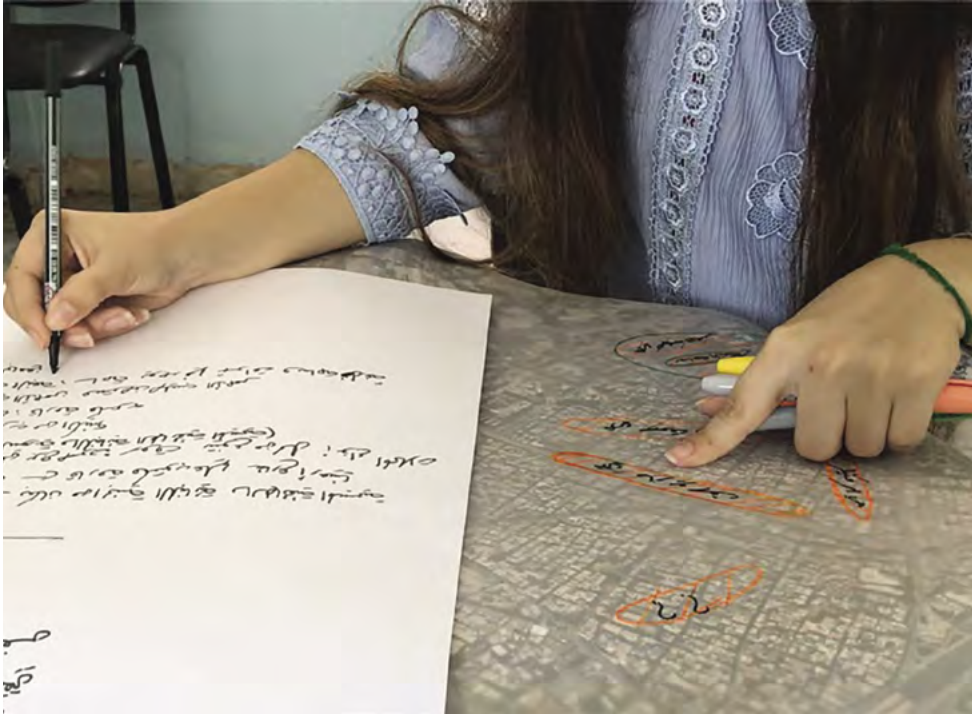
Promoting social cohesion

In order to examine what actually happens during social cohesion projects, we also conducted in-depth case studies of eight projects that attempt to improve refugee-host relations. The aim was to assess whether and how social cohesion projects influence inter-communal as well as inter-personal relations. In order to control for differences in context across different projects, we focused on a particular location in each country: the Kakuma refugee camp in north-western Kenya and the Beqaa Valley in western Lebanon. In Kakuma, we looked at the following:

1. A joint refugee-host farming project run by the World Food Programme (WFP) and the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO)

2. School-based peace and reconciliation programmes run by Lutheran World Federation

3. Sports-based social cohesion projects run by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit

In the Beqaa Valley, we looked at the following:

1. An area-based shelter renovation project run by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)

2. A youth-led peace-building initiative run by Search for Common Ground

These case studies provide practical insights into the prospects of different strategies to reduce refugee-host tensions, improve the

Bourj Hammoud residents used mapping exercises to examine the spatial aspects of community relations in their neighbourhood. (Credit: Watfa Najdi)

mutual benefits of programmes that engage both groups, and mitigate unintended outcomes, such as the commodification of refugees or increased inequality among hosts.

As well as documenting existing projects, the SoCHO research team collaborated with our project partner JRS to put our research into action. At the Kakuma camp, JRS runs five early childhood development and education (ECDE) centres, which target pre-primary children as well as older children with special needs. While young children are not often considered in peace and conflict activities, SoCHO research showed that community tensions in Kakuma can disrupt teachers' work. Moreover, the well-being and education of children was identified as a 'common ground' of agreed value among people who are otherwise divided by inter-communal conflict. These points indicate that teachers play an important but overlooked

role in dealing with community conflict. Based on these findings, SoCHO worked with JRS to design and pilot an intervention at the ECDE centres which aims to bring together parents and other family members around their children's education. Looking ahead beyond the end of the SoCHO project, JRS will take this project forward as part of its 'Reconciliation' strategy in Kenya.

Measuring social cohesion
For two of the case studies examined by the SoCHO team – the WFP/FAO farming project and the NRC shelter project – qualitative insights were supplemented by survey-based assessments to evaluate the impact on inter-communal relations. We drew upon existing social cohesion survey instruments, as well as our own ethnographic work, to determine the relevant domains of social cohesion and to derive corresponding

Parents of children enrolled at ECDE centres discuss the impact of community tensions on their children's well-being at a reconciliation event in the Kakuma refugee camp, Kenya. (Credit: Adipo Akinyi)

questionnaire items. The survey assessed the ways that people perceive others across the refugee-host boundary, as well as awareness of cross-communal marriages and practices of informal assistance such as providing small loans on credit.

One observation that arose during our interviews was that surveys designed to study refugee-host relations often draw upon definitions of cohesion from other contexts. In order to study the local validity of such questionnaire items in the specific contexts of Kakuma and Beqaa Valley, we conducted a mixed methods validation study of two research instruments: the 'social cohesion' section of the World Bank's Socio-Economic Assessment in Kenya, and the Tension Monitoring Survey commissioned by UNDP in Lebanon. Respondents were asked questions from sections of these instruments, after which they participated in an open-ended interview where they could explain their views verbally and in their own terms. We then looked for

correspondence between survey responses and the explanations provided in interviews to determine if the targeted questionnaire items captured the issues of significance and perceptions of respondents. A full analysis is forthcoming, but the preliminary results are discussed in the article by Stephen Hunt and Cory Rodgers in this special feature.

Our research was made possible by the Humanitarian Protection Research Programme, which is a joint funding initiative of the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. The project was an international collaboration among three institutions: Oxford's Refugee Studies Centre (UK), the School for Strategic and Development Studies at Maseno University (Kenya) and the Issam Fares Institute at the American University of Beirut (Lebanon). We were also supported by our project partner, JRS, who endeavour to promote social cohesion within the Reconciliation pillar of their strategic framework.

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 approaches[4] 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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Evolution of the stability sector in Lebanon: the role of civil society

Dawn Chatty

In recent decades, civil society has played a fundamental role in supporting social stability in Lebanon, including efforts at improving social cohesion between different groups.

Lebanon has recently experienced multiple crises: the COVID-19 pandemic, an unprecedented currency collapse, nationwide protests against a corrupt sectarian state, and the Beirut Port explosion in August 2020. State and humanitarian actors have therefore become increasingly concerned about inter-communal tensions and other threats to national stability, most recently between Lebanese nationals, displaced Syrians, and stateless people. Policy discourse in the country has focused on occasional – and often isolated – outbreaks of collective violence, as well as on a Tension Monitoring System administered by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). But there is limited scrutiny of what 'stability' has meant and continues to mean in Lebanon and how it is experienced by different groups.

These concerns build upon a much longer history of attempts by external actors to promote stability across the different ethnoreligious groups in Lebanon.[1] In 1860, France sent troops to quell the fighting between the Maronite Christian and Druze population of Mount Lebanon. After World War I, France created 'Greater' Lebanon, a new nation-state with a sectarian system of governance that regularly broke down. The civil war between 1975 and 1989 saw fighting both between and within various Christian and Muslim factions. The Syrian military then occupied Lebanon until 2005. This convoluted political history has resulted in serious concerns among civil society and government about tensions among the different groups that make up the Lebanese population.

Displaced Syrians in Lebanon
The concerns about the de-stabilising effects of displacement from Syria must be understood in the light of this history. Since 2011, 1.1 million displaced Syrians have entered Lebanon, who now make up 25% or more of Lebanon's current population. Refugee movements on such a scale elsewhere might well have triggered a major internal security operation or even military action. In Lebanon, however, the government's 'humanitarian' response has been minimal, with Syrians largely receiving assistance from international and nongovernmental organisations. Lebanon's political parties and population are split between supporters and opponents of the Assad government in Syria.[2] UNHCR's request to set up refugee camps for the displaced Syrians was rejected for fear that this might result in outbreaks of violence and undermine social cohesion in Lebanon. Such violence had erupted previously: in Karantina, a Palestinian refugee camp which was razed to the ground at the outbreak of the civil war in 1975, and in 1982 when Israeli forces backed Christian Lebanese militias in their massacre of Palestinians in Sabra and Shatila refugee camps.

In such a divided context, the survival of the state relies upon the idea that civil rather than customary or religious governance benefits the 'common good'. Civil society actors have made significant efforts to maintain and extend ties across Lebanese political and religious groups. The recent Syrian influx can best be understood by examining this search for stability which is intrinsic to the historical nature of the governance structure over the past century.

Displaced Syrians in Lebanon span the socio-economic spectrum: from millionaires to poor, unskilled labourers. In addition to a large number of Lebanese NGOs set up to assist displaced Syrians, many of the better-off Syrians in Lebanon have created NGOs to help Syrians cope with impoverishment,

lack of access to government services and the uncertainty of life in exile. Although there have been instances of violence against displaced Syrians, such as a mass eviction in Bsharre and the burning of shelters in Bhanine in late 2020, these are few and far between. Even the large-scale imposition of night-time curfews on Syrians often reflect positioning among pro- and anti-Assad Lebanese political parties, rather than a direct response to individual displaced Syrians.

Until very recently there were no visa restrictions between the two countries, allowing Syrians to easily enter and remain in Lebanon. Before 2011, half a million Syrian workers formed an essential part of the Lebanese agricultural and construction industries. These mainly male workers brought their families to join them once it became too dangerous to stay in Syria. Therefore, the majority of displaced Syrians in Lebanon are familiar to the Lebanese people, but nonetheless are separate from them[3]. It is this separateness that has made efforts to bring hosts and refugees together so difficult.

Civil society encouraging social cohesion

Over the decades, most social cohesion projects in Lebanon have been directed at bridging divides between the country's various ethno-religious sects and sect-based political parties. Displaced Syrians have rarely been involved in these projects, either in designing or in benefitting from them. Many of these projects have focused particularly on youth, including United Lebanese Youth Project, Tomorrow's Youth Organization, Lebanese Organization for Studies and Training, and Youth Development Organization.

Increasingly cohesion and stability projects have attempted to address relations between displaced Syrians and Lebanese host communities. In 2015, actors including government ministries, national NGOs, and international organisations came together to form a 'Stability Sector' aimed at addressing these inter-communal tensions. Their activities included establishing a Tension Monitoring System administered by UNDP. Research by the 'Social Cohesion

Across the Beqaa Valley in eastern Lebanon, tens of thousands of Syrians have taken up residence in tented settlements, just kilometres from the border with Syria (credit: Watfa Najdi)

as a Humanitarian Objective' project[4] has identified various strategies to encourage more welcoming attitudes towards Syrians in Lebanon. Some programmes that were originally designed to provide aid solely to refugees have incorporated Lebanese beneficiaries. Other programmes have created spaces for positive interaction between hosts and displaced Syrians, in the hope of building social connections and trust. These have been led by NGOs and international organisations such as the Norwegian Refugee Council and the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Stability in Lebanon is hardly threatened by the large number of Syrians it hosts, as many have long-established social ties and kinship in the country. Exclusion and hostility across sects have been a steadfast part of Lebanon's short history as a nation-state. Its response to displaced people, including Armenians, Palestinians, Iraqis and now Syrians, has been marked by discrimination. However, solidarity and support for displaced Syrians relies heavily on the role of civil society. Many of the most successful initiatives have been collaborations between Syrian and Lebanese actors. Two NGOs, Multi Aid Programs and Basmeh & Zeitooneh, for example, were founded by upper- and middle-class Syrians and were offered significant start-up support by members of Lebanon's civil society. The often closely related and intertwined Syrian and Lebanese civil society actors share the same goals; maintaining stability in the country that has provided asylum to so many displaced Syrians. Civil society is fundamental to the aims of the 'stability sector' in Lebanon.

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Aid tensions after the 2020 Beirut port explosion

Watfa Najdi

Tensions can intensify in contexts of overlapping crises: humanitarian actors must recognise the different kinds of tension resulting from aid distribution and respond accordingly.

In August 2020, a massive explosion tore through north-eastern Beirut, damaging tens of thousands of homes and buildings. As humanitarian assistance poured into the affected neighbourhoods, there was widespread public scrutiny about how aid was targeted and distributed. Amidst a broader context of financial, political and health crises, state and humanitarian actors became increasingly concerned about inter-communal tensions.

The experience of tension in Bourj Hammoud
According to Tension Monitoring Surveys administered by UNDP, social tensions intensified following the explosion, especially between Lebanese nationals and Syrian refugees, both of whom experienced heightened socio-economic vulnerability. Both groups felt that aid had been unfairly distributed. Paradoxically, many Syrians felt discriminated against by providers of assistance, while many Lebanese complained that Syrians received an undue portion of aid.

While 'tensions' are extensively monitored in Lebanon, there has been limited ethnographic research on the experience of tension or its complex relationship with various forms of identity, such as sect, nationality, or class. To explore this issue from an ethnographic lens, I initiated a participatory research project in June 2021 with 9 residents of Bourj Hammoud, a

refugee- and migrant-hosting neighbourhood affected by the blast. Bourj Hammoud was established in the early 1900s as a place of refuge for Armenians displaced by the genocidal campaigns conducted by the Ottoman empire. It now accommodates diverse low-income groups including Lebanese, Syrian, Palestinian, and Iraqi refugees as well as migrant workers from Africa and Asia. Although the neighbourhood offers employment opportunities and relatively affordable housing, it is identified as a poor area predominantly inhabited by refugees, with crumbling infrastructure and inadequate urban services.[1]

Perceptions of unfair aid distribution

Reflecting on the aftermath of the Beirut blast, research participants recalled accusations and resentment across lines of nationality and legal status. One Lebanese contributor explained that "Lebanese citizens were angry and frustrated that Syrian refugees were getting aid". On the contrary, a Syrian contributor identified a false perception that aid was given to Syrians more than others. "Most assistance targeted Lebanese citizens only", she added. Such stereotypes, often imposed on both citizens and foreign nationals, were used by certain individuals, media outlets and political actors. Not for the first time, rumours were woven into politicised aid narratives and circulated to aggravate anti-refugee sentiments towards Syrians and to push for their return.

These perceptions of unfair aid distribution added to longer standing tensions within Bourj Hammoud, especially in regard to an area called Naba'a. Administratively, Naba'a falls within the Bourj Hammoud Municipality. However, this area is home to a high concentration of refugees and Shi'ite residents, who stand out within the predominantly Christian population of eastern Beirut. For this reason, some see Naba'a as existing 'outside' Bourj Hammoud, reflecting the importance of religion and nationality as a basis for exclusion. One contributor explained, "Bourj Hammoud is divided in terms of interactions… The quarters and the buildings are segregated according to people's nationalities and religious beliefs". This sense of spatial division and conflicting communal identities in Bourj Hammoud generates antipathy, particularly when it comes to divergent narratives about aid bias.

However, intercommunal divides between sects and nationalities – what is often called the *horizontal* dimension of most social cohesion frameworks – do not fully capture the image of 'tension' that emerged from this study. Much anger was directed at the institutions responsible for targeting and distributing aid – what is often called the *vertical* dimension. After the explosion, the army and various NGOs visited people's houses to record the damage and provide financial assistance for repairs. According to our contributors, these assessments were uncoordinated and lacked clear criteria for targeting aid. Both Lebanese and non-Lebanese contributors described witnessing evidence of aid bias based on nationality. An Iraqi contributor explained that even though her apartment was more damaged than others in her building, the Lebanese Army gave her family 500,000 LBP, whereas all Lebanese families received 4,000,000 LBP. Meanwhile, a Lebanese contributor complained that Syrians can access more funding than Lebanese, despite the economic challenges faced by both groups. Conversely, a Syrian contributor wrote that her family was considered "ineligible to receive any financial assistance because as Syrians they should be getting aid from UNHCR".

Vertical or horizontal?

To avoid exacerbating refugee-host tensions, these *vertical* (provider-beneficiary) dimensions must be recognised alongside *horizontal* (inter-communal) dimensions. However, despite the rise in tensions following the blast, there were no major incidents of physical violence between refugees and hosts. Our refugee contributors generally described Bourj Hammoud as a place of diversity and tolerance, where bonds have emerged through cooperative interactions and shared hardships. During our research, we heard numerous examples

of everyday cross-communal solidarity, such as borrowing money from a neighbour or offering support for a classmate after the loss of a relative. However, when anger is directed upwards to institutions – whether the state, local NGOs, or international actors – it risks being deflected laterally to neighbours. It is therefore crucial that aid actors recognise vertical tensions in their conflict sensitivity frameworks and respond to crises accordingly. This might involve working with state actors to introduce a more comprehensive social protection system[2] as well as learning from and supporting existing solidarity mechanisms, which tend to provide a more contextualized and conflict-sensitive response[3]. Additionally, adopting more systematic and transparent targeting methods could help aid actors to address tensions resulting from perceptions of unfair aid distribution.

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Incoherent policies and contradictory priorities in Kenya

Michael Owiso

Since 2013, Kenya has embraced contradictory policies to manage its refugee affairs, with simultaneous calls for encampment, socio-economic integration and camp closure that affect both refugees and host communities.

Policies should aim to realise a people or a group's aspirations. However, in politically complex institutional environments, the design and adoption of policies may lose sight of common goals. Since the 1990s, Kenya has enforced a strict policy of refugee encampment. Then in 2017, in an apparent turn towards integration, Kenya became a pilot roll-out country of the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF)[1] and pledged to pursue self-reliance and socio-economic integration for refugees. The 2021 Refugees Act embraced both integration and encampment in a confusing combination of seemingly contradictory policy orientations.[2] Further complicating the situation, the central government has made repeated calls to close the Dadaab and Kakuma refugee camps, which host over 80% of refugees and asylum seekers in Kenya.

In light of these contradictions, how should we understand the Kenyan government's commitments? How do these policies affect refugee-host relations? This article draws upon interviews and discussions with refugees and host community members in Kakuma, as well as aid providers, to describe the divergent policy space that has emerged.

Incompatible policies: encampment, integration and camp closure

Before Kenya passed its first comprehensive refugee law in 2006, refugees were free to move, work and integrate into Kenyan society. This policy came under scrutiny in the 1990s, following the arrival of large numbers of refugees escaping war and famine in Ethiopia, South Sudan and Somalia. The Dadaab and Kakuma camps were created in northern Kenya during this influx. Kenya has since accommodated a rising number of refugees and asylum seekers through a strict encampment policy that limits movement, with restrictions particularly focused on Somali refugees.

The markets in Kakuma refugee camp bustle with social interaction and economic exchange among refugees as well as Kenyans, but lack infrastructure due to the government's insistence that the camp remain temporary (Credit: Asrat Tolossa)

Despite enforcing encampment, Kenya adopted the CRRF in 2017, pledging to incorporate refugee assistance into its national development plans and to ensure that refugees, returnees, hosts and others living in displacement-affected areas have equal opportunities to achieve self-reliance and well-being. CRRF implementation took centre-stage in the refugee-hosting counties of Garissa and Turkana, which have each established local socio-economic development plans.[3] Kenya has also been a leader in associated regional agreements such as the Djibouti Declaration on Refugee Education.

However, Kenya has repeatedly announced its intention to close its camps, with the aim of returning most camp residents to their country of origin. When attempting to close the Dadaab camps in April 2015 and again in 2016, the Kenyan government cited terrorist attacks and national security concerns related to the Somalia-based insurgent group Al-Shabaab. In March 2021, Kenyan authorities issued a 14-day ultimatum to UNHCR to develop a plan to close both Dadaab and Kakuma camps.

Policy contradictions

The relationship between these three policies – encampment, integration, and camp closure – generates three contradictions. The first and most evident is between encampment and camp closure. The second is between encampment and socio-economic integration. Although Kenya has committed to promoting refugee self-reliance, its encampment policy criminalises movement outside the camps without a pass and its Immigration Law creates barriers to secure legal employment. These restrictions greatly hamper refugees' prospects for economic integration and self-reliance.[4]

The third and most striking policy contradiction is between integration and camp closure. The government has called repeatedly for camp closure despite Kenya being a signatory to a range of international and regional instruments to provide for and

facilitate refugee integration. Interviews in July 2021 revealed the same confusion among refugees, many of whom feel destabilised by the news. As one recent arrival in the Kalobeyei Settlement explained:

I heard in the news that Dadaab and Kakuma will be closed. I was surprised. We were recently relocated here to the Kalobeyei Settlement, and now they want to close all the camps?

The calls for closure have had serious social, psychological and economic repercussions. Many respondents explained that it has taken time for them to develop personal networks which would be broken if the camps were closed. Others asked what would happen to those who have married members of a different nationality: might targeted returns divide their families?

Resolving the contradictions?

The contradictions in Kenya's refugee policies originate from its intention to respond to protracted refugee hosting while embracing evolving international regimes such as the CRRF. Kenya needs to harmonize its legal and regulatory frameworks around refugee hosting in order to achieve a reasonable level of policy coherence.

Most recently, attention has turned to the 'Marshall Plan for Africa', within which the Kenyan government has proposed to transition Dadaab and Kakuma camps into Refugee Villages that will provide infrastructure in education, health, water, energy, security and conservation in designated areas.[5] The roadmap agreed with UNHCR makes provisions for voluntary safe returns, departures to third countries and options for refugees from the East African Community (EAC) to apply for Kenyan citizenship. Under this plan, those seeking asylum in Kenya would in theory enjoy freedom of movement and the right to employment, education and healthcare as well as the right to start a business.

To bolster the transition from camps to Refugee Villages and empower refugees to pursue self-reliance and contribute to the host economy, refugees should also be provided with land to farm and construct

shelters. However, the Marshall Plan is silent on "the control of designated areas" which is entrenched in the 2021 Refugees Act[6]. The second contradiction – between encampment and socio-economic integration – is thus maintained. The Marshall Plan also excludes Somali refugees from the naturalisation option because Somalia is not a member of the EAC. Third-country resettlement rates are likely to be low, which leaves Somali refugees largely with one option: voluntary repatriation. But following the history of voluntary returns to Somalia since 2014, many who return would likely make their way back to Kenya because of challenges related to insecurity, lack of economic opportunities and access to services such as education.[7]

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The politics of sharing aid with host communities

Ekai Nabenyo

Extending refugee aid and services to host communities is a strategy to preserve the humanitarian 'protection space', but may drive unrealistic expectations for host entitlements.

In many contexts of large-scale protracted displacement, the distribution of humanitarian aid can become highly contentious, especially where local people face their own economic challenges and vulnerabilities but do not qualify for refugee assistance. In order to counter this resentment, which can impinge on the ability of humanitarian organisations to fulfil their protection mandate, aid actors have responded by including locals as beneficiaries and leveraging the aid economy to support local development. But as suggested by the history of the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya, this strategy to reduce tension brings additional risks in the long term.

Refugee-host relations in Turkana County

For decades, refugee-host relations at Kakuma camp have been beset by low-level tensions. When confrontations occur, these tensions can quickly escalate to violence. In 2017, a refugee student from the neighbouring Eastern Equatoria region of South Sudan attacked and killed five Turkana students and a night guard in a high school near Lokichoggio, about 100km from Kakuma. The attacker was taken into police custody, but was then seized from his cell and killed by a local mob.[1] In 2018, Somali refugees marched towards Kakuma town to protest the lack of camp security following a spate of night-time robberies, rapes and murders. They were met at the Tarac River by Turkana protesters concerned that the refugees posed a threat to local businesses. Military intervention was required to keep the two parties separate. More recently, the growing profile of members of the LGBTIQ+ community within the camp has provoked anger and resulted in some violent incidents perpetrated against them by local people.[2]

One particular source of tension is that many local people feel that they have not meaningfully benefited from the refugees' presence, despite giving up their land and pastures as the camp was constructed. Moreover, from the perspective of Turkana people, who practice a communal way of life and share available resources, it is immoral that refugees are guaranteed a baseline of support from UNHCR while locals struggle with meagre government support. This sentiment is captured succinctly in a narrative that emerged in the early 2000s, which suggested that it is better to be a refugee than a Turkana in Kakuma.[3]

Formally, UNHCR's mandate is to provide protection to refugees, whereas local community concerns fall under the remit of the national and county governments. But for much of Kenya's history, Turkana was neglected in the national development agenda. When the UNHCR set up its operations in Kakuma and began providing aid to foreigners living in Turkana territory, many locals felt a sense of exclusion that was amplified by the longer history of marginalisation.

Cohesion in law and programming

Humanitarian organisations have responded with efforts to mitigate tensions and promote positive relations between refugees and the Turkana community, usually under the banner of 'peaceful coexistence'.[4] Initially, this involved ad hoc arrangements that opened access to refugee programmes and services for local Kenyans. More recently, such arrangements have been formalised in policies such as the 2016 Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework and the 2018 Kalobeyei Integrated Socio-Economic Development Plan.[5] Peaceful coexistence has also been codified in law through the 2021 Refugees Act, where several articles specify strategies for promoting peace, including the shared use of public institutions, facilities

and spaces between refugees and host communities. Many of these objectives align with the emerging 'social cohesion' agenda in refugee policymaking, although in Kenya the older terminology has stuck.

One problem is that as peaceful cohesion has been formalised and normalised in Kenya's refugee policy framework, there have been growing expectations for 'host entitlements'. As in other refugee-hosting areas such as Dadaab in Garissa County, locals in Kakuma have increasingly used advocacy and sometimes even violence to demand benefits from the organisations that operate in their territory. Humanitarian actors have raised concerns about these interruptions to their work. Some of these activities have been organised by local political actors hoping to position themselves as community advocates. Others have attempted to direct 'host entitlements' such as jobs or construction tenders to their own networks. This politicisation of aid has been accompanied by disappointment due to unmet expectations of host benefits as well as dissatisfaction about the unequal enjoyment of benefits across the different strata of the Turkana population.[6]

Taking forward the 'peaceful coexistence' agenda in Kenya

Despite these complications, the peaceful coexistence agenda in Turkana holds promise. There is a long history of trade, economic cooperation, and even marriage between refugees and hosts. But policymakers need to strengthen the legal basis of refugees' belonging in Kenya. Despite efforts to provide refugees with small-scale economic opportunities within the camp area, refugees are still denied freedom of movement and the right to work, unless they seek special permits. Coexistence objectives require some level of equality across different groups, which must be anchored in legal rights for refugees.

Relatedly, peaceful coexistence projects have thus far focused heavily on the economic dimensions of host-refugee relations, which include leveraging aid as an investment in local development. But investing aid

in local development renders the camp a resource for hosts, which risks refugees being seen less as co-inhabitants and more as a commodity. While the host community may be happy for refugees to stay, they may also become accustomed to encampment and oppose granting greater rights for refugees, which would disperse refugees – and the benefits that accompany their presence – to Nairobi and elsewhere in Kenya. Such an attitude may actually work against efforts to promote social cohesion in the long term.

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Measuring social cohesion: lessons from Kakuma Camp

Stephen Hunt and Cory Rodgers

Various surveys have been constructed to measure social cohesion in contexts of displacement. But the results must be interpreted carefully by those seeking to inform policy and programming.

With the increased attention paid to social cohesion in refugee policy, there is greater need for robust methods of measuring cohesion among displaced and displacement-affected communities. At the project level, organisations that have adopted social cohesion goals into their programming require indicators for project evaluation. At the national and sub-national levels, monitoring mechanisms such as UNDP's Regular Perception Surveys in Lebanon are gathering data on cohesion and tension to improve conflict sensitivity among aid actors.[1] And at the broadest level, funding bodies such as the World Bank are investing in research to generate evidence on the factors that influence cohesion in contexts of displacement, which could be used to develop best practices for programme design.[2]

In Kenya, the World Bank has played an important role in supporting the socio-economic integration agenda pursued by the government and UNHCR. This includes research on social cohesion in urban and camp contexts. Questions on cohesion have been incorporated into various surveys conducted by the Bank and its partners,[3] including large-scale socio-economic assessments of the refugee populations in the Kakuma camps and Kalobeyei Settlement.[4]

Research instruments to study cohesion must be designed with attention to the particular institutional landscapes and policy priorities in any given context. For example, in the 1990s, social cohesion in Canada, the EU and other high-income countries was defined with a strong emphasis on equality. But in Kenya, refugees have a subordinated legal status and are subjected to strict encampment policies. The integration agenda is restricted to socio-economic dimensions,

including the promotion of self-reliance for refugees and merging humanitarian and national service provision into joint systems. As such, a survey question asking refugees in Kenya about their sense of 'equality' would seem out of touch. 'Cohesion' only really makes sense in regard to the expectations that people have for their place in a community, which is shaped by unequal legal statuses and the policy environments in which they find themselves. These factors, among others, complicate the ways that people interpret and respond to survey questions about social cohesion.

In 2022, the 'Social Cohesion as a Humanitarian Objective'[5] research team developed a strategy for assessing social cohesion research instruments used in Kakuma. We conducted a standard survey with a small but diverse sample of 30 respondents, immediately followed by an open-ended interview. The validity of common survey questions was evaluated based on similarities and differences between survey responses and how people described refugee-host relations in their own words.

In many cases, we found that an individual's survey responses were inconsistent with their interview comments. For example, in the survey, one South Sudanese respondent disagreed with a statement that the host community is trustworthy. But in the interview, he provided an optimistic image of "peace and unity among the refugees and Kenyans". Conversely, when asked about the trustworthiness of refugees, one Kenyan man responded positively. But in the interview, he signalled caution: "[Refugees] ask us to join them [on the football pitch], but we know that they are problematic people. So we refuse."

These observations highlight one pervasive problem with how social cohesion data is gathered: the closed-ended survey format. Respondents are often required to choose between binary options (yes or no) or to rate their sentiments on a scale (such as from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'). But people's perspectives on their social environments are often too complex or context-dependent to be captured in this way. As one South Sudanese woman explained when asked about relations between refugees and the local community:

There are some good things about the way people stay together here, but sometimes conflicts arise. God created people differently. Some are criminals, while others say people should live in peace. A criminal or a drunkard will bring chaos and disagreement between people. It is not all of them, but this is the problem.

Such ambiguity is oversimplified when responses are restricted to linear scales or reduced to a simple position like 'high trust' or 'low trust'. Similarly, broad categories like 'refugees' and 'host community' sometimes encompass too much diversity to elicit a meaningful response on a perception survey. In our interviews in Kakuma, assessments of the 'trustworthiness' of refugees varied drastically depending on which demographics were specified. Similarly, when asked about their own community, local Kenyan respondents highlighted the different motivations and lifestyles of those living near the camp and those living further away across the river.

Pending a full analysis, several key lessons emerge from a preliminary review of our findings:

Metrics for social cohesion must be adapted to each context. Questions that seem obvious may be interpreted differently by various groups. For example, some surveys ask if the respondent ever shares meals with people from other communities, an act assumed to measure intimacy. But in Kakuma, refugees often exchange meals for firewood and charcoal sold by locals. These interactions are more transactional and less intimate than imagined during survey design. Qualitative research is crucial to developing social cohesion indicators relevant to each context. This includes both preliminary ethnographic research to inform survey design and post-design qualitative validation to understand how the questions are interpreted.

Analysis of perception surveys should focus on extreme answers. In our study, those who provided moderate responses to survey questions about the trustworthiness of other communities often conveyed ambiguity or ambivalence during the interviews. But those who provided more extreme answers had stronger alignment between their survey and interview responses.

Perception surveys are a very limited measure of cohesion. Consider a survey that asks about the trustworthiness of refugees: even if 90% of the responses are very negative, this does not provide a reliable guide to actual practices of trust and cooperation in everyday life, such as lending money or sharing personal information. Responses to questions about abstract categories of people are shaped by contemporary stereotypes and popular narratives. The responses tend to be different if interview questions ask about individuals, such as neighbours, co-workers or friends. Perception indicators should therefore be accompanied by more specific measures of cohesion, such as the extension of credit or marital ties across communal lines. However, such measures require a concrete vision for how a more cohesive refugee-hosting society should look, which is often lacking in programme design and policy-making.

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1. Survey results can be viewed on the UNDP and ARK Interactive Dashboard, available at: bit.ly/communal-relations-lebanon

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Reflections on approaches and barriers to reconciliation

Danielle Vella and Diana Rueda

In a series of working discussions, the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) has identified common barriers to reconciliation. Making progress to overcome these barriers starts with individuals.

The concepts of reconciliation and social cohesion are intimately linked: reconciliation is a process of "recreating right relationships", with oneself and with others[1], and social cohesion is the glue that holds these relationships together. Both entail a complex and at times discordant array of objectives that include peace and harmony as well as justice and accountability.

In 2018, JRS adopted 'Reconciliation' as a pillar of its strategic framework. This conceptual framework mirrors John Paul Lederach's vision of reconciliation as a space for the values of truth, mercy, justice and peace.[2] An emphasis on non-violence underpins this framework, as do guiding principles that highlight equitable participation, restorative justice, and a universally shared humanity.

Many communities we work with, which are either suffering extreme violence or offering refuge to people displaced by it, dispute whether reconciliation is feasible. Although each context is unique, common barriers to reconciliation have emerged from JRS workshop discussions.

Common barriers to reconciliation

One barrier emerges when identity differences and power asymmetries are exploited, leading to feelings of 'superiority versus inferiority' that cause marginalisation, discrimination and oppression. This results in violent division between groups, reinforced by narratives that dehumanise and even demonise others.

Another barrier to reconciliation is frustration at feelings of powerlessness to stop violence and injustice. When legitimate, non-violent means of protest are brutally suppressed, the use of violence as a last resort is more likely to emerge, as is a transition from self-defence to vengeance. In contexts where there is often neither the space nor the resources to heal wounds, unhealed pain can perpetuate cycles of violence: "pain that is not transformed is transferred".[3]

To meet these challenges, JRS adapts to local realities and sets manageable expectations. We listen to diverse voices, with patience and without imposing our own views. We acknowledge calls for justice even if we might be woefully unable to support their fulfilment. We do not even mention the word 'reconciliation' if it is deemed unhelpful or will provoke scepticism.

JRS tries to work through barriers with individuals and communities, starting at the personal level. This journey is non-linear, but trust is the ultimate destination. Every step, however modest, is progress. We begin by encouraging critical self-awareness and proceed with cultivating tolerance, being willing to listen to and respect opposing views, and with time, developing empathy.

Reconciliation in action: the experience of JRS teams

In Myanmar, online sessions organised by JRS have nourished participants' conviction that inner personal transformation remains possible even in unchangeable situations.

The JRS Country Director, Rosalyn, said: "I believe reconciliation may happen at different levels. We cannot affect things outside of our control. Focusing on certain things like self-care, knowing and managing my emotions and responding well to incidents helps me a lot in my work and in dealing with others."

Reflecting their contexts, our teams are understandably affected by communal tensions. In northern Ethiopia, the JRS Reconciliation Coordinator, Million, said politics and ethnicity had long impacted team dynamics. "We used to organise team-building exercises and sessions on reconciliation, which were effecting positive change," recalls Million. "We used to cook and eat together and watch similar media sources." However, this growing trust plummeted when war erupted in Tigray between Ethiopian security forces and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). "News media and propaganda, identity politics and history affected relationships. The team split into two," said Million.

Then, the team attended a three-day meeting away from the conflict zone. "We created a safe, shared space with ground rules. Everyone shared how the conflict affected them personally," continued Million. "[We] realised that while every individual and each experience was unique, there were many shared emotions, especially fear and worry."

Among many others, Million had to leave Tigray because of his identity: "When we tried to leave, one TPLF administrator who knew us through our work put himself at risk to help us. We cannot generalise individuals or groups. There are good people everywhere. Our identity, experiences and perceptions create our reality. We need to prioritise the value of our shared humanity over our differences."

Claudine, JRS Reintegration Coordinator in Burundi, previously worked in northern Uganda with South Sudanese refugees and local communities. "We brought together a group of young people of different ethnicities from refugee and host communities. Session by session, we observed the creation of a team. At first, they didn't feel comfortable around one another and were afraid, but this changed with time and they developed

Participants at a JRS Reconciliation Workshop in Adjumani, northern Uganda, form a circle to reflect on their discussions during the closing session (credit: Diana M. Rueda Vargas)

concern for one another. When a young man was wounded in a big clash between the host community and refugees, the group kept each other informed." Claudine says she has seen "tolerance evolve to acceptance, mistrust to trust". She continues: "After the clash, the youth said they will no longer be manipulated by the narratives of their elders. By listening to each other, they were able to change their perspectives towards each other."

These experiences illustrate progress along enduring journeys of reconciliation. Rosalyn from Myanmar defined it this way: "Once ruptured, relationships will not be 100% healed. They may need to be reshaped and renewed. We need to know how to repair ruptures so that we are able

to tolerate each other's differences without tolerating injustice and inhuman acts and to respond without violence or revenge."

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1. This relational definition of reconciliation finds justification and promotion in religious and secular understandings of reconciliation. The Catholic Church emphasises "right relations" – an understanding echoed by the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) that talks about relationships with God, with oneself, with others and the environment.

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3. Rohr R (2016) *A Spring Within Us: A Book of Daily Meditations*, CAC Publishing

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