Social Cohesion in Displacement Contexts: Institutional Trust, Cooperation for the Common Good, and Inclusive Identity in Spaces of Displacement and Arrival

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Abstract

This working paper is a reflection on the research presented at the *German Institute for Development and Sustainability's (IDOS) 7th International Migration and Displacement Workshop* that took place in Bonn, Germany, on 23-25 September 2025. This year, the Workshop focused on the concept of social cohesion in displacement contexts. The reflections presented here highlight the opportunities for research that emerged during the Workshop. Drawing on expertise and research from over 30 scholars working on migration and displacement in Latin America, Africa and Asia, this paper examines the recent rise of social cohesion as a concept for understanding displacement and settlement, the conceptual limits of social cohesion, and the scope for improving this concept through the inclusion of different regional and cultural perspectives on identity, trust, and cooperation for the common good. The paper closes with a discussion on future research directions and emphasises the value of a more inclusive notion of social cohesion for policy makers.

Honing the Concept of Social Cohesion for the Study of Displacement

Social cohesion has made a broad resurgence as a concept across the social sciences, particularly in the fields of migration and refugee studies (Bauloz et al., 2020; Myers et al., 2023). The utilitarian nature of social cohesion as a concept makes it an important tool for scholars and international organisations to describe processes of migration and displacement, arrival and settlement, and economic and social integration across different contexts of migration and displacement. However, social cohesion as a standalone concept has its own long history in sociology. Durkheim (1984, original French 1893) analysed how organic social solidarity arose in complex industrial societies; there is also rich research on the social cohesion of parties and voter based in the U.S. and Europe in the 1950s-60s (Rose and Urwin, 1969; Mann, 1970); and more recent sociological research on social cohesion has been produced during the COVID pandemic (Orazani et al., 2023).

The aim of this working paper is to draw on research that was presented at the *IDOS 7th International Migration and Displacement Workshop*—hosted in Bonn, Germany, from 23-25 September 2025—which focused on the topic of social cohesion in displacement across a number of contexts. The Workshop featured research findings from Latin America, Africa and Asia, and aimed to refine the theoretical concept of social cohesion migration and displacement research.[1] This working paper serves as a reflection on what was learned. The workshop papers I reflect on, many of which were authored by scholars from the Global South, have showed how not only do we need a concept of social cohesion that is specific to the study of migration and displacement, but we also need to recognise how identity, institutions, and cooperation manifest differently in Latin American, African and Asian contexts.

This working paper offers two conceptual "jump off" points for research on displacement and social cohesion. The first is exploring how social cohesion is used as a conceptual framework to understand migration and displacement processes, and to identify relevant future research directions. The second is to link this research agenda to the science-to-policy making pathway in order for research to remain policy relevant and useful beyond academic debates.

Contribution to the Existing Research

While social cohesion as a sociological concept was first defined by Emile Durkheim (1984) in his work on the emergence of organic social solidarity in complex labour and industrial contexts, and has a rich history in mid-20th century political sociology, using this concept to explain social, political and economic processes in migration and

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[1] Details on the Workshop can be found at: https://www.idos-research.de/en/events/details/social-cohesion-in-displacement-contexts/

displacement contexts is a relatively recent practice. Recent examples of research include the World Bank's (2022) synthesis of research on social cohesion in contexts of violence and displacement; Holloway and Sturridge's (2022) project on social cohesion in humanitarian contexts from the Overseas Development Institute (ODI); and the ongoing Social Cohesion in Displacement Contexts (SoCoDisCo) project at the German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS).[2] As a field of study, social cohesion in migration and displacement contexts is relatively new, and has largely been led by organisations and institutes based in the Global North.

While social cohesion is a useful concept for framing empirical and theoretical research on migration and displacement, one of the main contributions of this working paper, which reflects on the *IDOS International Migration and Displacement Workshop*, is to address the tendency to use social cohesion as a "multi tool" solution to problems. For example, the World Bank's (2022) synthesis covers a wide range of geographic contexts, includes different typologies of displacement, and examines different economic, social, and political effects for both displaced people and host communities. It is a rich collection of evidence, but does not offer an *a priori* definition of social cohesion – in the analyses, social cohesion is an *ex post* outcome of everything from economic integration, access to social services, and an inclusive humanitarian safety net. Holloway and Sturridge's (2022) ODI-based project takes the definitional aspects a step further by working with existing sociological definitions and identifying which components are meaningful to displaced people and host communities through their research. The SoCoDisCo project has had the benefit of building on the results of the World Bank and ODI projects, and has been designed around Leininger et al.'s (2021) concept of social cohesion.

Working with Leininger et al.'s (2021) empirically grounded concept of social cohesion, the Workshop focused on the pillars of **inclusive identity**, **trust in institutions**, and **capacity to cooperate for the common good** to understand processes of migration and displacement. The workshop papers critically analysed how the three aforementioned pillars of social cohesion fit conceptually and empirically into different migration and displacement research contexts.

Geographic and cultural diversity were key factors across all the papers. Social cohesion in the sociological tradition is embedded in a Northern academic context and has only relatively recently been broadened to understand humanitarian and development aid processes in the Global South (e.g. Dunquah & Ouattara, 2021; Chatterjee et al., 2022). The majority of the workshop contributions were authored by researchers based in or from the Global South. They included reflections on the limits of social cohesion as imagined, and what social cohesion looks like when

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[2] More on the SoCoDisCo project can be found at: https://www.idos-research.de/en/research/description/details/social-cohesion-in-displacement-contexts/

conceptualised through a non-Northern ontological lens. This gave us, workshop organisers and scholars who speak directly to policy makers, a chance to build on the intellectual tradition of social cohesion, creating a richer understanding of what social cohesion means in different geographic and cultural contexts.

Finally, the Workshop served as a science-to-policy vehicle. Agencies such as UNHCR, the World Bank and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) have all invested in exploratory research and policies intended to support social cohesion in the contexts they work in. These agencies struggle in the same way with conceptual clarity around, and the means to measure, social cohesion in their work. The Workshop included participation of policy makers, many of whom indicated that this type of research *forum* develops their ability to engage in scientifically-grounded policy making.

What We Learnt from the Workshop Papers

The workshop presenters were an incredibly diverse group—every continent except Antarctica was represented. What I will first cover in this section is the variety of ways that the presenters **conceptualised social cohesion**, and **criticised Northern conceptions of it**, through different Global South perspectives. Secondly, I will examine the **modalities** through which **social cohesion is conceived**, based on the workshop presentations. Digital media, the use of urban space, and the role of customary leaders in building social cohesion in displacement contexts were identified as three areas that demand further reflection. Thirdly, I will discuss how, according to the papers presented, the **context of displacement** played a key role in how social cohesion was organised in affected communities: rapid onset natural disasters, violent conflicts, and development-driven displacement all affected trust in institutions, inclusive identity, and cooperation for the common good in unique ways. At the end, in order to organise the mains points arising from my discussion, I will provide a matrix that visualises the key workshop findings in relation to Leininger et al.'s (2021) pillars of social cohesion.

I will start with the first theme: conceptualisations and critiques of social cohesion from different regional and cultural perspectives. The critique of the concept of social cohesion as being grounded in a Northern epistemological tradition, developed by Durkheim during the colonial period, emerged clearly in the interactive fishbowl discussion that closed the Workshop. The concept of social cohesion that has been adopted in development cooperation, particularly in response to forced displacement, has a distinct veneer of technocracy. It is easy to be persuaded that, with the right mix of trust in institutions, inclusive identity, and cooperation for the collective good, social cohesion can emerge. Two key criticisms of this technocratic view were advanced in the discussions. The first was that even Leininger et al.'s (2021) concept of social

cohesion, despite being empirically derived from custom survey data collected in Africa, was still intangible. One participant asked during the fishbowl session: "Is social cohesion a bucket we simply put problems into when we cannot use other tools to address them, or is there a point where social cohesion is reached and we can begin to talk about different conceptual processes like 'integration'?" Essentially, what is the analytic value of the concept, and how can that be sharpened to better describe processes of displacement and settlement?

This formed the basis of the critique of social cohesion's 'Northern-ness'. When we describe trust in institutions, what counts as an institution? If we talk about inclusive identity, what traditions or constructs for putting inclusion into practice are we drawing from? How is the common good defined in cultures where individualism and community are understood in very different ways? The first line of general criticism was that institutional trust, inclusive identity, and cooperation for the common good cannot be measured independently of one another. Members of IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix team walked the workshop participants through the large volume of data on displacement they work with daily, explaining that even the best data sets cannot measure independent aspects of social cohesion without significant abstraction. Indeed, this idea of institutional trust, inclusive identity, and cooperation for the common good as 'independent' pillars was often challenged in the papers that were presented. In Northern Nigeria, people displaced by extremist violence may not trust government institutions; yet, they do have trust in the 'social institution' of providing aid, which was practised by different ethnic groups in the Lake Chad Basin. Therefore, a concept of social cohesion that measures trust in institutions and inclusive identity separately does not make sense in the context of displacement and hosting in the Lake Chad Basin.

The second theme that emerged was the different modalities used to build (or-unbuild) social cohesion. In the Lake Chad Basin example, social cohesion is an understood set of cultural and customary acts and principles; this does not require the internet or a particular communication infrastructure to be enacted. For Afghan refugees in Iran though, the digital sphere is a space where official Iranian institutions push narratives of exclusion. The internet, with social media, is a zone of building narratives of who is included in Iranian society and, by extension, who benefits from collective goods as a result of a government that decidedly does not include Afghan refugees. On the same digital platforms, civil society actors push for narratives of greater inclusion of refugees, arguing for solidarity and aid for Afghan refugees. The internet serves as an infrastructure for contesting the idea of social cohesion itself. There are also increasingly creative ways that see the meaning of social cohesion being conveyed through urban infrastructure. In Lagos, the physical artifacts of the city itself become tools of signaling where displaced people belong, and the resources they have access

to (Ceola & Enobong Roberts, 2024). In places where displaced people initially settle, the city authorities have painted signs and messages on bridge sides and walls indicating when religious events are held or where aid will be provided; buildings that are safe to squat are also landmarked. Institutional trust and inclusion are transmitted through the physical nature of the city, meeting displaced people in the spaces they settle and transit through.

Finally, the nature of displacement itself has unique influences on social cohesion. Papers that covered climate and environmental displacement, and development-induced displacement, tended to show how trust in institutions was uniquely strained when people needed emergency support or were forced off land slated for development. Institutional distrust was particularly acute in spaces where the government and developers were working together to eliminate common spaces, especially under the guise of 'greening' or 'preserving' space. Development-induced displacement is also particularly problematic because it not only strains the relationship between displaced people and governing institutions, but often also places strain on the collective resources of host communities. The situations these papers described resembled a spiral: institutional failure leading to resource constraints, leading in turn to break down in inclusiveness and cooperation. Yet, this kind of spiral was not as acute in conflict and violence affected settings, particularly in rural and peri-urban areas such as the Lake Chad Basin. Why and how different types of displacement lead to more or less social cohesion, and how social cohesion is understood in different contexts, represents a key question for the field of migration and refugee studies going forward.

The matrix below captures the key points that I have presented:

Pillars of Social Cohesion / Key workshop findings	Concepts and criticisms	Modalities	Contexts of displacement
Institutional trust	What counts as an institution? The role of customary institutions needs to be strengthened in development policy and practice	Urban spaces and physical infrastructure themself can serve to build institutional trust among displaced people – examples include cities using walls and bridges as 'message boards' in places where displaced people initially settle	Development induced displacement, such as that associated with 'greening' projects, damages trust in institutions, especially when governments hold investments in the development
Inclusive identity	What counts as identity, and how is inclusion conceptualised? At what point does social cohesion stop, and the more exclusivist notion of 'integration' start?	Risk: modes of communication, for example digital and internet-based technologies, serve as spaces of exclusivist narratives	The type of displacement (e.g. conflict, climate, development-induced) has distinct effects on the level of inclusion practised by host communities

Cooperation for the common good	The West can, and should, learn from collectivist cultural practices about how to strengthen cooperation for the common good	Just as communication modes can be used to create exclusivist narratives, displaced people and host communities can also use these tools to build solidarity	In peri-urban and rural displacement settings, pressure is often not as high when it comes to finding shelter and resources, helping to foster greater cooperation between displaced and host communities

Table 1: Matrix of key workshop findings as they relate to Leininger et al.'s (2021) pillars of social cohesion.

Outlook for Social Cohesion as a Concept in Displacement Research and Policy-Making

Social cohesion's conceptual strength is its multifaceted nature—although this also means knowing how to use the concept effectively. For applications outside the Global North and outside political sociology, Leininger et al.'s (2021) empirically-grounded concept of social cohesion, based on survey data from across Africa, represented a significant step toward expanding the geographic and cultural scope of the concept. The World Bank's (2022) and ODI's (2022) social cohesion and displacement reports and projects have helped show the variety of ways in which the concept of social cohesion can be used to understand forced displacement and its effects on host communities. *IDOS 7th International Migration and Displacement Workshop*'s papers point to key areas that researchers and policy makers can address to make the concept of social cohesion a better tool for understanding forced displacement contexts and processes.

Going forward, three areas will be key for future research on social cohesion and forced displacement. The first is bringing non-Northern concepts of institutions, inclusion, and cooperation for the common good into the discourse. The challenge is how to do this without diluting the concept of social cohesion to the point that it is no longer conceptually meaningful. A solution proposed at the Workshop included staying with the framework of institutional trust, inclusive identity, and cooperation for the common good as pillars, but investing in research that examines what these look like outside the ontological bubble of technical development cooperation. The second area is pursuing research that helps us understand the mechanisms and transmission processes of social cohesion. How are traditions of inclusion, like those highlighted in the Lake Chad Basin, transmitted between communities and intergenerationally? How do digital technologies and physical spaces get used to build or strain social cohesion? Finally, social cohesion evolves or devolves in host communities differently depending on the reasons people were displaced. There is potential for finding a great deal of comparative leverage between cases of similar drivers of displacement, because in many scenarios the institutional actors have analogous roles. For example, natural disasters often involve civilian search and rescue, emergency shelter provision, and

re-insurance for institutions covering the costs of loss and damage; hence, there is scope to look at how these kinds of interventions shape social cohesion after natural disasters across cases.

The discussions that took place during the Workshop are also linked to real-world policy issues. The keynote included an input from the Secretary General of Refugee Affairs from the German Federal Ministry for Economic Development and Cooperation. It is not for nothing that this Official not only spoke on stage, but also actively met with participants. At the policy-making level, social cohesion's "multi tool" nature is very attractive, but does demand that the scientific community provides policy advice to help bring a level of rigor and inclusiveness to the policy discourse. The challenge for academics then is to find ways to make the conceptual framing of social cohesion more rigorous and applicable to displacement contexts, without stripping it of the flexibility that makes it useful in policy discussions and implementation.

Looking to the future, how we understand social cohesion as a concept and policy practice can not only have a significant impact on displacement and migration policy, but can also feed into a wider and more diverse understanding of how economic development and humanitarian assistance are implemented worldwide.

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