

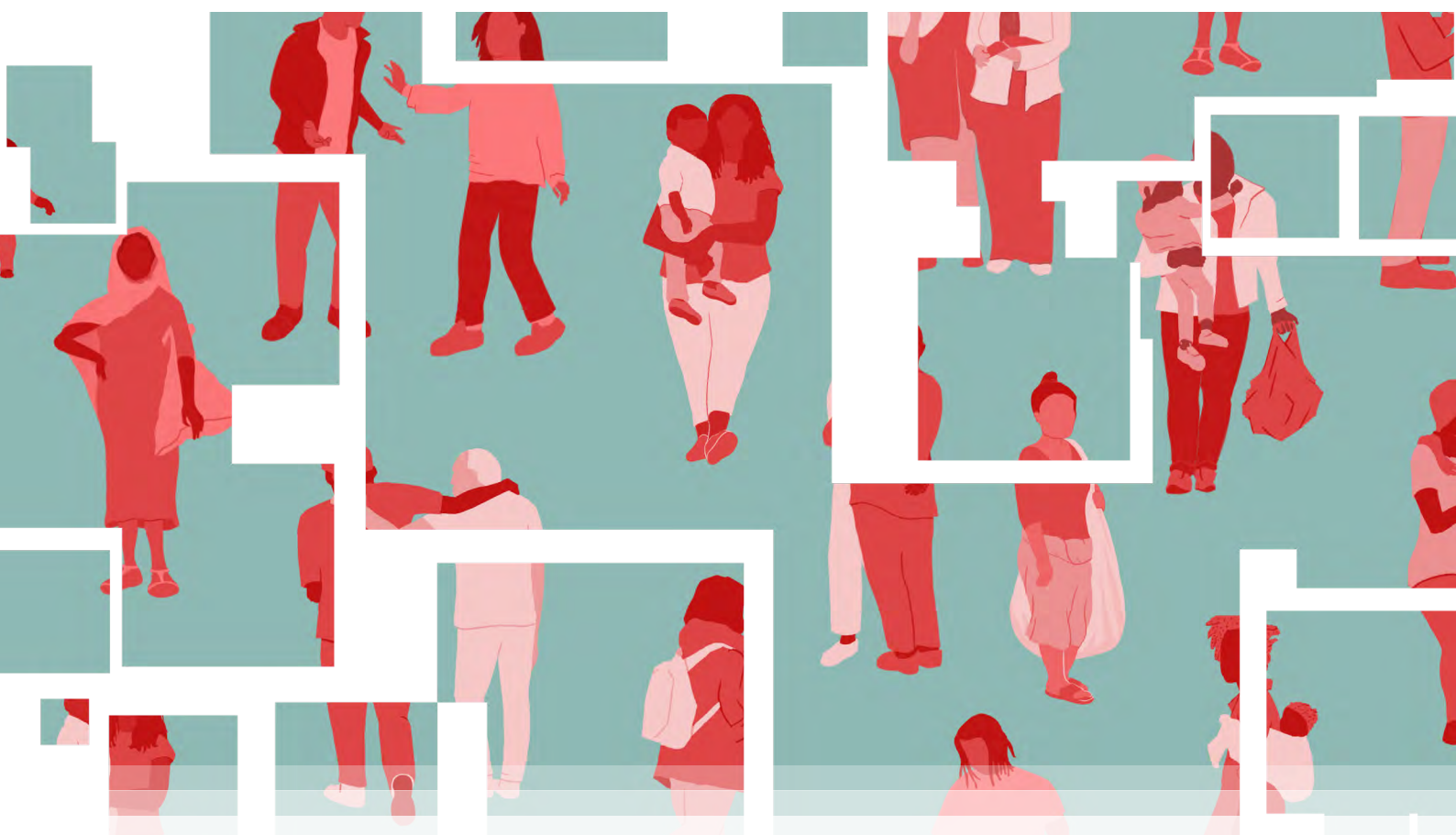
HPG working paper

# What aid actors need to know about social cohesion in displacement

## A Tanzania case study

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## About this publication

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# 1 Introduction

Policy interest in social cohesion among displaced populations is on the rise, but it remains a vague and contested concept (see Box 1). There is little consensus on how to define or measure social cohesion, the conditions that promote it, or the benefits it can bring (Finn, 2017; de Berry and Roberts, 2018; Delhey et al., 2018).

Considering these gaps, Tanzania is a strategic location for studying social cohesion in displacement over time and across locations. It has a rich history of hosting refugees over successive waves and decades, with its approach fluctuating between inclusion and exclusion (see Figure 1) (Milner, 2019). Shifting national policy has governed how and where refugees live, and what rights and status they are afforded – with significant repercussions for the nature and quality of social relations between refugees and hosts.

From the 1960s, refugees were originally welcomed to Tanzania by President Julius Nyerere. This was motivated by traditions of hospitality, fairness and compassion, as well as a post-independence era Pan-Africanism: ‘a conscious nationalist rejection’ of slavery and colonialism, and a nostalgia for a golden age when ‘politically designed borders did not constrain population movements’ (Chaulia, 2003: 154; Kamanga, 2005). During Nyerere’s presidency, refugees were largely allowed to self-settle in accordance with Tanzania’s *ujamaa* model of villagisation, which organised the rural population into self-reliant and communal villages (Milner, 2019).

However, from the 1980s refugees were increasingly viewed as a threat to national security and environmental resources, and an economic burden in the wake of slow economic growth, balance of payments deficits and a climbing debt burden (Chaulia, 2003; Rutinwa and Kamanga, 2003; Turner, 2004; Kweka, 2007; Milner, 2019; Wilson et al., 2021). In the 1990s the government further hardened its stance, following the sudden and unprecedented influx of Burundian and Rwandan refugees fleeing civil war.<sup>1</sup> International refugee policy has also contributed to a hardening. Refugee clampdowns by governments in the Global South ‘are not happening in a political void’, but are a response to the increasingly restrictive policies implemented in the Global North (Kuch, 2019).

Tanzania subsequently shifted from long-term solutions of self-reliance and local settlement to the prioritisation of temporary camps and repatriation. In 1995, national policy changed from open-door to encampment. Unrecognised or self-settled refugees became increasingly vulnerable to arbitrary arrest and refoulement, and in 1997, the government ordered the army to round up all foreigners living outside refugee camps (Hovil and Kweka, 2008).

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<sup>1</sup> The number of refugees residing in Tanzania increased from 292,100 at the end of 1992 to 883,300 by the end of 1994 (Milner, 2019).

### Box 1 What is social cohesion?

Social cohesion can be loosely understood as the quality of relationships between different groups of people, and between those groups and the institutions that govern them (Holloway and Sturridge, 2022). Socially cohesive societies do not have to live in perfect harmony. Rather, cohesion is about finding a balance – managing differences and tensions through mutual recognition and belonging, so that these do not spill over into conflict, as well as proactively building social capital and positive relationships among different groups of people (de Berry and Roberts, 2018; Lennox, 2018; Holloway and Sturridge, 2022).

Restrictions on refugees' freedom of movement and right to work were cemented in the 1998 Refugees Act and 2003 National Refugee Policy, which made it an offence to live outside the camps without a permit (Chimanda and Morris, 2020). These permits became notoriously difficult to obtain, and were only granted in exceptional cases involving medical needs, religious work and higher education (Pangilinan, 2011).

Against this backdrop, policy decisions that concern refugees in Tanzania today are geared towards return and repatriation. In practice, this means removing incentives to stay by limiting social and economic opportunities to the bare minimum of what is needed to survive. The government's decision in 2007 to offer naturalisation to Burundian refugees residing in the settlements since 1972 could be seen as a policy U-turn. However, rather than a softening of refugee policy, this was arguably motivated by changing Tanzania–Burundi relations, electoral politics, and a recognition that the majority of this particular cohort of Burundian refugees were born, educated, and living productive lives in Tanzania (Daley et al., 2018; Milner, 2008; 2019).<sup>2</sup>

Social cohesion tends to be divided into the 'horizontal' (relationships among individuals or groups) and 'vertical' (relationships between individuals and institutions, state and society). This research focuses on horizontal social cohesion, both intergroup between refugees and host communities and intragroup within refugee communities. Nevertheless, the Tanzanian context emphasises how the factors influencing social cohesion are messy and not limited to strict horizontal or vertical delineations (Holloway and Sturridge, 2022). Additionally, national policy responses and the provision of institutional aid (arguably 'vertical' considerations) have a profound effect on horizontal social dynamics between refugees and host communities, as well as within displaced communities.

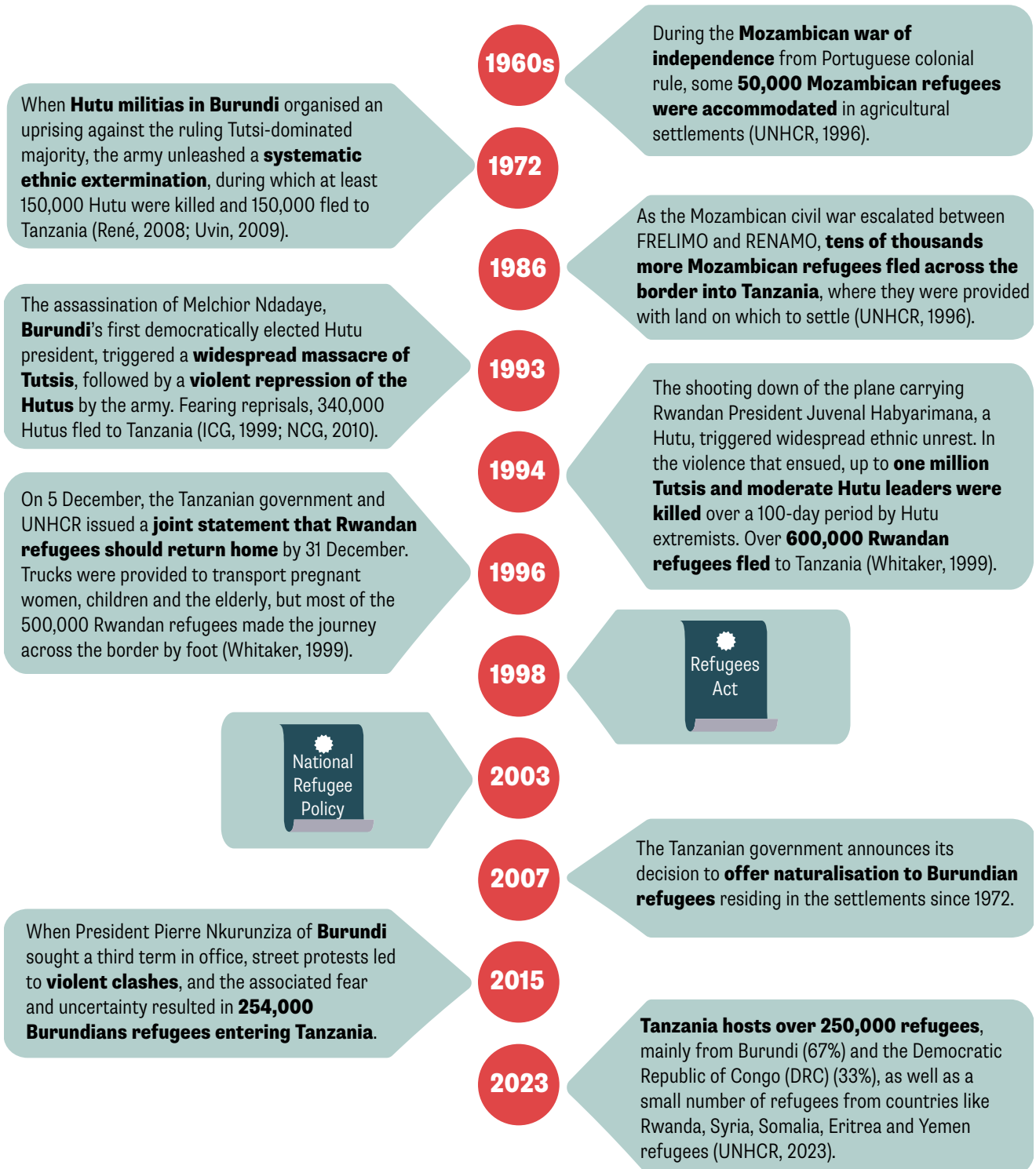
This paper is one of a collection of outputs that form part of a two-year project exploring social cohesion in displacement. It is published alongside a Pakistan case study and a series of blogs that address the wider policy implications emerging from our research. This paper also builds on a foundational think piece entitled *Social cohesion in displacement: the state of play* (Holloway and

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2 To date, 162,000 Burundian refugees have been granted citizenship by the Government of Tanzania (UNHCR, 2022).

Sturridge, 2022), which explores in depth the various ways in which social cohesion is understood, operationalised, influenced and problematised in displacement settings and responses. Detailed analysis of definitions and debates can be found in this initial think piece.

Figure 1 Tanzania’s refugee influxes over time





## 2 Methodology

### 2.1 Defining social cohesion

There is no single definition of social cohesion. It is usually conceptualised as an aggregate concept incorporating three main elements: trust; cooperation or participation; and a sense of belonging or inclusive identity (Holloway and Sturridge, 2022). What is more, as most social cohesion research and thinking has been carried out in English-speaking countries, it can be difficult to translate into different languages, traditions and cultures.

Rather than starting with a one-size-fits-all definition or seeking to translate ‘social cohesion’ into Kiswahili, the research refocused on the people affected by displacement – both refugees and host communities – and the aspects of social cohesion that matter to them. Instead of asking respondents about ‘social cohesion’ per se, we framed the discussion in terms of their relations and interactions with others, and rooted the conversation around everyday encounters, challenges and examples – building up a picture of social cohesion from there.

### 2.2 Working in partnership

Social cohesion in Tanzania is understudied. This is largely because options for conducting independent research on politically sensitive topics have been restricted due to legislation that repressed the work of media, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), researchers and political opposition groups (Human Rights Watch, 2019; Nyeko, 2019). While the situation is gradually improving, working in partnership with a trusted partner with strong research experience was key to the success of the project.

With this in mind, the research was conducted as a partnership between the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) and DIGNITY Kwanza, which works with vulnerable migrants and refugees in Dar es Salaam. HPG and DIGNITY Kwanza worked together to develop suitable methodology, conduct and transcribe the interviews, and analyse and write up the findings through regular meetings culminating in a series of joint analysis workshops in Dar es Salaam and a validation workshop with key national stakeholders in Kigoma.

DIGNITY Kwanza has a strong track record of working on similar research projects. These include the Tanzania component of the European Union-funded TRAFIG project that, in association with the University of Leiden, aims to develop tailored solutions for protracted displacement. DIGNITY Kwanza is also the lead partner of the Tanzania working group of the Local Engagement Refugee Research Network (LERRN). In addition, DIGNITY Kwanza collaborates with Professor Khoti Kamanga of the University of Dar es Salaam, who has published extensively on forced displacement and refugee law and policy.

## 2.3 Adopting a multi-sited and cross-sectional approach

A critical methodological challenge was how to understand social cohesion from the wide variety of perspectives, eras and contexts at play in Tanzania. Multi-sited location selection and cross-sectional respondent selection were key. Over 100 semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with a range of hosts, refugees and so-called ‘newly naturalised Tanzanians’ across multiple settings.<sup>3</sup> This included refugees from Burundi, the DRC, Rwanda, Syria, Eritrea and Yemen, who are confined to camps, settled in official settlements, and self-settled in villages and urban areas. Most refugees in Tanzania (84%) reside in camps, and around 70,000 Congolese and 50,000 Burundians are in Nyarugusu camp (UNHCR, 2023). Key informant interviews were also conducted with representatives from government, NGOs, United Nations (UN) agencies, civil society and local leadership (see Table 1 and Figure 2).

**Table 1** Breakdown of interviews and focus group discussions by location and group

	Nyarugusu refugee camp	Makere ward	Ulyankulu settlement	Rusaba village	Kigoma and Dar es Salaam	Total
Refugees (Burundian)	9	-	4	10	4	27
Refugees (Congolese)	9	-	-	-	4	13
Refugees (other)	-	-	-	-	3	3
Hosts	-	10	5	5	5	25
Newly naturalised Tanzanians	-	-	10	-	5	15
Key informants	4	4	4	4	4	20
Focus group discussions	2	2	2	2	2	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>113</b>

3 ‘Newly naturalised Tanzanians’ is the term often given to the 1972 cohort of Burundian refugees who received Tanzanian citizenship following the government’s decision in 2007 to offer them naturalisation.

### 2.3.1 Locations

**Nyarugusu refugee camp (Kigoma region):** One of several camps established during the 1990s, located in western Tanzania close to the border with Burundi and the DRC.

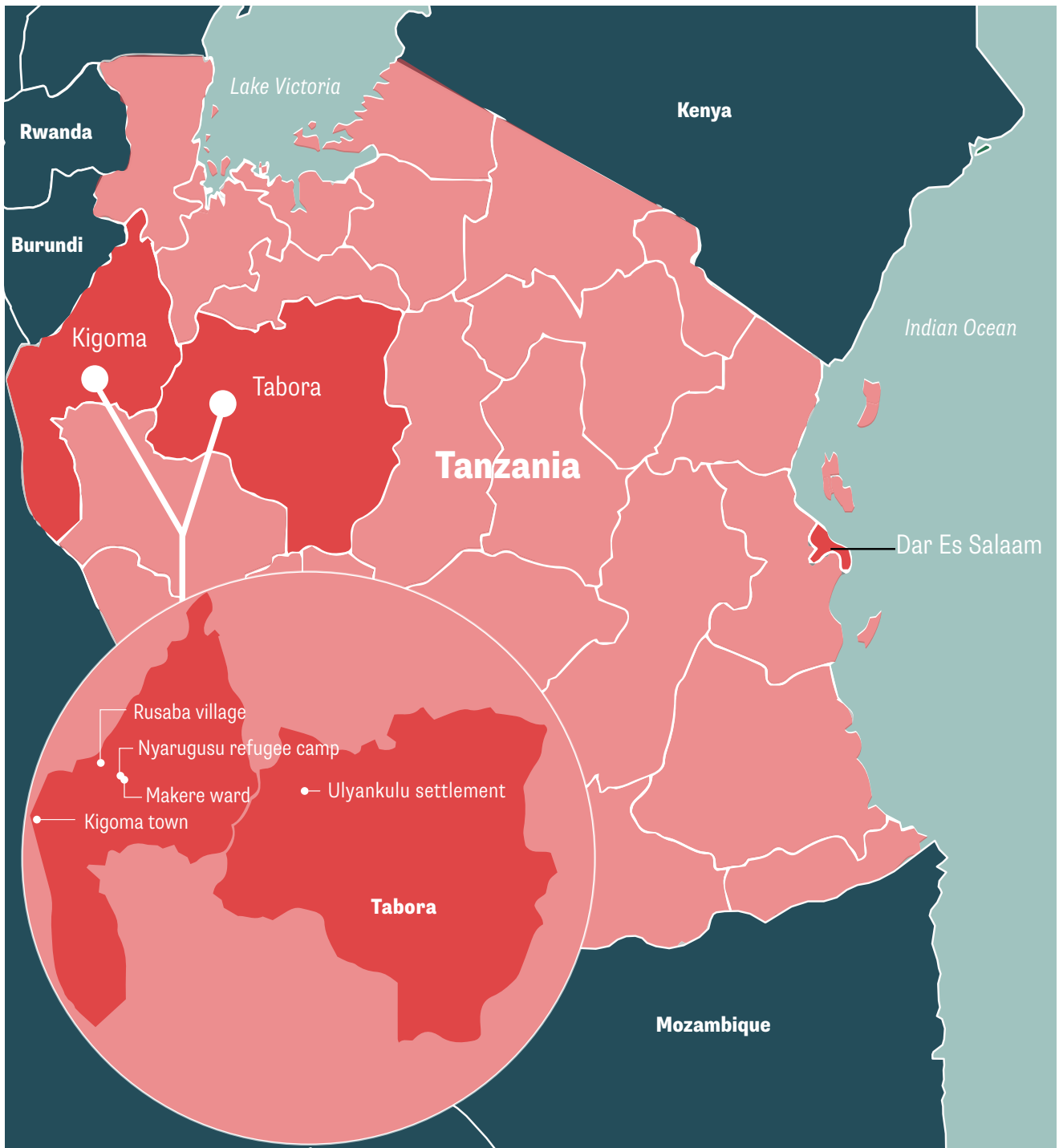
**Makere ward (Kasulu District, Kigoma region):** A semi-rural setting where Tanzanian nationals live that is located near to Nyarugusu camp. The ward comprises three villages: Makere, Nyangwa and Kalimungoma.

**Ulyankulu settlement (Kaliua district, Tabora region):** One of three rural settlement schemes (Katumba, Mishamo and Ulyankulu) where Burundians arriving in Tanzania in 1972 were encouraged to live (Daley et al., 2018). In a bid to develop these sparsely populated zones, the government encouraged refugees' self-reliance by allowing them land and the right to work, although restrictions on their movement limited meaningful integration with surrounding areas (Daley, 1992; Hovil and Kweka, 2008). There are currently 19,000 refugees in Ulyankulu settlement (UNHCR, 2022).

**Rusaba village (Buhigwe district, Kigoma region):** While some among the 1972 cohort of Burundian refugees settled in the schemes, around 21,000 self-settled in villages in Kigoma, where they have been residing for decades, including many who were born there (ibid.).

**Kigoma town and Dar es Salaam city:** In search of better opportunities, some refugees move to urban areas where they live in cramped and difficult conditions alongside Tanzanians. According to UNHCR (2022), there are officially 250 urban refugees, although the real numbers are believed to be much higher, possibly in the tens of thousands (Mann, 2002; O'Loghlen and Nobel Bwami, 2018). While those with temporary permits allowing them to reside in the city receive financial assistance from UNHCR, most are undocumented and left to fend for themselves (Mann, 2002).

**Figure 2** Map of interview and focus group discussion locations in Tanzania



## 3 Living configurations matter

Social cohesion dynamics differed significantly across the different research locations. Context and the conditions in which refugees live relative to host communities have a strong impact on social cohesion in Tanzania. Camps, settlements, villages, towns or cities open up and shut down opportunities for cohabitation, interaction and participation with hosts and other refugees, with implications for social cohesion (Zetter and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2011; de Berry and Roberts, 2018). In much of the literature, the relationship between social cohesion and living configurations is portrayed as complex and contradictory (Etzold et al., 2019; Aksoy and Ginn, 2022; Holloway and Sturridge, 2022), but stark differences in social dynamics nevertheless emerged across the different research settings in Tanzania.

### 3.1 Villages and settlements

The refugee villages and settlements of Rusaba and Ulyankulu were generally characterised by good refugee–host relations and a shared sense of community. Refugee and host respondents farmed together, attended each other’s weddings and funerals, built classrooms, clinics and roads together, intermarried, and attended the same churches. While small incidents and resentments did occur, these were seen as part and parcel of everyday life rather than the product of refugee–host relations.

This resonates with contact theory, which assumes that social interactions between diverse groups of people can reduce prejudice, build trust and reciprocity and, by extension, strengthen social cohesion (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006; Vemuru et al., 2020). While Tanzanians and Burundian refugees are divided across two halves of the village (Rusaba A and Rusaba B, respectively), in practice it was hard to know where one ended and the other began.

Time has also played a role in these social dynamics. Most refugees arrived during the 1970s or were born in Rusaba and Ulyankulu. The depth and duration of these social interactions was summed up by a 52-year-old Burundian woman in Rusaba: ‘We have been living together for so long that we have become like relatives.’ Most hosts and refugees described finding it easier to get along with others over time as they began to understand each other better. In the words of a 41-year-old Congolese man: ‘It is easier to get along with time, as we get used to each other, open up to each other, and find that we share the same challenges. Our relationship gets better every day.’ This contrasts with findings from other research in Jordan (Mercy Corps, 2012) and Iran (Hoseini and Dideh, 2022), for example, where an initial welcome by hosts can turn to fatigue on both sides when displacement becomes protracted over years and decades, or when competition over resources is exacerbated by wider economic pressures.

### 3.2 Camps and neighbouring villages

Social tensions were much more noticeable in and around Nyarugusu camp and the neighbouring village of Makere, where the presence of refugees tended to be marked by years rather than decades. ‘I don’t get along with refugees at all because they have no intention of getting along with us – they look

down on us,' explained a 61-year-old Tanzanian man in the village of Makere. While some respondents spoke in hostile terms about other communities, most refugees and hosts tolerated each other, but were not interested in moving beyond a transactional economic relationship.

Refugees from Burundi and Congo are not part of my community. We only interact when it comes to business: strictly selling and buying, nothing more. So, I cannot say that they are part of my community. Besides, I am not used to them, and I don't have any friends who are refugees. I do not discriminate against them [...] I just have not been able to make friends because in most cases we only meet briefly before they return to the camp. There is no time to make friends within the short time that they visit the market. (25-year-old Tanzanian woman interviewed in Makere village.)

These words illustrate the impact of encampment on social cohesion. Employed as a deliberate strategy for reducing the chance of integration, encampment undermines opportunities for cohabitation, interaction, participation and, by extension, social cohesion. Not only are Burundian and Congolese refugees restricted to different camp zones, but they are not allowed to leave the camp without a permit, and nor are hosts allowed to enter without one. By limiting opportunities for mixing and interacting in a meaningful way, social relations between refugees and hosts, and among refugees themselves, rarely progressed beyond a superficial level. A 41-year-old Congolese man complained that friendships he had made with Tanzanians working with him in the camp had disintegrated when they moved away, as they weren't able to visit each other: 'They get tired and the bond fades, even though we were very close to each other.'

Encampment also trickles down to undermine social relations in indirect ways. By squeezing refugee livelihoods, encampment encourages refugees under economic pressure to take firewood, crops and assets from neighbouring host communities – a key strain on refugee–host relations. Restrictive national policies also undermine social cohesion by generating resentment, frustration and anger among refugees. In the words of a Burundian man in Nyarugusu camp: 'We get angry. We are treated unfairly by the government and there is nothing we can do about it.' The suspicion articulated by Burundian respondents that the encampment policy was applied less rigidly to Congolese also created tensions between the two groups of refugees.

### 3.3 Urban areas

If villages and settlements were marked by good refugee–host relations, and the camp and its environs by transactional relations undercut with social tensions, Dar es Salaam can be characterised by an absence of refugee–host relations. While 'good Samaritan' stories of hosts assisting refugees did emerge from this and other research, these tended to be the exception rather than the rule (Wilson et al., 2021).

Fearing detention, deportation or the forcible return to camps due to their irregular status, refugees in Dar es Salaam live as inconspicuously as possible. Stories were common of landlords raising refugees' rents or evicting refugees upon discovery of their status, or of employers cutting or withholding wages.

Many avoided social interactions altogether, socialising only with a handful of trusted acquaintances. Other studies describe children and adolescents spending long periods of time confined to their home ‘doing nothing’ and not interacting with their peers, for fear of being identified as refugees (Mann, 2002; 2008). ‘We try our best to hide our refugee status to avoid mistreatment, threats and disturbances,’ explained a Burundian woman in Dar es Salaam.

This absence of refugee–host relations is also seen between groups of refugees. Suspicion and a lack of trust, particularly among those fleeing political persecution, were common and undermined refugees’ ability to form and sustain social relationships. An Eritrean man in Dar es Salaam explained how a group of Eritreans orchestrated his arrest due to their political differences, adding: ‘There is no community if you cannot talk freely to others.’ A lack of social interactions between urban refugees is also an outcome of living dispersed across neighbourhoods. In contrast to other hosting contexts (for example, Eastleigh in Nairobi, Kenya, or ‘Little Bukavu’ and ‘Little Goma’ in the DRC) refugees in Dar es Salaam have not congregated together in specific enclaves because their irregular status requires an invisible existence (Willems, 2003).

## 4 Social cohesion comes with risks and limitations

Social cohesion (like many social processes) is often framed as an inherent social good to be worked towards (Pelling and High, 2005). In support of this, social cohesion was an important means to many ends for refugees and hosts interviewed in Tanzania.

For one, good social relations unlocked economic and business opportunities. Many hosts relied on refugee acquaintances to purchase their wares at local markets. Others had established lucrative business partnerships with refugees to buy and sell goods inside the camps.

Social cohesion, and the associated sense of community, also functioned as a safety net in the absence of state social services. People from across the refugee–host divide turned to each other for help with paying medical bills, school fees, burials or fines, or for assistance during sickness and childbirth.

Relatedly, good social relations cultivated peace – in terms of physical safety, but also peace of mind, and a respite from anxiety and depression – especially for those who have fled conflict. ‘Getting along with others has helped me to feel better psychologically – it makes me forget the problems that I have gone through,’ explained a 34-year-old Burundian woman in Nyarugusu.

Nevertheless, there are also downsides to social cohesion. In Tanzania, social encounters and interactions can be dangerous. While this may indicate a wider context lacking in social cohesion (rather than a shortcoming of social cohesion per se), in places where restrictive national policy limits refugees’ rights and movements, social cohesion can be risky to achieve. This was illustrated by undocumented urban refugees who sought out marginalisation and outsider status – not social cohesion – in order to avoid detection and detention by the authorities (see Section 3.3).

The risks and limitations of social cohesion manifested in other ways, outlined below. These are not well understood by the aid sector, which takes an optimistic view of the positive benefits of social cohesion programming for development and peacebuilding (de Berry and Roberts, 2018; Holloway and Sturridge, 2022).

### 4.1 Social cohesion or social coercion?

As a minority group with limited rights and protection, many refugees in Tanzania cannot afford to isolate themselves from the wider community. They cannot register a SIM card, purchase property, open a bank account, request a bank loan, establish a business, or access government subsidies – as all these activities require a national ID that refugees do not possess. Refugees routinely rely on Tanzanian friends, acquaintances and neighbours to register for these services on their behalf. For refugees, cohesion with hosts was an important means for everyday activities.



In this context of unequal power relations and disadvantage, social cohesion is a necessary means to everyday ends, rather than a cause for celebration. Social cohesion is important to refugees as they cannot afford to not get along with others. When asked why he interacts positively with others in the village, a 70-year-old Burundian man in Rusaba replied, 'I have to get along well with them because I need their help.' And when asked whether he still thinks it's important to get along, even when a Tanzanian has done something to annoy him, he replied: 'Yes, because he helps me.' This power imbalance has created a depressing sense of resignation among refugees in Tanzania: that they must accept their situation uncomplainingly and be grateful for their lot (Nayeri, 2017).

Being a refugee requires you to be a humble person. A refugee should not be a complicated person. You must understand that you left your home country and are here in other people's country. If you are troublesome, everyone will distance themselves from you. (60-year-old Burundian man in Rusaba.)

### 4.2 Trade-offs and compromise

Actions and activities that strengthen some aspects of social cohesion simultaneously undermine others. Such trade-offs occurred when it came to shared interests and experiences. Common language, culture and faith brought respondents together, but also created lines that separated them from others – thereby promoting relations within communities (intragroup cohesion) while simultaneously undermining relations between them (intergroup cohesion). Religion brought together people with the same faith and place of prayer: 'We share the same spiritual beliefs, and the fear of God unites us as one,' said a 27-year-old Congolese man in Nyarugusu camp. But it also isolated them from other religious groups, as expressed by a 43-year-old Tanzanian man in Rusaba: 'They have their own Catholic church where only Burundians worship.'

Likewise, the shared hardship of displacement can bring groups of refugees together, as well as distancing them from others who have not endured the same experiences. Therefore, policies such as encampment, which are intended to drive people apart, can also unite them. In the words of a 34-year-old Burundian woman in Nyarugusu camp, this 'ill treatment brings us together. We find comfort in each other.' A similar perception was articulated by a 24-year-old Congolese man in Nyarugusu:

We have the same history of fleeing our homes to a foreign land. We have the same challenges that all refugees within this camp face. We love common things like soccer. And we all commit common offences like leaving the camp without a permit. So we understand each other.

Trade-offs and compromise can also be seen in terms of identity. Some urban respondents concealed their status by changing their names and introducing themselves as Tanzanians or Waha from Kigoma region – a finding supported by other studies (Hovil and Kweka, 2008; Wilson et al., 2021). This pragmatic coping strategy made it easier to get along with Tanzanians and avoid detection by the authorities. But it also came with a downside: abandoning (at least in public) one's national identity to blend in and get along. That said, attitudes towards national identity are complex. Many refugees have spent most, or all, of their lives in Tanzania, or have been naturalised. Writing in 1995, Malkki argued

that Burundians in camps adopted a purist notion of a collective Burundian refugee identity, and resisted assimilation as it would mean abandoning the hope of a collective return to the 'homeland' (Malkki, 1995). Two decades later, most of the 1972 cohort of refugees chose Tanzanian citizenship over repatriation, suggesting a shift away from 'purity' and 'marginality' to a more pragmatic compromise or trade-off of belonging and cohesion (Kuch, 2018: 211).

## 5 An unpredictable relationship between aid and social cohesion

Aid influences social cohesion in complex and contradictory ways:

1. Some interventions are designed to explicitly improve social cohesion, typically through:
  - a. direct-contact interventions that bring different groups together;
  - b. no-contact interventions that increase knowledge and awareness of others, or address the conditions that enable social tensions;
  - c. advocacy initiatives that improve social cohesion by influencing public opinion (Holloway and Sturridge, 2022: 18).
2. Other interventions, which have no specific social cohesion objective, can influence social cohesion in indirect and unintended ways, both positive and negative. The kinds of aid that are given, the ways in which they are distributed, and to whom, all influence social cohesion outcomes (Holloway and Sturridge, 2022).

This second pathway – the indirect and/or unintended consequences of aid writ large – was most evident during our research in Tanzania, and particularly in and around Nyarugusu camp, where (albeit limited) aid is available to both refugees and hosts. The positive and negative impacts of different kinds of aid on social cohesion in and around Nyarugusu camp are outlined below, and summarised in Table 2. As settled and self-settled refugees rarely, if ever, received aid, evidence of its impact on social cohesion in villages, settlements and urban areas was minimal.

### 5.1 The presence of aid isn't itself the problem

Most Tanzanians understand the need for aid in displacement settings, and do not begrudge refugee communities this assistance. This contrasts with much of the literature, which tends to focus on refugee–host competition. Hosts often saw aid as fair compensation for refugees who are restricted to camps and therefore unable to sustain themselves through income-generating opportunities. ‘I understand that [refugees] are going through a hard time,’ explained a 25-year-old Tanzanian woman in Makere. Hosts also saw aid as fair compensation for themselves for hosting refugees.

The reason we appreciate refugees in our village is because we have benefitted from organisations providing assistance as a way of giving back to us for hosting refugees. This has made us feel good about having refugees and even established a stronger bond with refugees. We get along as we don't feel like they are a burden. (34-year-old Tanzanian woman in Dar es Salaam.)

Others explained how assistance brings communities together when they trade and exchange the goods they receive for the items they want, as explained by a 27-year-old Congolese man in Nyarugusu:

‘Burundians do not like ugali (maize flour porridge) but prefer plantains. The Congolese prefer ugali. So, we exchange maize flour and plantains. This brings us together.’ Similar dynamics occurred between refugees and hosts when the rains and crops failed in Kigoma region, and Tanzanians relied on refugees to sell, trade or share the food received in the camp.

In camp settings, health services provided by aid actors can also improve social relations by increasing opportunities for communities ordinarily separated by encampment to meet and interact. Host communities regularly entered Nyarugusu camp to take advantage of free (albeit mostly basic) health services.<sup>4</sup> Many recognised these benefits, which would not be available without the refugee presence. To illustrate this point, a 42-year-old Tanzanian woman spoke thankfully of the weekly free blood transfusions donated by Burundian and Congolese refugees that her child with sickle cell anaemia receives at the camp clinic:

I am among the few that truly benefit and appreciate their presence here, and for that reason, they are part of my community. I consider them my community members, because, at the toughest time, they are always there to help us. Life for me and my family would have been very different without them.

### 5.2 Distribution mechanisms are the issue

The presence of aid isn’t itself the problem. Rather, it is the mechanisms for distributing aid that is the issue.<sup>5</sup> Serious social tensions emerge when aid is not distributed equally across communities. Protests and violence erupted in Nyarugusu camp when bars of soap were distributed to Burundians only – allegedly because the donor wanted to ringfence this group for assistance. The subsequent abandonment of the controversial project further aggravated tensions among Burundians who blamed the Congolese for frustrating their opportunity to receive the soap. As explained by a 27-year-old Congolese man in Nyarugusu camp: ‘The only thing that makes it hard for Congolese and Burundian refugees to get along is when aid is addressed to one and not the other. This divides us completely as we get jealous of each other.’

Refugee–host tensions also emerged from competition over NGO work and employment opportunities. While these provided communities (that would not normally interact) with a chance to work together in a shared space, the allocation of opportunities created issues. A Tanzanian NGO worker in Kigoma complained that the humanitarian system does not hire enough Tanzanian nationals with local knowledge and experience. Grievances were also voiced by refugees restricted to working as NGO ‘incentive workers’ due to legal restrictions on their right to work. They resented being paid significantly less and having fewer promotion opportunities than national staff. In the words of a 24-year-old Congolese man hired as an incentive worker in Nyarugusu: ‘How do you think I feel towards my colleagues when they are being paid better because of their status?’

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4 Other studies reveal that more complicated and permanent health issues cannot be treated in the camps (Wilson et al., 2021).

5 There have been similar findings in relation to promoting dignity in displacement (Mosel and Holloway, 2019).

Similar grievances were replicated among refugees competing for a small number of resettlement opportunities. Competition between refugees was fuelled by the perception among Burundians that Congolese refugees receive preferential treatment and fast-tracked resettlement applications. According to a 25-year-old Congolese man, ‘This issue of resettlement affects our relationships and how we get along with Burundians. It reaches a point where Burundian refugees start to hate us.’ In urban Dar es Salaam, refugees complained that Syrians were given preferential treatment. While this brought Burundians and Congolese together, it created tensions with Syrian refugees.

Tensions resulting from aid went beyond national rivalries. Some refugees also complained when women, children, people with disabilities and the elderly were prioritised for assistance. The restriction of firewood by aid actors to vulnerable groups and the elderly was especially controversial. The issue was not the provision of firewood itself, but that refugees did not understand or agree with why vulnerable groups were prioritised. This was explained by a 35-year-old Burundian woman:

The provision of firewood tends to harm relations in the camp. This is because they are not given to all people. According to the providers, they are only available to people with special difficulties. The problem is how they categorise people with special difficulties – it is not very clear. We don’t understand how they decide who deserves to get it and who doesn’t.

**Table 2** Summary of the positive and negative impacts of different kinds of aid on social cohesion in and around Nyarugusu camp

	Positive impacts	Negative impacts
<b>In-kind assistance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aid is seen as fair compensation for both refugees and hosts.</li> <li>• Trading and selling assistance increases interactions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unequal distribution according to nationality, refugee status, gender, age and disability creates tensions between refugees and hosts, and among refugees.</li> </ul>
<b>Services</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Services are seen as fair compensation for both refugees and hosts.</li> <li>• Shared facilities increase social interactions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The perception that services are better in camps than in neighbouring villages causes host resentment towards refugees.</li> </ul>
<b>NGO work opportunities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shared workplace increases social interactions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unequal opportunities between nationalities create tensions between refugees and hosts, and among refugees.</li> <li>• Unequal pay structures between refugees and nationals cause refugee resentment towards hosts.</li> </ul>
<b>Resettlement opportunities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resettled refugees support those left behind with remittances.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unequal opportunities between nationalities create tensions among refugees.</li> </ul>

### 5.3 Reality-checking social cohesion programming

While interventions designed to explicitly improve social cohesion did not emerge during data collection, a subsequent desk-based review revealed a range of social cohesion programmes targeting refugees and hosts being implemented by national and international actors in Tanzania (see Box 2).

These interventions address social cohesion from multiple angles and agendas that are not routinely associated with common goals or outcomes: trade and markets, peacebuilding, counterterrorism, art, water, child protection, livelihoods and faith. It can be argued that social cohesion is a complex issue requiring a holistic approach. Nevertheless, this scattergun approach could also suggest that aid actors are increasingly employing the language of ‘improving social cohesion’ as a catch-all, or added after-thought, for accessing funding associated with social cohesion (Holloway and Sturridge, 2022).<sup>6</sup>

Social cohesion programming, in general, has been critiqued for making overly optimistic claims about its ability to build social cohesion and for being simplistically presented as a positive foundation for development, growth, peacebuilding and conflict resolution (King et al., 2010; King, 2013; de Berry and Roberts, 2018; Holloway and Sturridge, 2022). In support of this claim, none of the social cohesion interventions in Box 2 were supported by a logical theory of change or tracking indicators, or at least these were not available online.

What is more, in countries like Tanzania, where national policy is designed to segregate and isolate refugees, there will be limits to what individual projects designed to improve social cohesion can achieve (Fearon et al., 2009; Browne 2013). As long as the underlying structural context and wider political agendas make it difficult or dangerous for refugees to build social relations with other communities, aid interventions can only scratch the surface of more meaningful change (Holloway and Sturridge, 2022).

#### **Box 2 Selected projects with a social cohesion agenda implemented in Tanzania during the past five years**

**Trade-led and market-based** project designed to support economic resilience, peaceful co-existence between refugees and hosts, and economic opportunities for returnees.

**Peacebuilding** project designed to ‘relieve community tensions’ through conflict resolution committees, peace seminars and sport.

**Art** initiative designed to ‘bring together’ young Congolese refugees and Tanzanians around art classes and exhibitions.

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<sup>6</sup> Funding for social cohesion programming in fragile and conflict-affected countries has risen exponentially in the last two decades to just under \$ 40 million in 2020 (Cox et al., 2023).

**Water** project designed to ‘promote social cohesion and acceptance between refugees and hosts’ through the drilling of two boreholes.

**Child protection** project designed to address ‘poor social cohesion’ by establishing a joint Child Friendly Space for Burundian and Congolese refugee children.

**Livelihood** project that aims to ‘bring together peaceful cohesion and economic prosperity’ through common markets, business training, technical and vocational education and training, and village saving and loan associations.

**Faith-based** initiative designed to promote ‘human development and more peaceful coexistence among Muslim and Christian communities’ through ‘interfaith networks and practical action’.

**Countering violent extremism** project that sought to strengthen community resilience through improved participation and inclusion, interfaith collaboration and social cohesion.

## 6 Conclusion and recommendations for aid actors

National policy responses and institutional aid have a profound effect on social cohesion in Tanzania. Social cohesion brings many benefits to refugees and host communities (business, economic opportunities, safety nets, peace). Nevertheless, in places where national policy is designed to segregate and isolate refugees, or where aid and associated opportunities (jobs and resettlement places) are not distributed equally, it becomes difficult and even risky to sustain strong social networks across and within communities. This framing forms the basis for a series of recommendations for aid actors outlined below.

### 6.1 Introduce area-based approaches with care

Misconceptions and misunderstandings about aid and to whom it is distributed were commonplace. Strengthening explanations, information or communication about differential allocations is rarely going to satisfy a community that is uniformly struggling across the refugee–host divide in a context of limited assistance and livelihoods. An alternative is area-based approaches, whereby all groups in a targeted geographic area (many of whom experience similar needs and vulnerabilities) receive equal allocations of aid. More frequently used in urban areas, area-based approaches ‘define an area, rather than a sector or target group, as a primary entry point’ (USWG, 2019: 3). Debates around the relative merits of place-based versus people-based approaches are ongoing, unresolved and require more research. While area-based approaches should therefore be handled with care and will not be appropriate in every context (Griggs et al., 2008; Byron, 2010),<sup>7</sup> many respondents in and around Nyarugusu refugee camp were supportive of such an approach:

All services and assistance should be available for all. (34-year-old Burundian woman in Nyarugusu.)

I wish for aid actors to treat us equally without categorising nationalities, gender or status so that we all receive the same quality and quantity of services and assistance. (41-year-old Congolese man in Nyarugusu.)

Any service or aid provided should not discriminate or categorise the beneficiaries. All the community members should benefit and participate equally. (55-year-old Burundian woman in Nyarugusu.)

<sup>7</sup> Collective and multi-sectoral approaches can help to alleviate the risk of refugee–host tensions and may be more effective in complex crises than sector-specific or targeted interventions (Sanderson and Sitko, 2018). But they can also exacerbate tensions between the target and surrounding areas, and, in order to be effective, require cross-sector coordination and shared understanding of area-based approaches – neither of which may be forthcoming (IRC, 2015; Sanderson, 2017).



### 6.2 Prioritise meaningful participation of refugees and hosts

Aid actors need to listen to refugees and hosts, and adapt their programmes accordingly. Meaningful participation (rather than superficial consultation) is key to avoiding the unintended impacts of aid on social cohesion. ‘If they understand our relationship, they will see the importance of reaching out to all communities equally without discrimination,’ explained a 41-year-old Congolese man in Nyarugusu. Most respondents felt their views were not adequately taken into consideration, or that efforts to engage were tokenistic. ‘They design their projects quietly and we only hear about them when they are implementing them,’ complained a 24-year-old Congolese man in Nyarugusu. Meaningful participation would also increase aid actors’ understanding about the deep-seated reasons (beyond perceptions of fairness) that explain why targeted distributions can be controversial, as illustrated by the case of firewood:

We are consulted to some extent but often our opinions are neglected. Our refugee leaders have spoken so much on the issue of firewood. They have explained to aid actors that it should be provided to all people because many cases of rape are a result of women having to go out of the camp for a long distance to find firewood. And yet, nothing changes. (28-year-old Burundian woman in Nyarugusu camp.)

### 6.3 Be realistic about what social cohesion programming can achieve

Aid actors need to be more realistic and honest (with themselves, donors and, most importantly, with beneficiaries) about the extent to which individual projects can meaningfully achieve social cohesion – particularly in highly restrictive policy environments. They need to engage more with the policy environment in which they work and also focus on the practical barriers to social cohesion rather than seeking to orchestrate complex refugee–host relations. For example, an Eritrean respondent who did not attend weddings and burials as she could not speak Kiswahili requested language classes to help her communicate better with the community. Also, implementing projects with trusted partners such as refugee-led organisations, local NGOs or faith-based groups may be more effective than implementing social cohesion from above. Undocumented refugees were more likely to approach a local organisation than UNHCR, and many respondents held a particularly strong sense of belonging to faith-based actors and places of worship.

### 6.4 Recognise the risks and limitations of social cohesion

Social cohesion is an important means to many ends for myriad displacement-affected communities. But it also comes with risks and limitations in places where national policy restricts refugees’ rights and movements. Marginalisation and outsider status (not social cohesion) were the priority for undocumented refugees in urban Tanzania. These risks are not adequately understood in aid circles. Instead of assuming that social cohesion is an inherent social good, aid actors should adopt more critical approaches. The risks for marginalised and minority groups without legal protection need to be properly acknowledged (rather than glossed over) and integrated into project design and delivery. There is an argument for ‘doing social cohesion better’. But there is also a case for ‘doing social cohesion less’ – specifically in places where social cohesion is not the priority, or worse still, where programming puts people in danger or makes social cohesion worse.

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