Article

Communicating Social Cohesion in Forced Displacement: A Framework for Protracted Situations of Encampment

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Abstract: This paper addresses the role that communication and media interventions can play in fostering social cohesion among displaced populations in camp settings through a review of both practical and theoretical notions in this area. The multiple definitions available in the literature on social cohesion do not come to a consensus on what this concept means. Yet, despite this lack of substance, reflecting on social cohesion in contexts of displacement has been a prevalent topic. Horizontal social cohesion, which is critical in protracted situations of encampment, is defined by UNHCR as the bond that 'hold(s) people together within a community'. While a number of studies have focused on the social connection between host and displaced people, scarce attention has been paid to the dynamics and social fractures among displaced communities themselves. Yet, tensions both within and between groups of displaced people may be equally, if not more important to social cohesion than relationships with other groups. In order to begin to address this gap, a communication-based framework for humanitarian and development work on social cohesion in refugee camps is presented. Ultimately, the aim of this article is to offer a starting point for humanitarian agencies working in refugee camps to articulate the adoption of a communication-driven approach in their social cohesion programming.

Keywords: social cohesion; refugee camps; communication; communication framework; protracted displacement; encampment; inter-group relationships; peace; media

1. Introduction

Through a discussion of theoretical approaches and practical implementations that connect scholarly literature with existing interventions, this paper addresses the role that communication plays in fostering social cohesion among displaced populations in camp settings. The multiple definitions available in the literature on social cohesion do not come to a consensus on what this concept means. Yet, despite this lack of substance, reflecting on social cohesion in contexts of displacement has been a prevalent topic (Finn 2017).

Horizontal social cohesion, which is critical in protracted situations of encampment, is defined by UNHCR as the bond that 'hold(s) people together within a community' (UNHCR 2018, p. 16). While a large number of studies have focused on the social connection between host and displaced people, scarce attention has been paid to the dynamics and social fractures between displaced communities themselves. Yet, tensions both within and between groups of displaced people may be equally, if not more, important to social cohesion, than relationships with other groups (World Bank 2022). In order to begin to address this gap, a communication-based framework for humanitarian and development work on social cohesion in refugee camps is presented.

This article begins with an introduction to the existing debate within the literature that surrounds the concept of social cohesion. This is followed by some reflections on trust, which is a key factor in the establishment of cohesion between different groups. The role of communication in this context is then discussed, focusing particularly on its application to

promote social cohesion at the horizontal level. Here, Cox et al.'s (2023) work provides a useful reference point that both directs and exemplifies practical ways in which communication plays a part in strengthening community bonds through the implementation of relevant media interventions. As a result of this analysis, a communication framework to enable social cohesion in encamped realities is put forward.

Whilst it needs to be acknowledged that a vertical dimension of social cohesion also exists in camps involving refugees and the various entities that govern these spaces, and that this dimension can indeed have an impact horizontally, the focus of this paper is on the inter-communal relationships of the displaced. Ultimately, the aim of this article is to offer a starting point for humanitarian agencies working in refugee camps to articulate the adoption of a communication-driven approach in their social cohesion programming between different refugee groups.

2. The Meaning of Social Cohesion

Many definitions of social cohesion have been suggested in scholarly works, yet no singular comprehensive definition exists because institutions, policymakers, and scholars interpret the concept differently. Nevertheless, social cohesion generally refers to the level of social interconnectedness and solidarity among diverse community groups, encompassing trust and bonds among individuals and across the community (Adetunji et al. 2023). It involves positive relationships within groups and individuals—the horizontal dimension—as well as between society and its governing entities—the vertical dimension (Cox et al. 2023).

Adetunji et al. (2023, p. 2) observe that social cohesion plays a crucial role in enhancing community capacity, which encompasses the collective and individual capabilities of community members to surmount obstacles and identify or create opportunities that enhance the overall welfare of both the community and its individual members. As described by these authors, community capacity involves the ability to mobilise resources, as well as social and political backing, to address community needs effectively, thereby enhancing health and wellbeing.

Levine (2024), on the other hand, suggests that the concept of social cohesion is not that of a singular entity. While it is undeniably real and significant, the concept manifests in multiple dimensions that can either complement or conflict with each other. These dimensions may evolve in similar or divergent ways over time and hold varying importance to different individuals throughout their lives. The author argues that oversimplifying 'social cohesion' as a uniform concept is risky. Treating it in a generic manner renders it meaningless, making programmes aimed at enhancing social cohesion operate without clear objectives or a coherent theory of change. Without a precise understanding of which types of relationships are crucial to people and how they are influenced, well-intentioned efforts to assist might inadvertently worsen conditions for individuals.

Promoting, rebuilding, or maintaining cohesion poses challenges for any society, but these tasks become especially daunting in conflict-ridden environments where divisions perpetuate violence and violence reinforces divisions. Adopting a social cohesion approach in such divided, conflict-affected societies offers several benefits. Firstly, it directs interventions towards less tangible aspects of conflict, highlighting overlooked grievances and bringing attention to tensions between groups and the state. Secondly, it integrates a peacebuilding perspective across various policy domains. Thirdly, it enables policymakers to incorporate citizen perspectives into development strategies and prioritise the provision of inclusive peace for all residents (Cox et al. 2023).

However, employing a social cohesion approach also presents challenges. External actors may encounter sensitivity when addressing social grievances, identity-based divisions, and power dynamics. Established groups might feel threatened in their positions of power and resist such efforts, while tensions among historically marginalised groups could lead to friction. In the short term, social cohesion programmes may even risk exacerbating tensions. Yet, confronting and acknowledging these tensions may be necessary for

rebuilding inter-group trust and restoring state legitimacy in the long run (Ballard 2019; Cox et al. 2023).

Fonseca et al. (2019) agree that the existing definitions of social cohesion fail to encompass the diversity of values and cultures present in contemporary societies. Consequently, societies today may be governed and shaped by a framework that could potentially exacerbate significant and ongoing conflicts. At the same time, these scholars put forward that a cohesive society adheres to a common moral framework, suggesting that generalised trust cannot exist among diverse clusters of individuals with varying cultures and values. Without universal acceptance of all forms of humanity and their diverse expressions, over time, cohesion can deteriorate into fragmentation and negative outcomes. Mixed neighbourhoods are preferable to segregated clusters of highly cohesive communities because they foster more inclusive interaction, lively debate, and achieve a balance between cultural autonomy and social solidarity.

Looking at social cohesion between displaced populations and host communities, Jayakody et al. (2022) adopt the working definition of the term social cohesion as 'the ability of displaced people and their host—who are brought together incidentally with cultural, social, ethnic, and other demographic differences—to live in the built environment of the same community, get along amicably, trust and support each other, and live peacefully together' (p. 3). In the context of social cohesion in forced displacement, these authors also discern that interventions are mainly designed around peacebuilding and confidence-building processes between different groups. At the same time, Utterwulghe (2004) acknowledges that displacement emergencies and those impacted by them need tailored, multi-faceted support strategies that fit within a broader context, which includes both the immediate emergency phase and the ongoing relief–development continuum. A key aspect of this approach involves tackling the underlying structural causes of the conflicts that affect displaced groups.

3. Reflecting on Trust

Lefko-Everett et al. (2016; cited in Khaile et al. 2022, p. 3) identify trust, identity, belonging, solidarity, tolerance, and inclusion as key dimensions of social cohesion. Trust is crucial, encompassing aspects such as assurance in the sincerity, reliability, dependability, and competence of someone or something's behaviour. Another significant facet of trust is affective, involving emotions, moods, and shared goals, beliefs, values, and identities among parties. Research emphasises that mutual trust fosters bonds among individuals and communities. Additionally, trust involves mutual respect and a shared sense of connectedness among individuals or within groups. Khaile et al. (2022) note that establishing accountability among community members over time lays the groundwork for trust to develop, with accountability preceding trust formation. Social cohesion itself significantly shapes perceptions of trust: ongoing interactions between diverse groups influence the dynamics of trust, potentially leading to its development, erosion, or a mix of both over time (Khaile et al. 2022).

Social cohesion faces risks when efforts to foster peace and mutual trust between communities are lacking, preventing the creation of an environment conducive to communal living and social interaction. Increased social tensions between communities typically pose a threat to social cohesion, as heightened tensions often lead to its decline and may result in secondary conflicts, known as conflict diffusion within host communities. Factors contributing to rising social tensions commonly include widespread poverty, resource scarcity, inadequate provision of essential services by local authorities, and cultural, religious, and social norm disparities between different communities (Jayakody et al. 2022; Mooney et al. 2021).

For most refugees, living in a camp is a result of force rather than preference. The refugee population is typically very diverse, varying greatly in religion, social status, class, ethnic backgrounds, and political affiliations. Additionally, the experiences that led to their displacement and uprooting differ significantly. Even when refugees share a

common experience regarding their country of origin, they rarely exhibit a strong sense of political unity. More commonly, refugee groups are deeply divided, with various factions having differing approaches to addressing the issues that led to their displacement. As a result, a humanitarian system with scarce resources tends to provoke both inter-group and intra-group conflicts, as individuals compete with one another to gain favour with the authorities (Voutira and Harrell-Bond 1995). Additionally, Jayakody et al. (2022) highlight how 'social tensions can also be increased by the roles of social, local, and international media, especially if issues are framed in ways that target minority communities at the expense of others, a situation where a community is favoured more than the others' (p. 4).

4. The Role of Communication

Efforts aimed at fostering belonging, inclusion, participation, recognition, and legitimacy can enhance social cohesion between displaced populations, including with their host communities. Maintaining communication and community networks throughout the relocation process is crucial for bolstering social cohesion (Jayakody et al. 2022; McCleary 2017). Looking at social cohesion from a more critical perspective, Harris and Johns (2021) assert that achieving a shared sense of belonging and common purpose becomes more testing when some members of the community face legitimacy challenges and are at risk of social exclusion. From this view, these scholars regard 'negotiation, dialogue and engagement (rather than consensus and shared values) as key to the ongoing process of cohesion and active citizenship by all in a culturally diverse society' (p. 396).

Horizontally, promoting social cohesion through the use of communication entails addressing societal divisions, significant grievances, and identity-based conflicts. Strengthening social cohesion is intertwined with power dynamics and must be handled accordingly. This may necessitate navigating the complexities of neutrality versus proactive engagement and planning responses to potential resistance and opposition. To foster sustainable development and peace, it is imperative to engage constructively across various social divides. In line with this, Cox et al. (2023) identify four types of interventions that aim to strengthen inter-group trust and collaboration, as well as form an inclusive identity. These are crucial for fostering social cohesion at this level and are described in Table 1.

Table 1. Horizontal interventions (from Cox et al. 2023, p. 4).

	Description (Primary Goal)
Dialogue-based interventions	Restore trust through dialogue that bridges social divisions. One of the most direct and most common types.
Collaborative contact interventions	Engage members from different identity groups in a joint activity in a political, economic, or social arena.
Social cohesion messaging	Provide information aimed at reducing prejudices and stressing the commonalities among diverse groups.
Social engagement	Strengthen civic engagement by encouraging higher levels of participation in civil society groups and activities.

The idea that participation in development strengthens community cohesion has been a recurring theme in the literature. Bennett and D'Onofrio (2015) adopt the concept of Community-Driven Development (CDD) to indicate a widely used aid approach that prioritises community authority in making decisions about planning and allocating resources. CDD is founded on principles of community empowerment, accountability, and transparency, operating under the belief that local communities are most capable of identifying their own development needs and determining suitable solutions for them (Bennett and D'Onofrio 2015). Qasmi and Ahmed (2018) support this argument, observing that ethnic diversity and power dynamics within communities can influence solidarity among individuals, with both positive and negative outcomes. Therefore, engaging people in development initiatives can foster equality, granting them ownership over their

own development and potentially reducing conflicts, thereby promoting greater unity (Bennett and D'Onofrio 2015).

CDD interventions often proceed with an underlying belief in existing mistrust and tense relationships between different segments of the population as well as between the state and the people. It is also theorised that participating in CDD's inclusive processes can empower communities, enhance their ability to manage local development and governance and strengthen social cohesion. In this process of transformation, the core concept is that the participatory nature of CDD interventions allows individuals and groups to learn about and witness new social norms in action. For example, participants actively practice transparency, accountability, and equity throughout the programme. When participants derive value from this experience, they may begin to appreciate the norms that govern it—whether socially, feeling recognised as agents of change, or psychologically, gaining a sense of belonging or pride from collaborative efforts toward a shared objective. Moreover, participants must believe in future opportunities to benefit practically, socially, or psychologically from similar processes, even if these are not directly linked to the programme (Bennett and D'Onofrio 2015). Achieving this transformational goal necessitates a theory of change that outlines the processes and conditions required to initiate lasting and sustainable change over time. According to Bennett and D'Onofrio (2015), this theory of change states the following:

> 'If *groups within a community* (or across communities) *come together* (convene) and are able to identify and *engage around a common need* then they will *identify and acquire critical information and resources* that will enable them to *construct credible commitment mechanisms* that *facilitate and enforce the action* required to address the need which then *allows for some benefit* to be derived and subsequently for some *value to be attributed* to the process'. (p. 19)

In essence, these authors support the notion that when people come together to convene, engage, and share information, these actions activate one or more mechanisms that encourage participants to commit to collaboration and fulfil that commitment by contributing to or participating in joint tasks (Bennett and D'Onofrio 2015).

In line with the ideas presented above, we can put forward that communication plays a pivotal role in fostering social cohesion and can be regarded as a fundamental technology alongside the creation of shared ideas, rituals and sanctions used in this process. The exchange of mutual values, cooperation strategies, responses to external threats, symbols, and the formation of group identity all rely on communication systems. Thus, communication serves as both a prerequisite and a tool for creating social cohesion and forming solid communities, encompassing society in its broadest sense (Krasnova 2014). This includes online communication (Wallace et al. 2014).

5. Practical Applications of Communication for Social Cohesion

Practical applications of communication to foster social cohesion, including through the use of media channels, have been identified in the literature. This section provides examples of these applications in line with the horizontal interventions identified by Cox et al. (2023, p. 4) and presented previously (see Table 1).

5.1. Dialogue-Based Interventions: Community Dialogues

Community dialogues have been studied by Bernstein and Isaac (2023). These scholars describe this type of dialogue as an interactive and communicative planning process that convenes participants from various segments of a community to ponder, discuss, and delve collectively into underlying issues of significance. According to the literature, community dialogue represents an ideal method for community stakeholders to engage in discussions about community concerns, though the specific conditions integral to this dialogic process may vary. Essential components for an ideal community dialogue process include the involvement of participants with diverse perspectives, fostering civility and respectful listening, and employing a consensus-building approach to decision-making. To ensure a

range of viewpoints, it is crucial that a variety of stakeholders are empowered to participate actively in the democratic dialogue process, which may involve challenging assertions and expressing constructive disagreements (Bernstein and Isaac 2023).

Community dialogue can manifest in diverse forms of public gatherings such as town hall meetings, seminars, focus groups, workshops, and online forums. While these dialogues vary in structure, they commonly involve activities like problem-solving, envisioning the future, and establishing trust. They are designed to create opportunities for residents to share their personal stories, core values, and concerns, thereby nurturing trust throughout the process. These processes play a pivotal role in fostering social cohesion by creating a communicative space and encouraging community engagement in pertinent social issues. Community dialogue operates as a participatory method that facilitates goal-setting, collaboration, and the constructive exchange of differing viewpoints, ultimately leading to innovative problem-solving (Bernstein and Isaac 2023).

In a displacement context, Zihnioğlu and Dalkıran (2022) examine the use of inter-communal activities between hosts and Syrian refugees in Türkiye. In relation to communication, and similar to community dialogues, a local non-governmental organisation promoted collaboration between the host community and refugees by offering mediation training. The aim was for both groups to understand each other better and resolve their disputes, facilitating joint efforts to address issues arising from the refugee crisis. The study showed that mixed results were achieved through this programme, as it was mostly those who were already open to dialogue that participated, establishing a positive exchange. This demonstrates the importance of ensuring the inclusion of different perspectives in these types of activities.

In the context of internal displacement, Utterwulghe (2004) has highlighted how displaced groups can be active agents in transforming and improving their situations. This author underlined, in particular, the power of facilitated dialogue sessions to stimulate social mobilisation in camps and the importance of providing effective training for people to engage meaningfully in these assemblies. This is reinforced also by Mooney et al. (2021) in the context of social cohesion in displacement.

5.2. Collaborative Contact Interventions: Radio Listening Clubs

In a study conducted on Masibumbane listening club (MLC), an informal association encompassing Radio Khwezi's active audience in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, Khumalo (2021) reports relevant findings on the role of radio listening clubs in building social cohesion. In particular, social cohesion within the Masibumbane group was demonstrated through positive interpersonal interactions, strong mutual support among members, shared values like Ubuntu, and collaborative efforts to innovate for improved livelihoods. Being part of the association equipped members with innovative ideas to enhance their lives, fostering a cooperative spirit aimed at enhancing livelihoods within the community.

Membership in the MLC also enhanced social capital through mutual support and shared values, enabling collective approaches to address development challenges affecting both the group and the broader community. Shared values within the group motivated proactive engagement in community and self-development. Ultimately, the MLC members served as attentive listeners for Khwezi residents, offering valuable social benefits such as closer community ties, shared strategies to increase individual and household incomes, and collaborative efforts to address community development issues. These initiatives result in reciprocal benefits that strengthen community bonds and consequently promote social cohesion (Khumalo 2021).

In a study on radio in Bhutanese refugee camps in Nepal, Govindaraj (2013) highlights that when refugees were asked how their lives would change without radio, they noted that they would miss out on important updates about events in the camps, global news, and the lives of resettled refugees. Despite the absence of established listening clubs, radio provided information on these topics and acted as a link, connecting refugees within the camp. Although these connections are often weak and lack direct interaction, they were felt

to be essential in critical moments, allowing refugees to exchange and receive information through the network (Govindaraj 2013).

5.3. Social Cohesion Messaging: Community Newspapers

A study conducted by Yamamoto (2011) shows that community newspapers contribute to fostering social cohesion by promoting community values, interests, and solidarity. They play a crucial role in building communities where members share common values that support the community's wellbeing. Yamamoto (2011) describes community newspapers as periodicals specifically tailored to serve particular communities, often geographically defined. While they may vary in frequency from daily to bi-weekly, weekly, or monthly, they serve as central hubs of local information. They report on the activities of local institutions such as government agencies, businesses, schools, churches, and volunteer organisations, typically aligning with these institutions' agendas and perspectives. News that might undermine local institutions or core community values tends to receive less coverage. Moreover, community newspapers place significant emphasis on social and personal news, featuring community members, places, events, and achievements.

Reading content that highlights the positive aspects of community life in community newspapers integrates readers more deeply into the local fabric, fostering community pride and identity. This sense of social cohesion is considered a significant outcome of engaging with community newspapers. While personal experiences and interpersonal communication are important sources of information about community affairs and atmosphere, they cannot fully substitute for community newspapers. These publications serve as specialised channels of local communication, offering insights into the social and cultural dimensions of community life that residents might not otherwise access due to time and resource constraints (Yamamoto 2011).

Several experiences of community newspapers in refugee camps exist. Some of the most notable for community cohesion, even though currently discontinued, include *The Road*, produced by young volunteers in Za'atari refugee camp (Jordan) with UNICEF funding, and *The Refugee Magazine* in Kakuma (Kenya), also produced by the youth through FilmAid's Journalism project.

5.4. Social Engagement: Social Media Platforms

The literature on the use of social media to build social cohesion in contexts of displacement is developing. In a related study exploring natural disasters, Fan et al. (2020) demonstrate that disruption within a community triggers increased activity on social media, where users create focal points to exchange information on various topics. The authors specifically explore the concept of 'emergent social cohesion', characterised by sudden, temporary, and widespread social connections aimed at sharing information about significant community events. Therefore, in contexts of emergencies such as forced displacement, the use of social media can facilitate emergent social cohesion, which significantly enhances communities' resilience in managing disruptions. In the face of distressing events, social networks enable information sharing and adaptive behaviours that aid communities in coping with impacts, allowing social cohesion to emerge.

At the same time, however, it is important to note that while digital communication technologies have the potential to enhance connections within local ethnic communities and across global transnational communities, they can also undermine social cohesion in other ways. For instance, digital tools like social media may perpetuate existing social inequalities by disadvantaging those with limited online access. This creates disparities influenced by economic status, education levels, literacy, language barriers, and age (Marlowe et al. 2017).
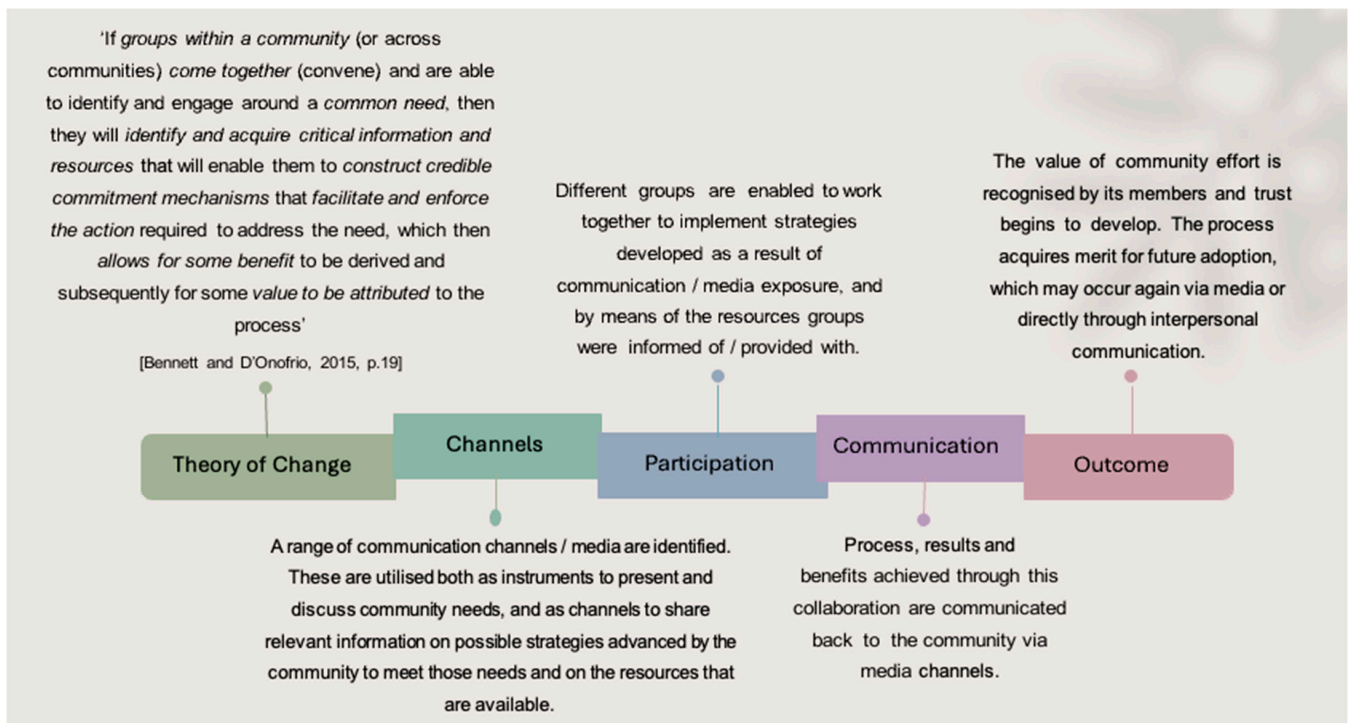
6. A Communication Framework for Enabling Social Cohesion in Refugee Camps

With conflicts persisting over long periods, displacement often spans many years, leaving little hope for a return home. As protracted displacement becomes more common, experts recognise that displaced individuals are not solely dependent on outside assistance.

Instead, they actively take steps to improve their situations, launching initiatives for self-reliance. In response, humanitarian organisations are adjusting their efforts to support these initiatives (Crawford et al. 2015). Protracted displacement varies widely, influenced by factors like conditions in refugees' home countries, socioeconomic factors in host countries, policy frameworks, opportunities for sustainable solutions, and international community involvement (UNHCR 2019). Yet, a commonality that can be observed is the feeling of transiency and non-belonging experienced by those who live through this situation, which continues to be felt even after decades.

In protracted displacement scenarios, refugee camps can morph into semi-permanent settlements, existing almost as separate entities from their surroundings. Initially conceived as emergency responses, these camps become places where individuals establish precarious roots for significant periods. Humanitarian aid in these settings blends emergency relief with long-term development efforts. While some scholars dispute the idea of refugee camps forming cohesive communities, Grayson (2014) argues that multiple communal identities emerge within camps, based on shared experiences and spatial proximity. This view contrasts with Hyndman (2000; cited in Grayson 2014), who contends that restricted mobility and lack of resources prevent refugees from forming structured communities, and Bulley (2014), who suggests that 'community is difficult to conceive of in a realm of pure domination and necessity' such as a camp (p. 66). Grayson (2014), however, suggests that over time, despite not forming a unified community, these co-existing groups develop meaningful connections.

The concepts of trust and participation expounded previously are critical for the development of social cohesion in these contexts. The theory of change provided by Bennett and D'Onofrio (2015, p. 19) offers a pertinent starting point to connect these and to bring to light how communication can be woven into a process that sees social cohesion coming to the surface. Figure 1 is helpful in visualising and outlining this progression.

Figure 1. A communication framework for promoting social cohesion in protracted encampment.

This framework clarifies how communication, also facilitated through contextually appropriate media channels, represents a thread through which relationships and collaboration begin to form. This finally leads to an overall recognition of the value and

importance of establishing bonds for the betterment of the situation of all groups and for the development of a more cohesive community.

Adopting a communication-based framework for enabling social cohesion with encamped populations is both beneficial and crucial in humanitarian work. It enhances engagement, fosters trust, empowers communities, and favours interventions that consider cultural differences. By prioritising communication, organisations can better meet the diverse needs of encamped populations; at the same time, through an effective application of the framework presented, they can also support communities' journeys towards self-reliance and integration. Through this framework, communities are enabled to find their own path to collaboration and trust-building thanks to a communication-driven process, facilitated by media channels, that provides relevant content around community needs and effective messaging that encourage collaboration.

7. Conclusions

Through a theory-based framework, this article has illuminated the role of communication in enabling social cohesion among diverse groups. This aims to encourage the adoption of a planned communication approach, such as the one proposed here, in the work of humanitarian organisations operating in refugee camps of a protracted nature. As the literature review presented has shown, multiple notions around the meaning of social cohesion exist. Yet, commonalities are found in elements such as trust, participation, and the need for a theory of change that allows different groups to recognise value in collaboration.

Four types of interventions that are useful to strengthen inter-group trust and collaboration have been introduced from the work of scholars in this field. Selected practical applications of communication to promote social cohesion in the form of both interpersonal and media-driven activities have then been presented to exemplify these typologies. While acknowledging inherent limitations in the assessment of the impact of these activities, which is not discussed here, their positive influence on inter-group dynamics and in fostering a sense of community solidarity is recognisable.

In conclusion, this paper has underscored the importance of thinking strategically about communication processes that can foster social cohesion within diverse communities, particularly in protracted refugee camp settings. By advocating for a communication-based approach to work with social cohesion in refugee camps, this paper has highlighted the value of structured methodologies that prioritise specific elements regarded as crucial in the emergence of cohesive inter-group environments. As humanitarian organisations continue to navigate complex socio-cultural landscapes, integrating these insights into their operational frameworks can pave the way for more inclusive and resilient communities in refugee settings.

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