

Linking social protection and humanitarian assistance

A toolkit to support social cohesion in displacement settings

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INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE OF THE TOOLKIT

The number of people in the world who are forcibly displaced has more than doubled in the last decade, passing the 100 million mark in 2022. Such displacement is increasingly long term, and those affected typically live among host communities rather than in camps.

Such shifts have required those responding to displacement to revise their approach, and they have increasingly moved away from traditional ‘care and maintenance’ models of humanitarian assistance – based on the immediate relief of emergency needs – towards development-oriented solutions. One potential solution is to engage more closely with national social protection systems as a crisis response mechanism. Yet the implications – including for **social cohesion** – of linking humanitarian assistance for displaced populations with social protection in different ways has been the subject of only limited investigation to date.

While there is no universal definition, **social cohesion** is about the nature of relationships between individuals and groups in a particular environment (**horizontal cohesion**), and between those individuals and groups and the institutions that govern them (**vertical cohesion**) (de Berry and Roberts, 2018).

Social cohesion is influenced by many factors including a government’s broad policies towards the host and displaced populations, the wider media and public discourse, economic and political climate, and historic relations and socio-economic profiles of the displaced and host populations (de Berry and Roberts, 2018; Gray Meral and Both, 2021).

The assistance provided by government or international agencies is unlikely ever to be the main factor shaping social cohesion, but it can play a part in attitudes among and interactions between displaced and host communities (i.e. horizontal cohesion), and between those communities and the state (i.e. vertical cohesion).

As part of a wider project funded under the Building the Evidence on Forced Displacement partnership, primary research has now been completed exploring the effects of assistance provision on social cohesion in three countries:

- Cameroon (Levine et al., 2022)
- Colombia (Ham et al., 2022)
- Greece (Tramontanis et al., 2022).

An overall thematic paper gathers the findings of these three case studies (Lowe et al., 2022), discussing in detail cross-country conclusions, including whether and how the impacts differ if assistance is in some way linked with the state’s social protection system rather than delivered separately by independent humanitarian agencies.

When considering the effects of assistance on social cohesion, two overarching insights emerged.

1. The effects depend on *perceptions* of assistance provision, which often diverge substantially from the *actual* arrangements in place, meaning that people do not necessarily know what assistance is being provided, to whom and from which source.
2. Where social tensions exist in relation to the assistance provided, they are unlikely to be *caused* by the assistance itself. Rather, assistance can aggravate existing tensions – where social discontent among the host community already exists and where institutions are perceived to be failing to address those concerns. Displaced people, and the assistance they receive, may become targets for pent-up resentment, particularly when this is encouraged by high-profile public or political figures.

With this toolkit, we aim to offer guidance for both government and non-governmental actors (i.e. implementing agencies and donors) providing assistance in displacement settings. We root that guidance in evidence gathered across three key country contexts (Cameroon, Colombia and Greece), and we draw conclusions and make recommendations at three levels:

- policy
- programme design
- administration and delivery.

We offer not only general guidance on assistance provision in such contexts but also more specific guidance for those wondering how – or indeed whether – to link humanitarian assistance with social protection systems.

In this way, we hope this toolkit will help governments and non-governmental actors to provide assistance in ways that promote social cohesion among host and displaced populations, and between those populations and the state.



POLICY



POLICY LESSONS

LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORKS

Social tensions relating to assistance provision are often a result of inadequate access to rights and opportunities in regions affected by displacement. Many areas hosting displaced populations have a long history of weak socio-economic development, high deprivation and only limited social protection provision; the provision of humanitarian assistance that is merely adequate for meeting displaced populations' needs can consequently seem unfair to neglected host populations. For their part, displaced populations may have experienced discrimination and denial of rights more broadly, either in principle (in law and policy) or in practice (in the implementation of those laws and policies). Strengthening relations among communities in affected regions (i.e. horizontally), and between those communities and the state (i.e. vertically), therefore means developing comprehensive legal and policy responses to meet the needs and maintain the rights of both displaced and host populations.

While assistance programming is only one component of the broader legal and policy framework underpinning displacement responses, our research suggests that linking assistance for displaced populations to a comprehensive, nationally-led legal and policy framework may help to enhance vertical cohesion. Enshrining assistance in law and policy may strengthen the ability of displaced people to claim the support to which they are entitled or enhance their access to wider state systems and services, as well as positively influence their perceptions of the state. However, embedding assistance for displaced persons



COUNTRIES IN FOCUS

Displaced populations in **Greece** were far less likely to be aware of and to access government assistance than were those in **Colombia**, where 99% of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and 89% of Venezuelans were aware of at least one social protection scheme, and relatively high proportions were accessing government programmes (Tramontanis et al., 2022; Ham et al., 2022). While one reason may be that displaced populations in Colombia face fewer linguistic and cultural barriers compared with those in Greece, these examples also suggest that it may be easier for displaced populations to claim their rights to assistance in practice when there are comprehensive and progressive legal and policy frameworks in place. In Colombia, those frameworks include the renowned Victims' Law and associated policy (for IDPs) and the Temporary Protection Status (for Venezuelans).

into national law or policy in principle does not automatically translate into improved provision – or perceptions of that provision – in practice. Sound programme design and delivery must partner with that law and policy for it to have positive effect.

Horizontal cohesion is more likely to be negatively affected if a host community perceives that legal and policy provisions for displaced households come at the cost of other vulnerable groups. Such negative perceptions are less likely when actors pursue displacement responses *alongside* strategic efforts to meet host communities' needs– and when those efforts are communicated clearly and sensitively.

Displaced people bring an advantage to the community – I believe that if we have received assistance, it's because of their presence.

Host respondent, Cameroon



General recommendations for effective assistance provision

- **Invest** in the broad socio-economic development of regions affected by displacement, through a long-term, cross-sectoral strategy that enhances services and opportunities for both host and displaced communities, in collaboration with diverse stakeholders.
- **Develop** policies to ensure that both host and displaced populations have legal recourse and effective access to their wide-ranging social, economic and political rights (e.g. access to documentation, freedom of movement, decent livelihoods and land on reasonable terms, financial services, justice and legal protection).
- **Pursue** long-term responses to the displacement alongside strategies aiming to meet vulnerable host populations' needs, **and communicate** commitment to these strategies.

In relation to social protection specifically:

- **Build** a comprehensive strategy to adequately meet displaced and host populations' needs, by expanding existing programmes, developing new government-led schemes, or working in collaboration with international, national or local partners to facilitate non-governmental provision.
- **Recognise** that assistance programming is only one component of effective social protection, alongside employment rights, social security and labour protections, and access to broader social services.

Recommendations for linking humanitarian assistance with social protection

- **Promote** a comprehensive nationally-led legal and policy framework to respond to displacement, and link assistance with that framework, but **recognise** that the principles enshrined in law or policy on paper may not equate to strong provision in practice.
- **Distinguish** between policy links and financial links, **and recognise** that even if international assistance for displaced populations is integrated within national policy frameworks, international financing will typically still be required.
- **Ensure** that assistance for displaced persons supplements sound assistance policies for vulnerable host populations, rather than taking away existing support.
- **Advertise** both the international financing of displacement assistance programmes and their role as complementary to, not competitive with, policies supporting vulnerable host populations.

GOVERNANCE AND COORDINATION

Concerns about unfair provision commonly relate more to the inadequate provision of assistance for host communities than they do to levels of provision for displaced persons. Effective governance and coordination of provision for both displaced and host populations across social protection and humanitarian systems may therefore enhance both horizontal and vertical cohesion, by maximising resources overall and plugging gaps in provision for neglected groups. Such coordination is important even in situations in which it is not feasible or desirable to integrate provision by governmental and non-governmental agencies.

If the government came to help us, it couldn't only help us. It would also have to help those in the village. That would be good for relations between us.

Refugee respondent, Cameroon



COUNTRIES IN FOCUS

In **Colombia**, policymakers felt that improved coordination between humanitarian and social protection actors had helped to expand and streamline the provision of assistance across different agencies (although such sentiments had not filtered through to perceptions of Venezuelan and IDP households themselves) (Ham et al., 2022).

Similarly, in **Cameroon**, some displaced and host respondents commented that better aligning humanitarian assistance with government systems in future might enable more needs to be met overall, thereby improving coverage levels (and in turn, potentially also relations) across the displaced and host populations. These increases in coverage are much-needed, since the current lack of provision for host populations can lead them to feel neglected by the state and international organisations (Levine et al., 2022).

General recommendations for effective assistance provision

- **Coordinate** with national and local government agencies, civil society and international actors across the humanitarian, development and peace-building nexus to:
 - **ensure** a coherent displacement response from the outset of a crisis
 - **maximize** scarce resources
 - **avoid** duplication or gaps within assistance provision (which are far more likely to trigger tensions than the specific source of assistance).

Recommendations for linking humanitarian assistance with social protection

- **Improve** coordination both within the humanitarian and social protection systems and across these two systems.
- If considering the use of a single cross-sector coordination mechanism, **ensure** that the mechanism proposed is capable of facilitating effective and reliable coordination.

FINANCING



COUNTRY IN FOCUS

The findings of the **Colombia** case study illustrate how public perceptions of sources of financing may vary depending on the displaced population in question (Ham et al., 2022).

- Respondents identified IDPs as vulnerable victims of internal conflict who strongly deserve the support of a host government.
- Respondents commonly believed that attention to Venezuelans was diverting national resources away from vulnerable Colombian citizens and that any further assistance for Venezuelans should be financed more heavily by international actors.

Perceptions about the source of funds for the support of displaced populations may have notable effects on both vertical and horizontal cohesion. Displaced populations may view the state more positively if they believe that the government is allocating attention and resources to them. Host populations, however, may come to resent the state – or displaced populations themselves – if they believe that such assistance is being financed at their own expense. This is particularly likely when assistance is being provided to non-citizens, and if it appears to divert resources directly away from vulnerable citizens or is viewed as drawing unaffordably on an already-stretched state budget (perhaps because it has been framed as such by influential political or public figures).

International financing is therefore important if programming for vulnerable citizens is to be sustained and, where necessary, scaled up, at the same time as assistance is extended to newly displaced households. With the United Nations' Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) and associated frameworks, the international community has in principle committed to sharing responsibility for global displacement challenges and easing the pressure on host countries. In practice, this means that sustained and adequate international financing needs to be provided to countries with large displaced populations.

Whether this international financing is channelled through or linked with national systems should be determined on a case-by-case basis, depending on the capacity, effectiveness and accountability with which these systems reach individuals within displaced or host communities. Where assistance for displaced populations is linked in some way with government systems and especially when that link is with the mainstream social protection system (i.e. assistance for the host population), our research suggests that both recipients and non-recipients alike may perceive that assistance is being funded from the state budget even when it is the subject of international financing.



General recommendations for effective assistance provision

- **Step up** provision for displaced populations (drawing on international support where feasible and necessary) rather than diverting funding away from other vulnerable communities.
- **Secure** sufficient, long-term international financing to sustain or scale up programming for vulnerable citizens at the same time as providing for newly displaced people, in line with GCR commitments.

Recommendations for linking humanitarian assistance with social protection

- **Ensure** that linked financing results in a net increase in adequate provision reaching populations in need.
- **Assess** provider agencies' operational and financial management systems to determine which channel(s) will expand assistance effectively in practice.

If there is social discontent about the domestic fiscal cost of displacement-hosting:

- **Consider** keeping the provision for displaced populations separate from mainstream social assistance and/or engaging a non-governmental/international agency in the (visible) implementation of the programme, in cases where the government is involved.
- **Advertise** where assistance is being financed by non-traditional or international sources.



PROGRAMME DESIGN LESSONS

The effects of assistance on horizontal and vertical cohesion often depend on specific aspects of programme design – notably:

- transfer design (i.e. the type and level of assistance provided)
- targeting criteria (i.e. the criteria determining who is eligible).

TRANSFER DESIGN

In relation to the transfer *type*, assistance to displaced households can help strengthen relations with host populations where it is felt to benefit the local economy or community, for example when it is spent at local businesses or shared with host neighbours. Conversely, it may damage relations when it is perceived to undercut local prices, benefit external rather than local markets or generate excessive demand for local services, thereby straining provision.

In relation to transfer *values*, displaced households have different and typically higher needs than host community households, because they have only limited access to land/housing, employment and community networks. It is often assumed that providing higher levels of support to displaced populations provokes social tensions, and that aligning transfer values across both displaced and host programming is preferable. However, our research suggests that this may not necessarily be true.



COUNTRY IN FOCUS

Respondents in **Cameroon** generally did not have any sense of *how much* support others were getting, and the specific value of assistance did not seem to be a notable source of tensions (Levine et al., 2022). However, there was evidence of the transfer *type* influencing host–community relations (horizontal cohesion).

- Some displaced households receiving food aid sold this locally at below-market prices, undercutting some host vendors' prices and inspiring their resentment.
- More positively, host populations often viewed displaced people – and assistance provision to them – more favourably because they recognised the benefits that accrued for the local economy, when displaced households shared food aid with host neighbours or spent cash (earned from selling food aid) at local businesses.

In some cases, differentiated levels of support may simply not be a matter of concern – either because they are unknown or because it is accepted that displaced households’ needs are different from those of host households. In other cases, transfer values may indeed contribute to tensions, but these may be rooted either in misconceptions about the generosity of provision (meaning that the actual transfer value is somewhat irrelevant), or they may persist even after attempts to align transfer values of a particular scheme. In these cases, concerns about unfair assistance levels may be a pretext for resentment rather than its real cause. Moreover, lower-value transfers may reduce the local economic or community benefits that accrue to host populations when assistance is provided to displaced households (negatively affecting horizontal cohesion) and may not meet the needs of recipients in practice (negatively affecting vertical cohesion).

When we are going to use the voucher or the school subsidy that my son receives, we do not use it here in the neighbourhood, and generally I try not to talk while waiting in line, knowing that yes, these vouchers usually generate controversies.

Venezuelan respondent, Colombia



General recommendations for effective assistance provision

- **Provide** transfer amounts that adequately meet recipients’ needs.
- **Pay** assistance in cash where feasible, since this typically produces greater economic benefits for the wider community, **and measure and communicate** these economic benefits.
- **Counter** misinformation about displaced populations **and promote** host community solidarity, including by highlighting the reasons why it is not only morally important but also socio-economically advantageous to assist displaced households (i.e. the benefits that displaced households can bring).
- **Use** programme messaging and content to inspire positive attitudes towards displaced people where additional programming is provided for host communities in response to a population influx:
 - **Highlight** where more resources are being provided to help host communities affected by the displacement influx.
 - **Promote** positive encounters between host and displaced communities.

Recommendations for linking humanitarian assistance with social protection

- **Avoid** pursuing the alignment of transfer values or the integration of programme design as objectives in themselves. If needs between host and displaced recipients are similar, it may be appropriate to provide similar support. But in many cases, displaced households have higher needs, and providing larger transfers adjusted to their needs will enable them to meet these needs, and contribute more meaningfully to the local community and economy.

TARGETING CRITERIA

Where the host community was receiving little support before the displaced population arrived and *new* assistance programmes are proposed, it may be feasible to design these new programmes to meet the needs of both displaced *and* host households – albeit with some tailoring to accommodate differences between the two (see ‘Transfer design’ above).

However, where displaced households are being considered for inclusion in *existing* social protection programmes, greater trade-offs may arise as eligibility criteria would need to be adjusted for displaced households (e.g. where proving long-term residence, tax-paying history or citizenship would be prohibitive). Such adjustments may strengthen the relationship between displaced populations and the state (vertical cohesion), since pretending to serve displaced populations through programmes for which they cannot qualify in practice will only damage those populations’ perceptions of the state. Where existing criteria are well-known and widely endorsed, however, adjusting them to facilitate the inclusion of displaced households may have negative effects on relations between displaced and host populations (horizontal cohesion) – especially where there are perceptions that displaced households (particularly non-citizens) are usurping provision meant for vulnerable host households.



COUNTRY IN FOCUS

In **Greece**, host communities often accepted that the state would provide assistance targeted specifically and temporarily at displaced populations, but were more resistant to the idea of adapting mainstream social protection criteria such that displaced residents might access general welfare assistance (Tramontanis et al., 2022).



General recommendations for effective provision of assistance

- **Consult** with affected communities from the outset and throughout programme design and implementation, in order to:
 - **explore** existing and evolving cohesion dynamics, and
 - **understand** communities’ perspectives about fair and effective programme design.
- **Ensure** that any populations targeted by a programme can meet the eligibility criteria.
- **Communicate** clearly that assistance to displaced people is supplementary to the assistance provided under existing social protection schemes. Where necessary, **highlight** external funding sources to counter concerns about national budget being unfairly diverted.

Recommendations for linking humanitarian assistance with social protection

- **Link** humanitarian assistance with social protection targeting criteria only when the displaced residents can meet these criteria in practice. Criteria adjustments may be required.
- **Consult and communicate** with host communities to determine the potential impacts of such adjustments on social cohesion and to clearly explain their rationale.
- Where there are strong concerns that displaced households are diverting support away from hosts, **consider** maintaining a visible distinction between existing provision and new programming developed in response to the displacement influx, and clearly advertise where external funding has been provided.



ADMINISTRATION AND DELIVERY TOOLS

Where programmes appear to be implemented in an unfair, corrupt or ineffective manner, this can aggravate tensions between communities and damage perceptions of the institutions associated with provision. Effective and transparent programme administration is therefore important for promoting both horizontal and vertical cohesion.

Our research found that people are more likely to assume that assistance is in some way financed by the state if it is administered (fully or partly) through government systems. This has several potential implications for humanitarian agencies considering linking assistance for displaced persons with national social protection systems.

- Such links may have negative effects on displaced–host community relations (horizontal cohesion) if there are salient concerns about the diversion of limited state resources away from vulnerable citizens.
- They may have positive impacts on displaced recipients' relations with and perceptions of the state (vertical cohesion) if displaced persons feel included within wider state systems and services (strengthening their access to rights and their sense of belonging), or if such links appear to evidence the government's concern for their situation. However, these positive effects are likely to accrue only if the administrative systems used are perceived to be fair, effective, capable and appropriate given displaced populations' unique protection risks.



COUNTRIES IN FOCUS

Compared with those not receiving assistance, respondents receiving assistance in both **Colombia** and **Cameroon** reported higher levels of trust in both government and international organisations (Ham et al., 2022; Levine et al., 2022).

In **Greece**, however, receipt of assistance was *not* associated with improved trust in government among either host or displaced respondents; rather, it was sometimes associated with *decreased* trust (Tramountanis et al., 2022). In some cases, respondents' perceptions of the Greek state may have been shaped by negative interactions with government officials when accessing the programme. In others, experiences of government policies or officials outside of the programme may have entrenched recipients' negative perceptions, such that any new assistance activity had only limited capacity to transform their views.



General recommendations for effective provision of assistance

- **Develop** transparent selection processes, clear communication strategies, and legal and policy frameworks outlining entitlements.
- **Build** registration and delivery mechanisms that are both reliable and accessible.
- **Create and advertise** effective channels for identifying and resolving complaints and appeals.
- **Refine** programmes proactively and continuously, based on effective monitoring and feedback processes.
- **Dismantle** barriers that may prevent particular vulnerable groups from accessing administrative systems in practice.

Recommendations for linking humanitarian assistance with social protection

- **Consider** keeping the registration, payment and management of assistance in some ways separate from routine systems if there is substantial resistance among the host population to the idea of spending national budget on displaced communities.
- **Avoid** channelling assistance through systems that are perceived to be unfair, ineffective or unable to absorb additional caseloads.
- **Investigate and resolve** displaced persons' protection concerns (including potential hesitancy to engage with state systems), before linking humanitarian and social protection administrative systems.
- **Ensure** that local facilities and services have sufficient capacity to absorb displaced caseloads, when assistance will involve or promote their shared use (e.g. adequate payment points and staffing at registration offices, and expanded capacity at schools and health facilities affected by sudden increases in demand).

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About this publication

The overall aim of this project is to better understand effective mechanisms for the integration of social protection programmes and humanitarian assistance. By providing clearer guidance about when, how and why different forms of integration might be considered, the project will develop the theory, evidence base and operational guidance on how social protection systems and humanitarian systems can work together to meet the needs of those affected by displacement crises. It draws on a total of six study sites that present different contexts of displacement and humanitarian response: Greece (Athens and Ioannina), Colombia (Bogotá and Cúcuta) and Cameroon (Far North and East). The project is led by ODI, who work in close collaboration with the Centre for Applied Social Sciences Research and Training (CASS-RT) in Cameroon, the School of Government at the University of Los Andes in Colombia and the National Centre for Social Research (EKKE) in Greece.

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This is one of four toolkits published as part of this project. The toolkits distil findings from the longer project publication and draw out policy recommendations for policymakers and practitioners. The other toolkits focus on contextual analysis, transfer adequacy and operational delivery.

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