



REFUGEES' PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL COMMUNITIES AND SOCIAL COHESION IN LEBANON, JORDAN AND IRAQ

POLICY BRIEF

Authored by Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Aydan Greatrick and Estella Carpi, with Amal Shaiah Istanbuli

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Access to *de jure* rights, such as residency and employment rights, and a supportive protection environment, are key for refugees to be able to safely participate in local community life. Since social tensions and animosity towards refugees are common but are not inevitable, policies and programmes have sought to enhance positive social relations and interactions in different ways. Priorities have included strengthening service provision on a municipal level for all residents (irrespective of their nationality and legal status); and creating shared spaces for social interactions, in addition to enhancing the frequency, nature and quality of refugees' interactions with different members of host communities.

However, legal barriers and political and media discourses that scapegoat refugees mean that refugees continue to be excluded, subject to discrimination and different forms of violence on the basis of their nationality, gender, and/or religion. Policies that exclude refugees based on their nationality by focussing on *Syrian refugees* may exclude refugees from Syria (including Iraqis, Kurds and Palestinians). Different groups of refugee women, men, girls, and boys are affected in particular ways by restrictions on their mobility, harassment, and a lack of protection. The absence of legal protections limits refugees' abilities to participate in local communities and in local economies, reinforcing a sense of insecurity and precarity.

The nature of refugee-host relations has increasingly been examined through the lens of 'social cohesion'. Social cohesion literature, policies and programmes have overwhelmingly focused on documenting host perceptions of refugees and host assumptions relating to the 'impact' of refugees on hosts. However, the assumption that the presence of refugees leads to negative impacts on members of host communities is not consistent with the evidence. Instead, the literature demonstrates that there is a need for a more contextually-specific understanding of the relationship between social cohesion and displacement. This is because social cohesion is often poorly defined, with an absence of appropriate methodologies, indicators and evaluations of programmes and policies relating to 'social cohesion'. Social cohesion and participation will vary depending on locality, requiring a more 'situational' approach to understand specific local dynamics.



Front cover photo:
Syrian and Palestinian children play together while a writing workshop takes place in the Jordanian town of Jarash.
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FACTORS OF SUCCESSFUL PARTICIPATION

Factors which enable or restrict safe forms of social interaction and participation in local communities include national and municipal policies, discourses, and actions; residing within spaces which may facilitate people's freedom of movement and social interaction; the nature of local-level dynamics; and inter-personal and inter-communal relationships in local communities. In the same host state, different municipalities, towns, cities, and camps provide different opportunities or barriers for refugees to participate safely. The significance of different factors on national, municipal and local levels varies by to context and the characteristics of the members of refugee and host communities.

Key factors for successful participation include:

- Access to legal rights: positive *de jure* and *de facto* rights and regulatory frameworks.
- A welcoming political and media discourse, policy, and practice.
- Access to the labour market, safe and dignified forms of employment, fair income.
- Inclusive settlement policies, safe and dignified housing, and safe spaces for interaction;
- Access to education.
- Access to services supporting health and wellbeing.
- Positive markers of 'Social Cohesion' (including):
 - Positive nature and degree of social interactions between refugees and hosts.
 - Positive host perceptions of refugees and the presumed 'impacts' of refugees.
 - Positive refugee perceptions of hosts.
 - Positive host and refugee perceptions of diverse institutions.
 - Positive perceptions of belonging to and being safe in host community and country.
 - Safety and stability.

Experiences and outcomes related to integration and participation will vary depending on refugees' intersecting identity markers (real and imputed) and demographic identifiers.

DEFINING SUCCESS AND FAILURE

Refugees from Syria in Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq aspire for higher standards of living, employment, housing, education, and higher degrees of community participation. However, this does not mean that refugees will necessarily want to have frequent interactions with members of local communities. This may be the case when participating in local communities leads to discrimination and a lack of safety. It is therefore important to identify what conditions facilitate people's ability to engage in *safe* modes of integration and participation. These will involve accounting for people's social backgrounds, local level dynamics, policy contexts, media discourses, and other factors, including access to *de jure* and *de facto* rights, the role of municipalities and a combination of the nature of refugee-host, refugee-refugee, refugee-institutional and host-institutional relations.

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Factors that contribute to levels of participation and cohesion:

Structural factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • History of relations with the country of origin. • Geographical and socio-economic factors. • Pre-existing levels of poverty. • Resource availability/scarcity. • Degree of municipal capacity to deliver basic services.
<i>De Jure</i> and <i>De Facto</i> rights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Residency and employment rights. • Access to official documentation. • Experiences of detention or deportation due to issues around documentation. • <i>De jure</i> rights are essential but inefficient in the absence of <i>de facto</i> protection.
Municipalities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Degree to which services are integrated for all residents. • Quality of media and political discourse about refugees at the municipal level. • Types of settlement available and/or required (urban, rural, camp-based). • Refugees' experiences of participation will vary depending on locality.
Refugee-Host relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demographic characteristics influence refugee-host relations (i.e., similarities or differences in religious, cultural and social norms). • Refugees and hosts are not homogenous groups. Inter-host and inter-refugee dynamics also contribute to levels of participation.

Recommendations arising in the literature:

- Support host states to develop national legislative frameworks that uphold refugees' rights writ large.
- Provide high-quality integrated service provision for all residents.
- Raise awareness of migrants' rights, intercultural awareness, human rights and anti-discrimination principles among civil servants and officials operating at the state and municipal level.
- Promote and support long-term, high-quality, integrated services for refugees and hosts.
- Establish initiatives to support and maintain positive interpersonal interactions – recognising the significance of host perceptions on issues including opportunities, services and jobs.
- Run awareness-raising and media campaigns to combat discrimination against refugees.

NAVIGATING TENSIONS THROUGH NUANCED POLICY

It is often assumed by policy makers, politicians and the media that the arrival of refugees inevitably leads to tensions. However, tensions are not inevitable. For example, tensions over employment are often seen as a significant ‘trigger’ of social conflict between hosts and refugees. However, this is based on empirically-unfounded perceptions and representations that refugees negatively impact local economies and lead to higher rates of unemployment. Economic interactions may become sources of tension, but this is because they are prone to power dynamics and exploitation affecting both refugees and hosts. While Lebanese host members may perceive Syrians as stealing jobs and driving down wages, Syrians face exploitation and poor working conditions.

Nonetheless, the *assumption* of negative impacts is perpetuated because indicators and evaluations of programmes and policies relating to ‘social cohesion’ take the reasons for refugee-host community tensions for granted. Instead, key factors influencing social tensions often pre-date the arrival of refugees, and include:¹

- High levels of poverty, resource scarcity, lack of effective governing institutions.
- Differences in religious, cultural, and social norms, including perceptions linked to gender, and a lack of social networks.
- Access, affordability, and quality of housing.
- Economic competition over jobs and livelihood opportunities.
- Access to and quality of basic education and basic public services.
- The role of international aid (distribution, availability and perceptions of inequity and corruption).
- The role of social, local, and international media and the framing of issues.

ENHANCING SOCIAL COHESION

Refugees are often blamed by different stakeholders – including politicians and the media – for undermining citizens’ access to different services and resources, even when pressures on such services pre-date displacement. There is a need to recognise the intersecting roles of various factors, and to consider these in the development and evaluation of different programmes, with recommendations including the following:

- High levels of poverty, resource scarcity, lack of effective governing institutions.
- Develop integrated area-based responses that redress pre-existing structural inequalities, such as policies and programmes to address poverty and resource scarcity amongst all residents.
- Strengthen national- and municipal-level capacity for the delivery of public goods and services.
- Enhance access, affordability and quality of housing for all residents.
- Increase the quality of interactions, perceptions and attitudes between refugees and hosts.
- Address the reality and/or hosts’ perceptions that competition over jobs has increased.
- Mitigate against host members’ perceptions that resources and support are unfairly distributed.
- Enhance livelihoods opportunities for all residents (refugees and hosts alike).
- Work with the media to challenge xenophobic rhetoric that blames and scapegoats refugees.
- Support local systems to resolve disputes and reduce tensions.
- Integrated education and tackling inequalities that prevent access to education to ensure participating in education is safe and that schools are non-discriminatory environments.

¹ Recommendations paraphrased from Guay, 2015. *Social Cohesion Between Syrian Refugees and Urban Host Communities in Lebanon and Jordan*. World Vision International.

GENDER, AGE AND SOCIAL COHESION

Gender, age and other social factors inform patterns of social inclusion and exclusion. Men are often excluded from or opt-out of diverse programmes and services for a range of reasons, with detrimental effects on their well-being and ability to participate in many aspects of local community life. Women and girl refugees often face diverse kinds of sexual- and gender-based violence (SGBV), which limit their abilities to safely participate in local communities.

Particular groups of women facing specific risks of violence and social isolation include female-headed households; unmarried and/or recently widowed women; women with disabilities; and LBT refugees. As men's mobility is often limited due to a fear of detention and deportation, refugee women may be more likely to work to support their families; this may, in turn, increase their risk of being exposed to harassment and violence.

Children and adolescents with refugee backgrounds are also subjected to different forms of exclusion and violence. Male children and youth are frequently targeted by hosts due to broader host-refugee tensions, and children and adolescents often face different types of harassment, bullying and exclusion in neighbourhoods and schools. Adolescent dwellers of informal tented settlements (ITS); adolescent girls; married girls; adolescents with disabilities; and Palestinian children and adolescents from Syria are all at particular risk of different forms of social isolation and exclusion from policies and programmes.

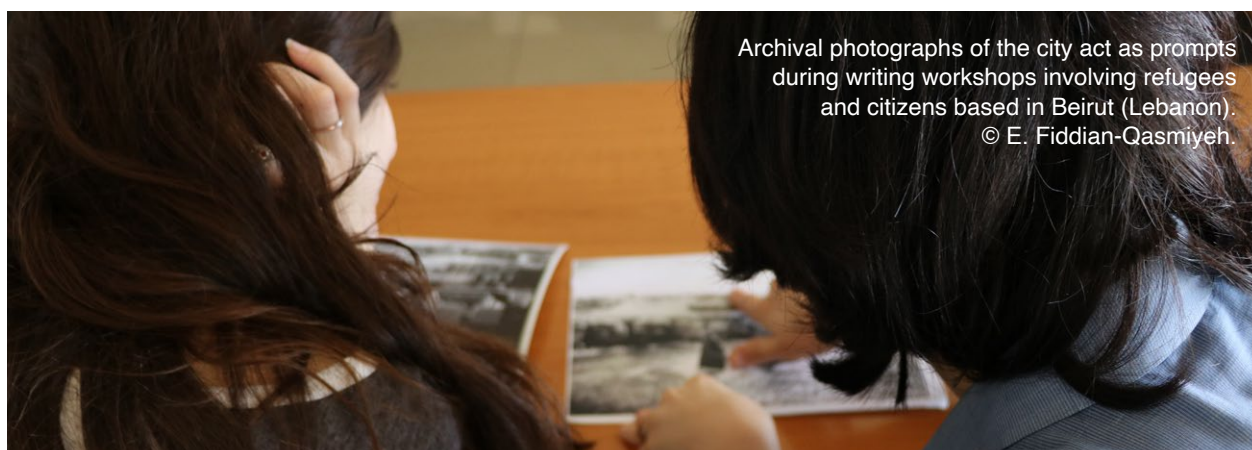


Two women from Syria participating in a writing workshop in the Jordanian town of Irbid.
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TOWARD A SITUATIONAL APPROACH TO VULNERABILITY

In contrast to an ‘essentialist approach’ (i.e., focusing on a single, fixed category such as ‘refugee women’), a ‘situational’ approach accounts for the particular factors that lead to specific people being able or unable to safely participate in particular situations (i.e., a disabled adolescent from a minoritised ethnic group may be vulnerable to particular forms of exploitation and discrimination in a particular setting, such as a school, whilst being safe and well supported at home).

Identifying the particular risks faced by different people must take place in conjunction with attention to the impacts of diverse structural factors, including a lack of *de jure* and *de facto* rights and wider structures of inequality. Future research, policy and practice should be sensitive to the ways that intersecting identity markers and demographic characteristics lead to particular forms of exclusion and inclusion in specific situations and contexts. Promoting a more comprehensive, intersectional approach can promote safe and dignified forms of social interactions and social relations and help address the causes of longer-term exclusions.



Archival photographs of the city act as prompts during writing workshops involving refugees and citizens based in Beirut (Lebanon).
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ABOUT THIS POLICY BRIEF

This Policy Brief is part of a series that synthesises findings from a longer report on Development Approaches to Forced Displacement from Syria in Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq, based on a state-of-the-art desk-based literature review of over 260 sources published between 2016-2021.

The **Full Report** is available here: www.geog.ucl.ac.uk/research/research-centres/migration-research-unit/pdfs/dafdfullreport

A **Summary Report** is available here: www.geog.ucl.ac.uk/research/research-centres/migration-research-unit/pdfs/dafdsummary

Other Policy Briefs related to this study are also available:

- **Policy Brief** on Development Approaches to Forced Displacement from Syria in Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq. Available here: www.geog.ucl.ac.uk/research/research-centres/migration-research-unit/pdfs/dafdbriefing
- **Policy Brief** on Refugees’ Onward Migration Decision Making in Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq. Available here: www.geog.ucl.ac.uk/research/research-centres/migration-research-unit/pdfs/dafdombriefing



A Syrian man from the city of Daraa gently holds his wife's ring in Jordan. Displaced and separated from his family by the conflict in Syria, he was informed by phone that his wife had died in childbirth. He was unable to bury his wife, and is unable to return to Syria to meet his child. "The ring is a part of me."

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