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Loss, damage and social cohesion

Impacts and next steps for policy and programming

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LOSS, DAMAGE AND SOCIAL COHESION

Impacts and next steps for policy and programming

Lily Salloum Lindegaard and Francis Xavier Jarawura



DIIS · DANISH INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIES



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Globally, climate change is rapidly intensifying but understanding of its social impacts remains limited. This report – part of a groundbreaking study on climate-related losses and damages to social relations and social cohesion – sheds new light on social impacts in climate vulnerable areas. It provides critical insights for policy and programming and sets the stage for further research and policy engagement.

The report analyses trends in international engagement with social cohesion and novel empirical data on losses to social cohesion on the ground, with particular focus on situations of climate change and forced mobility. It includes a literature review, a policy and programming review, empirical data collection in the Upper West Region of Ghana and Tillabéri Region of Niger, and interviews with practitioners.

In Ghana and Niger, we identify the following key findings on current dynamics between social cohesion, climate change and forced mobility; what implications these have for those affected; and what perceived avenues there are for addressing cohesion losses. These are discussed in depth in the report.

Empirical findings on social cohesion, climate change and forced mobility:

- Considerable losses and damages, including to social cohesion.
- Complex mobility dynamics, with a high degree of forced mobility.
- Centrality of broader environmental, sociocultural and temporal factors in impacts to social cohesion.
- Declining quality of mutual support, linked to growing individualism and monetisation of support.
- Trade-offs in social cohesion, especially for marginal groups.
- Context dependence of relevant authorities and organisations for cohesion.
- Some hope for improvement and unexpected ideas for solutions.

To link to policy and practice, we analyse current approaches and programming of major actors engaging with social cohesion, complementing this with insights from practitioners. This yields the following key insights, elucidated in the report.

Insights from policy and practice:

- Current social cohesion efforts are driven by major donors and international organisations.
- Social cohesion programming focuses on settings with conflict and displacement.
- Other vulnerable areas also experiencing social cohesion losses are overlooked.
- Social cohesion approaches may not be clearly defined, be contextually relevant or have a clear theory of change.
- Social cohesion approaches may be overly optimistic or fail to recognise trade-offs in cohesion.
- Protracted insecurity and interlinked crises will increasingly require integrated approaches.

On the basis of empirical and programming analysis, we find that losses to social cohesion are likely more widespread than realised, especially in areas highly impacted by climate change. These losses can have significant, negative impacts on both material and social well-being, which are likely going overlooked and unaddressed.

Mainstream conflict, displacement and climate programming approaches may not be well-suited to addressing social cohesion losses, for instance due to lack of focus on complex, contextual cohesion dynamics or social dynamics generally. Finally, many of the contexts with considerable cohesion losses are likely also experiencing other major challenges, such as forced mobility or insecurity, requiring approaches that can simultaneously address interlinked challenges.

To address these observed challenges and shortcomings, we propose the following takeaways. For each, we provide a brief discussion and concrete steps for actors engaging with or considering engaging with social cohesion, to support informed approaches.

Key takeaways for social cohesion engagement:

- Rethink definitions.
- Take stock and update approaches.
- Consider other contexts beyond conflict and displacement.
- Develop programming to integrate social aspects and address loss.
- Integrate broader environmental, sociocultural and temporal dynamics.
- Recognise complexity and trade-offs in cohesion.
- Enable context-based, community-driven efforts.
- Establish innovative partnerships and integrated approaches.



Photo and description: BXXNG9. Irene Abdou / Alamy Stock Photo.
In the town of Djibo in northern Burkina Faso. November 2010.

INTRODUCTION

Globally, climate change is rapidly intensifying, but understanding of its social impacts remains limited. This report – part of a groundbreaking study on climate-related losses and damages to social relations and social cohesion – sheds new light on social impacts in climate vulnerable areas. It provides critical insights for policy and practice and sets the stage for further research and policy engagement.

Improved understanding of social impacts of climate change is crucial as already severe climate change impacts are on track to worsen. Globally, we are nearing the 1.5°C limit established in the Paris Agreement – a limit ‘not considered “safe” for most nations, communities, ecosystems and sectors’, and posing ‘significant risks to natural and human systems’ (IPCC, 2019: 44). Already now, the impacts of climate change are characterised as ‘widespread’ and ‘pervasive’ (IPCC, 2022: 9), increasingly touching on all facets of life and affecting vulnerable, exposed populations most acutely.

Responses to date have focused especially on supporting resilience and adaptation and saving lives and livelihoods. Yet as climate change penetrates daily lives, environments and societies, it is increasingly clear that fundamental aspects of these structures and the relations that maintain them are under strain. This includes the social fabric of societies and communities that is fundamental to their identities and integrity as well as their resilience. For the most vulnerable communities, often with limited support from state or external organisations, this social fabric is the primary protection from external shocks and stresses.

In international policy and programming, we are currently witnessing revived focus on social relations, particularly a focus on social cohesion. Social cohesion can be loosely understood as a dynamic quality of social ‘togetherness’ in a particular society or community (Walkenhorst and Unzicker, 2018) that can include elements of belonging, trust, co-operation, identity and many others. It is recognised as an important element of thriving societies in its own right as well as a crucial mechanism for enabling resilience and co-operation within societies. Attention to fostering and strengthening social cohesion is increasingly evident in a range of fields including international development, conflict and peacebuilding, and mobility and displacement – and also growing in climate response.

This report therefore provides insights into social cohesion impacts linked to climate change, from a loss and damage perspective. This is based on increasing evidence of negative social impacts and losses in areas highly affected by climate change. The report presents key findings of the study ‘Displacement, climate change and social cohesion: exploring loss and damage dynamics’, a co-operation between the Danish Institute for International Studies and the Danish Red Cross, together with the Niger Red Cross and research partners in Ghana. In line with the focus of the overall study, the report has a particular focus on social cohesion and loss and damage in situations of forced mobility. Many of the findings are, however, relevant to social cohesion efforts more broadly.

The report draws on four pillars of analysis, that make up the following sections:

- One, an overview of the current **landscape of social cohesion approaches** in research and international policy and programming;
- Two, **linking to loss and damage**, through a synthesis of findings of the impacts of climate change on social relations and insights into addressing these;
- Three, novel **empirical study of social cohesion** changes in two highly climate vulnerable areas in the Sahel and West Africa;
- Four, analysis of current **policy and programming efforts**, including key trends, pitfalls and potentials.

Drawing on the key findings across these pillars, we provide main takeaways and concrete steps for international actors engaging with social cohesion in climate vulnerable and fragile areas.

Social cohesion and loss and damage

Attention to social cohesion is also growing in relation to climate change. This is taking place in the overlap between climate change and the fields of development, conflict and mobility noted above. It is also prompted by increasing effects of climate change on social relations and cohesion on the ground. Climate change's effects on social cohesion are particularly important to understand in relation to loss and damage. Loss and damage describes the negative impacts of climate change, which cannot or have not been prevented by mitigation and adaptation actions. This includes economic losses from climate change impacts, such as loss of income or property, as well as non-economic losses that can be closely linked to social relations and cohesion, such as loss of cultural practices.

As climate impacts intensify, loss and damage has become a burgeoning field of policy, research and practice. Recent policy developments, including the establishment of a Loss and Damage Fund and funding arrangements at the 27th Conference of the Parties (COP27) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 2022 in Egypt and their operationalisation at COP28 in 2023 in the United Arab Emirates, have laid the groundwork for increased finance and programming specifically to loss and damage under the UNFCCC. This will not only mean increased development of dedicated loss and damage policy and programming in the coming years, but it will also affect the mandates and landscape of actors working in these fields. Both of these changes require consideration by actors working with related topics, including with negative social impacts of climate change. This can include work with social cohesion and inclusion, psychosocial support, or a range of other fields increasingly integrating social awareness and programming, e.g. livelihood support, resource management, social services and infrastructure.

In addition, improved understanding of potential social losses linked to climate change – coupled with engaged outreach and dissemination – can support the everyday practices of a variety of actors on the ground, including communities themselves.

Spotlight on forced mobility

To examine the relationship between social cohesion and loss and damage, we focus on situations of forced climate-related mobility, including displacement and forced migration. Attention to social relations linked to displacement especially has grown in recent years, specifically social relations among displaced populations and between displaced and host communities. In addition to this, our own research on

climate-related mobility has indicated mixed, including negative, social effects of climate migration for mobile populations as well as those remaining behind. There are indications of loss of social cohesion, with potential negative effects at community, household, and individual levels. These include loss of identity and cultural practices, loss of community cohesion, loss of informal social safety nets and negative impacts to well-being more broadly.

These impacts include non-economic losses with potentially severe and long-lasting consequences, yet they are not well understood. At the same time, existing research indicates that impacts to social cohesion can be mixed, with potential positive elements emerging even in situations of forced climate-related mobility. A knowledge gap therefore exists in potential loss of social cohesion in relation to climate-related mobility and its implications across the mobility spectrum: for sending areas, receiving areas and mobile persons themselves.

Findings on social cohesion and loss and damage in contexts affected by forced mobility are crucial for understanding rapidly shifting contexts on the ground. Insights and learning are especially important for actors actively engaging in these settings, both in seeking to support social cohesion of affected individuals and communities, as well as in other programming, where insights on social dynamics will also be relevant. This is especially true as emerging social cohesion programming takes novel approaches, learning underway even as such programming continues to expand.

Study approach

To examine the relationship between social cohesion and loss and damage, with focus on climate-related forced mobility, we conducted a literature review, a multi-sited empirical study, policy and programming analysis and key informant interviews of practitioners.

The literature review provides an overview of existing knowledge and approaches to social cohesion. It draws on scholarly and grey literature, with three main aims: (1) provide an overview of definitions of and approaches to social cohesion in research and policy; (2) synthesise findings on social cohesion in relevant fields, including international development, conflict and peacebuilding, and forced mobility – including experiences with assessing and addressing social cohesion challenges; and (3) explore linkages between social cohesion and loss and damage, including emerging findings on social cohesion impacts linked to environmental and climate stresses and shocks and relevant responses.

The multi-sited empirical study provides novel primary research exploring perceptions of climate change, social cohesion and elements of loss among communities affected by climate change and forced mobility in climate vulnerable settings. The study focused on the following geographical contexts, each providing insight into different aspects of the identified themes of the study:

- **Upper West Region of northern Ghana**, where localised floods are becoming increasingly common, linked to extreme rainfall, against a backdrop of slow-onset climate change. They are driving recurring, short-term displacements, as well as dynamics of forced migration and immobility. In this setting, the study considers social cohesion and loss and damage dynamics in relation to (1) recurring displacements, (2) forced (im)mobility, and (3) sending areas.
- **Tillabéri Region in western Niger**, where a significant number of people are experiencing longer term displacement due to conflict and security issues as well as climate stress and extreme weather events. In some cases, displaced persons have experienced secondary displacements, where they are displaced again, for instance due to flooding, after an initial displacement. In addition, there have been issues of tensions in displaced receiving areas between displaced and host populations. In this setting, the study focuses on (1) multiple displacements, (2) issues of conflict/security, and (3) receiving areas.

The study was designed to include key informant interviews, a survey of individuals in the study sites, supplementary interviews with some survey respondents and focus group discussions where the security situation allowed. These were supplemented by secondary data on issues of security, climate and environmental change, conditions of displaced persons, etc. This study design was carried through in Ghana. However, due to a shifting political situation in Niger and delays in obtaining an ethical approval, the study design was altered in Niger to rely on key informant interviews and secondary data. Unfortunately, this means that perceptions of community members are not well represented in this report. Instead, additional data was gathered on perceptions of policymakers and implementers that are actively working with issues of social cohesion, climate change and forced mobility through key informant interviews. As this report was being finalised, the ethical clearance was obtained, and further data collection in Niger will be carried out. For the latest updated data and analysis, see the project website at www.diis.dk/social-cohesion. In addition, a more comprehensive data report with qualitative and quantitative findings from Ghana is also available at the project website.

The **analysis of policy and programming** provides a brief assessment of current programmatic approaches to improve social cohesion. It provides examples of existing interventions with focus on elements including climate and resources, displacement and conflict and peacebuilding.

This is combined with insights from **key informant interviews with practitioners** working with issues of climate change, forced mobility and social cohesion. Key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted with practitioners working in Niger as well as internationally with these issues. They were conducted with Danish Red Cross and Niger Red Cross staff as a supplementary source of information due to the challenges obtaining research permits in Niger for data collection with community members directly. These interviews provided insights into dynamics in Tillabéri, Niger, as well as further afield.

For additional information on methods, see the Annex.

Together, the analysis is able to combine existing knowledge, novel primary research and analysis of recent policy and programming to provide valuable new insights to a rapidly developing area of social cohesion impacts and interventions.



Photo and description: https://www.flickr.com/photos/ericsson_images/8864871380/in/album-72157633756504741/ Ericsson / Flickr.com. Conducting baseline surveys in northern Ghana. 2012.

SOCIAL COHESION IN RESEARCH, POLICY AND PRACTICE

In the recent decades, the concept of 'social cohesion' has been revived in research and policy spheres in relation to issues around development, conflict and human mobility. While social cohesion is increasingly emphasised in policy spheres – by Western and international organisations especially – the concept is fluid and has been used differently by various actors and in different fields.

This section provides an overview of main approaches to social cohesion and its use in different fields. It draws on academic and grey literature to examine: (1) how social cohesion is defined, also vis-à-vis other social concepts; (2) how social cohesion is approached in relevant fields of international policy, analysis and intervention; (3) how it can be assessed and addressed; and (4) what key themes emerge across fields and approaches to social cohesion.

It is important to note that the concept and approaches outlined here provide an overview of international knowledge and approaches. Understanding and responding to social challenges on the ground will require situated knowledge of how social well-being and challenges are understood in a particular context.

DEFINITIONS AND LINKS TO OTHER SOCIAL CONCEPTS

Within research, social cohesion has been understood as a dynamic quality of social relations linked to a shared sense of identity, values and norms (Chan et al., 2006; Kusche, 2019). Policy-related work has communicated it most generally as a ‘quality of communal “togetherness”’ (Walkenhorst and Unzicker, 2018). Traditional conceptualisations of social cohesion were more conservative, emphasising homogeneity (Jensen, 2010), while current approaches emphasise diversity and inclusion. Overall, approaches recognise social cohesion as an important element of thriving societies.

Within policy spheres, use of social cohesion varies across institutions, also in relation to particular focus areas and policy aims (Jensen, 2010; Holloway and Sturridge, 2022; see also discussion in Valli et al., 2019). Despite many major organisations working with social cohesion – e.g. OECD, Council of Europe and European Union, World Bank – definitions have long been lacking or vague (Jensen, 2010; Rodgers, 2022). In recent years, increased focus on social cohesion has led to greater efforts to clarify the concept, both in policy and in research. Table 1, to the left, provides an overview of current definitions.

As is clear from this overview, elements of social cohesion differ across definitions, and include, for instance, sense of identity, sense of belonging, shared values, trust, focus on the common good, positive social relations, low inequality and connectedness. Definitions vary in their scope and flexibility, e.g. some are broader, indicative definitions, while others entail a fixed set of core elements. There are thus many differing approaches to social cohesion within both policy-related organisations and research.

Social cohesion has also been linked to other social concepts, especially social inclusion, social capital and social sustainability, though there is limited agreement on the distinctions and relationships between them. At times they are used almost interchangeably. An analysis prepared for the United Nations (UN) Research Institute for Social Development report, for instance, finds that some organisations previously


equated social cohesion with social capital, or linked it to social inclusion (Jensen, 2010). A recent example from World Bank efforts to more clearly define these concepts and their relationships place social cohesion and social inclusion both as subcomponents of social sustainability (World Bank Group, 2023), while an OECD definition defines social inclusion as a subcomponent of social cohesion (OECD, 2011).

Table 1. Definitions of social cohesion

International actor	Definition used
UNDP	'Social cohesion is the extent of trust in government and within society and the willingness to participate collectively toward a shared vision of sustainable peace and common development goals' (UNDP 2020, p. 7).
OECD	'A cohesive society works towards the well-being of all its members, fights exclusion and marginalisation, creates a sense of belonging, promotes trust, and offers its members the opportunity of upward mobility. This report looks at social cohesion through three different, but equally important lenses: social inclusion, social capital and social mobility' (OECD 2011, p. 17).
World Bank Group	'Social cohesion is a sense of shared purpose, trust and willingness to cooperate among members of a given group, between members of different groups, and between people and the state' (Chatterjee et al. 2023, p. 5).
The Network International Cooperation in Conflicts and Disasters, GIZ	'Social cohesion is a descriptive trait of a society; it expresses the quality of co-existence within that society. A cohesive society has close social relations, a strong feeling of connectedness/focus on the common good as well as positive state-society relations (core dimensions)' (GIZ-NICD 2021).
Researchers	Definition used
Leininger et al.	'Social cohesion refers to the vertical and horizontal relations among members of society and the state that hold society together. Social cohesion is characterised by a set of attitudes and behavioural manifestations that includes trust, an inclusive identity and cooperation for the common good' (Leininger et al. 2021, p. 3).
Fonseca, Lukosch and Brazier	'The ongoing process of developing well-being, sense of belonging, and voluntary social participation of the members of society, while developing communities that tolerate and promote a multiplicity of values and cultures, and granting at the same time equal rights and opportunities in society' (Fonseca et al. 2019).
Schiefer and van der Noll	'We identified three core dimensions of social cohesion that the majority of social cohesion approaches agree on: social relations, sense of belonging, and orientation towards the common good. Three other, often incorporated, components of social cohesion— (in)equality, quality of life, and shared values—we argue, should however be treated as antecedents or consequences of social cohesion...!' (Schiefer & van der Noll 2017).
Langer, Stewart, Smedts and Demarest	'We distinguish three dimensions of social cohesion; i.e. the extent of perceived inequalities, the level of societal trust, and the strength of people's adherence to their national identity. Importantly, our social cohesion index is based on individuals' perceptions...!' (Langer et al. 2017).

Source: Compiled by report authors.

These different definitions reflect different understandings of the mechanisms producing cohesion and the results of social cohesion. This can translate into unclear or diverging theories of change in efforts to address social cohesion, including focus areas, operational approaches and aims (Rodgers, 2022). It also means that social cohesion is a malleable policy concept, which can be employed in a variety of ways in relation to particular aims, agendas or fields of interventions (Cheong et al., 2007; Jensen, 2010; Finn, 2017). Differences in policy approaches can be decisive for the focus of social cohesion policies and interventions as they direct attention to particular aspects of social cohesion, or certain mechanisms through which it can be affected (Rodgers, 2022). Therefore, attention to definitions and concepts is important.



Social cohesion is a malleable policy concept, which can be employed in a variety of ways in relation to particular aims, agendas or fields of interventions.

Increasingly, efforts are being made to generate a common definition of social cohesion across geographical and cultural contexts, in response to the lack of conceptual clarity around social cohesion (see e.g. Chan et al., 2006; Walkenhorst and Unzicker, 2018; Burns et al., 2021). Research and policy efforts often seek standardisation of definitions and approaches across contexts in order to measure, assess and respond commensurably. However, empirical studies and practical implementation indicate that social cohesion is highly context-based and subjective (Langer et al., 2017). It is not surprising that the elements constituting social cohesion, or how these elements are expressed or understood, would differ significantly across and within continents, societies and groups (Holloway and Sturridge, 2022). Some researchers point to the problematic nature of transplanting conceptions of social relations – and the complex social and cultural relations entailed – across cultures, development contexts and continents (Barolsky, 2016; Barolsky and Borges, 2019; Holloway and Sturridge, 2022). They suggest instead greater explorative social cohesion research in the Global South and developing country contexts (Barolsky and Borges, 2019), as well as employing contextually-anchored concepts of cohesion, for instance employing ‘ubuntu’ in South Africa rather than importing a Western concept of cohesion (Barolsky, 2016). And when using contextual concepts, use them to understand what elements are relevant to cohesion in the particular context, rather than merely using them as a translation of Western concepts of social cohesion (Holloway and Sturridge, 2022).

We therefore suggest the need for balance between definitional clarity and contextual relevance. Moving towards a contextually tailored definition is in line with a grounded theory research approach, which is a more bottom-up, rather than top-down approach to explaining social phenomena. While such an approach can add complexity to policy and programming efforts, it is better able to capture local understandings, challenges and also possibilities. It may therefore be able to support better interventions and outcomes. Similarly grounded approaches have recently gained traction in the form of 'localisation' in development and 'locally led adaptation'. We reflect further on this in the section 'Learnings from policy and practice' and our final takeaways.

SOCIAL COHESION ACROSS FIELDS

Governments and international organisations have increasingly focused on fostering social cohesion over the last few decades. In the early 2000s, this was linked to a re-emphasis on social policy and outcomes after structural adjustment and economic transitions (Jensen, 2010). More recently, the concept has been applied to areas affected by migration, conflict and displacement. In these fields, focus on social cohesion is an expansion of previous policy agendas focusing to a greater degree on coexistence and integration (Rodgers, 2022; see e.g. OECD, 2011) and entails intensified engagement with social aspects of mobility and conflict (Rodgers, 2022; see e.g. World Bank Group, 2021) Attention to social cohesion is also being promoted as a larger issue within social development broadly, based on the understanding that ongoing socioeconomic transformations, e.g. globalisation, may entail significant social disruption (Healy et al., 2016).

This review of social cohesion across fields focuses on how it is applied in policy and practice, especially regarding climate-related displacement. It therefore touches particularly on relevant fields of development, conflict, forced mobility and environmental change.

International development

Literature on social cohesion and development explores how development impacts and interventions affect social cohesion as well as how social cohesion can support development processes. Early work on social cohesion has linked it to well-functioning institutions and governance and to positive economic development outcomes (Easterly et al., 2006).

Subsequent research, however, has had mixed findings. A recent review of globalisation impacts have suggested that social cohesion can be negatively affected by some forms of economic development, for instance trade impacts on local livelihoods (Vrolijk, 2023). Looking at development interventions, a study of community-driven development approaches across countries indicated only weak improvements in social cohesion, though noted that this may have been due to implementation shortcomings (King et al., 2010). Regarding environmental and resource challenges, studies suggest that resource management and social cohesion be mutually supportive, linked through collective action and practices that support perceived fair access and distribution (Bisung et al., 2014; Khaneiki, 2022), though this suggests that breakdown in one may lead to negative effects on the other.

In terms of the impacts of particular interventions on social cohesion, there have been mixed outcomes across contexts and sectors, see Box 1. See also the section 'Addressing cohesion'.

BOX 1. MIXED EFFECTS OF DEVELOPMENT INTERVENTIONS ON SOCIAL COHESION

Social protection efforts in Malawi have had mixed effects on social cohesion. They have both led to some improvements in group trust and co-operation, but in some instances have also prompted tensions linked to perceptions of unfairness (Burchi and Roscioli, 2022).

Sustainability certification in Ghana has shown multiple, diverging social cohesion outcomes, including: enhanced interactions among participants, contributing to new relations among community groups; negative impacts for some informal institutions and a particular societal group; potential undermining of collective action in targeted communities; and no broader effect on communities' overall social cohesion (Ollendorf et al., 2023).

Locally managed conditional cash transfers in Tanzania created increased trust in elected officials, which can be characterised as increased vertical social cohesion. This was especially in communities with frequent meetings with government officials. Recipients also expressed increased willingness to participate in community projects, though this did not materialise in practise. The study did not investigate effects on relationships between recipients and non-recipients (horizontal social cohesion), which have been negatively affected by similar interventions in other contexts (Evans et al., 2019).

Peace and conflict

Social cohesion has increasingly become a focus area in relation to conflict and violence. Analyses have mostly considered social cohesion in relation to aftereffects of conflicts and violence, with surprisingly mixed findings. Social cohesion has been found to suffer after conflict and violence, especially when these are linked to inter-group divisions (see e.g. Mbowura, 2014). However, being affected by violence and experiencing victimisation has recently been linked to subsequent increases in civic and political participation, for instance joining community groups or becoming active politically (Tellez and Balcells, 2022). While these and similar findings have prompted optimism, a recent review found that only political participation increased after violence, while other social cohesion indicators around trust and co-operation across groups declined (Fiedler, 2023). Despite this, social cohesion is increasingly being employed as a tool to support peacebuilding after conflict (Cox et al., 2023), for example through natural resource management and agricultural practices (Löhr et al., 2021). Yet studies indicate that efforts to build social cohesion in such contexts can also lead to negative outcomes (Cox and Sisk, 2017; see also section ‘Addressing cohesion’ below). This indicates the need for caution as such efforts become increasingly popular among international actors.

There has also been attention to social cohesion in relation to preventing and predicting conflicts and violence. Studies of cross-country survey data indicate that different forms of social cohesion have disparate relationships with political violence: high community trust and national identity were negatively associated with political violence while social cohesion linked to religious and community membership was positively associated with political violence (Alcorta et al., 2020). Ethnic-based geographic separation has also been linked to violence (Kasara, 2014). Other assessments drawing on similar data found that countries with low social cohesion in a particular year will more likely experience violent conflict the subsequent year (Langer et al., 2017). These and other studies draw on the related concept of social capital and point to the importance of distinguishing between structural and cognitive social capital (Hansen-Nord et al., 2016; Langer et al., 2017). Structural social capital refers to social organisation, rules and memberships, while cognitive social capital refers to shared norms, attitudes or beliefs (Alcorta et al., 2020). These categories are blurred in social cohesion literature, where distinctions are more often made between ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ social cohesion – the former referring to relations with state actors and external institutions and organisations and the latter to relations within and between community groups (Lowe, 2022). The findings from social capital literature suggests the importance of further clarifying dimensions of social cohesion when assessing relations to conflict, development and social resilience.

Forced mobility

Research and policy engagement has increasingly indicated that social cohesion can be negatively affected by human mobility. Studies indicate, for instance, that migration, whether forced or voluntary, can pose challenges to social cohesion in both origin and destination communities; displacement can disrupt social ties, causing conflicts which in turn can stifle development (Betts et al., 2017); and displaced populations can face integration challenges in new environments where existing residents might feel their own identity or resources are threatened (Castles, 2003; Sturridge et al., 2023).

Most attention has been given to forced displacement, often with a focus on the relationship between displaced persons or groups and host communities (Finn, 2017; World Bank Group, 2023). In such settings, displacement can exacerbate pre-existing social fractures and introduce new ones. It can create tensions between host communities and newcomers, and even within displaced populations (Castles, 2003; Vezzoli and Laczko, 2020). Displacement can also lead to competition for limited resources in host communities, which can be a major source of tension (Black and Collyer, 2014; Carpi, 2019). Increasingly, research has also examined social cohesion impacts for those experiencing displacement. These show mixed results, linked to a range of factors including gender, age, international or domestic displacement and prior socioeconomic status (World Bank Group, 2022a). This suggests the necessity of differentiated analysis among displaced populations, with attention to how differences in these factors affect cohesion and why.

Recent research also indicates the potential for some positive social cohesion outcomes in situations of displacement. Some recent studies have found that those who experienced displacement in a conflict setting subsequently showed higher levels of political mobilisation and social cohesion than those who had not experienced displacement (Tellez and Balcells, 2022). At the same time, those who had experienced displacement suffered negative effects on their welfare overall, linked to lost property and economic resources (World Bank Group, 2022a). This indicates that the relationship between social cohesion and welfare/development is not necessarily positive, but rather is more complex than currently assumed in some policy and research engagement. This is in some ways a promising finding, suggesting that positive social cohesion outcomes are possible despite economic and welfare challenges.

Regarding disaster and climate-related displacement, academic findings have generally noted negative impacts on cohesion, especially with focus on receiving areas (Adger et al., 2018). Findings suggest that 'sense of place' is an important factor for fostering social cohesion, an element which is also beginning to emerge within loss and damage assessments (see below). At the same time, studies are increasingly bringing attention to social cohesion among those who stay behind, including trapped populations (Black and Collyer, 2014; Bharadwaj and Shakya, 2021).

ASSESSING AND ADDRESSING COHESION CHALLENGES

Assessing cohesion

Different definitions and approaches to social cohesion can lead to diverging assessments and understandings of the state of social cohesion, including what factors affect it and how. Until recently, studies of social cohesion in the Global South were limited (Ozcurumez and Hoxha, 2020), though recent policy and academic studies have begun to address this (see e.g. World Bank Group, 2023).

Studies suggest that context-based approaches to social cohesion are most relevant, as social cohesion is linked to local values and community practices, making it difficult to standardise across contexts. This has been argued both in terms of definitions and understandings of social cohesion, as previously discussed in this section, as well as indicators of social cohesion (Ozcurumez and Hoxha, 2020; Hunt and Rodgers, 2022). While indicators such as extending credit, sharing food or engaging in various community activities have previously been employed, their significance varies across contexts (Hunt and Rodgers, 2022). Context-relevant indicators may also be more future-oriented and entail processes rather than concrete activities or outcomes, making them difficult to measure (Ozcurumez and Hoxha, 2020). Other approaches have sought to use existing macro-level indicators and measurements, e.g. inequality indicators, etc. (Langer et al., 2017). These can be useful as an indicative overview at a national level or across countries, but are much less suitable for social cohesion related programming in particular communities.

Research also points to the importance of using social indicators, including perceptions and subjective experiences, e.g. attitudes or experiences (Langer et al., 2017; Ozcurumez and Hoxha, 2020). This can include, for instance, perceptions of inequalities, societal trust and group identity (Langer et al., 2017). This kind of information is best gathered through open-ended formats, and can be a valuable supplement to quantitative data, which is limited in its ability to capture nuances and even contradictions in perceptions and experiences relevant to social cohesion (Hunt and Rodgers, 2022). Such information can also provide nuances in terms of differentiated experiences of social cohesion across community and demographic groups. Women, the elderly or other demographic or marginal groups are likely to experience social cohesion dynamics and non-economic losses differently (see e.g. DCA, 2021). Understanding such differences and the mechanisms behind them is crucial for successful policy and interventions.

Addressing cohesion

Research on efforts to address and strengthen social cohesion highlights the role of social engagement, service provision and institutional and governance dimensions. Regarding displacement particularly, they indicate that inclusive policies that address the needs of both the displaced and host communities can foster better social cohesion (Betts et al., 2017; Collyer and Goodwin-Gill, 2021).

Regarding social engagement, research finds that encouraging cultural exchange can help to reduce tension and misunderstandings and promote integration among displaced and host populations (Ager and Strang, 2008; Schapendonk and Steel, 2020). Access to accurate information and communication tools can also alleviate fears and misconceptions that can strain social cohesion (Chazal and Majidi, 2013). Shared spaces, such as community centres and schools, as well as joint activities, can act as bridges that support social cohesion between displaced and host populations (Smets and Salman, 2018).

Regarding service provision and assistance, assistance provision can sometimes help to strengthen social relations, though can also play a role in exacerbating social tensions (Lowe, 2022). Social protection has increasingly been employed, targeting both displaced and host communities, with potential to both strengthen and undermine inter- and intra-group social cohesion (Valli et al., 2019). This also dovetails with recent efforts to use social cohesion as a tool to address loss and damage (Aleksandrova and Costella, 2021). Psychosocial support has also been found to foster improved social relations and cohesion between forcibly displaced and host communities. In one case, support groups through community

organisations provided safe environments for inter-group exchange and contributed to improved perceptions of well-being and mutual understanding as well as enhanced empathy and reduced prejudice (Chica and Acosta, 2018). Research also indicates that efforts aimed at rebuilding and reconstruction post-displacement should explicitly incorporate measures to strengthen social cohesion (Richmond and Mitchell, 2018).

Regarding institutional and governance dimensions, previous research suggests that effective local leadership within displaced communities and host communities can pave the way for greater social cohesion, and points to the importance of informal governance structures among displaced persons (Kibreab, 2004). In addition, findings indicate the importance of bottom-up representation and influence, where efforts to strengthen social cohesion should reflect priorities of displaced persons, ensuring their experiences and needs shape policies and interventions (Horst, 2006; Harrell-Bong and Voutira, 2020). However, in such instances it is again important to differentiate among those displaced, with attention to marginal social groups within displaced populations.

KEY THEMES ACROSS FIELDS

Definitions of social cohesion vary in their scope and focus, but elements commonly emerging across definitions include social relations, trust, sense of belonging/identity and co-operation/orientation towards the common good. Our review suggests, however, that the elements and mechanisms constituting social cohesion will vary across contexts – perhaps even across different groups within the same area. Blanket definitions of social cohesion will therefore be inadequate, both for nuanced research and understanding of cohesion dynamics and social cohesion programming.

Additionally, recent research documents mixed impacts to social cohesion, more than previously recognised. This is the case for impacts of disasters, displacement and conflicts, long assumed to be largely negative. It is also the case for interventions seeking to improve social cohesion. This indicates that the mechanisms through which social cohesion is affected are more complex and multidirectional than previously understood; it is now clear that a negative external stressor will not necessarily impact all elements of social cohesion negatively.

Importantly, social cohesion itself can also have mixed implications, despite cohesion often being portrayed as entirely positive. This is because dominant forms of social relations can also produce marginalisation, exclusion and tension (Sturridge et al., 2023). Social capital literature, for instance, has indicated that certain forms of social capital can be exclusionary and can exacerbate divisions and tensions. One study even describes ‘negative forms of social cohesion’ linked to violence (Alcorta et al., 2020). Social cohesion efforts have attempted to overcome this by explicitly focusing on inclusion as well as cohesion. However, it is important to recognise possible negative aspects of cohesion.

Also emerging across fields is the role of institutional and governance dimensions in shaping social relations and cohesion. This is linked to questions of scale and focus in social cohesion work, i.e. social cohesion within communities or between communities (horizontal social cohesion) or between communities and state or other authorities (vertical social cohesion; e.g. Lowe, 2022). However, governance also emerges as a cross-cutting factor in the mechanisms producing social cohesion outcomes. Both informal and formal governance actors, from community leaders and elders, to traditional authorities, to elected officials, can directly and indirectly influence social cohesion in a variety of ways – from conflict resolution, to service provision, to trust. Attention to the role of governance institutions and actors, even when indirect, will likely be useful for programming. This is both in context-relevant theories of change and also in anchorage and sustainability of interventions.

Finally, breakdown or loss of social cohesion elements can be addressed; there is existing experience with improving cohesion. However, improved social cohesion will likely take new and different forms, also reflecting changes in the socio-environmental context in which cohesion is produced and functions. While recognising the gravity of loss, this can also open possibilities; breakdown and loss may provide the potential for new and strengthened forms of social engagement, relations and cohesion in rapidly shifting local contexts.



Photo and description: D5MK5E. Joerg Boethling / Alamy Stock Photo. Africa NIGER Zinder, village Zongon Soumaguela, water transport with bullock cart from water pond during dry season. February 2013.

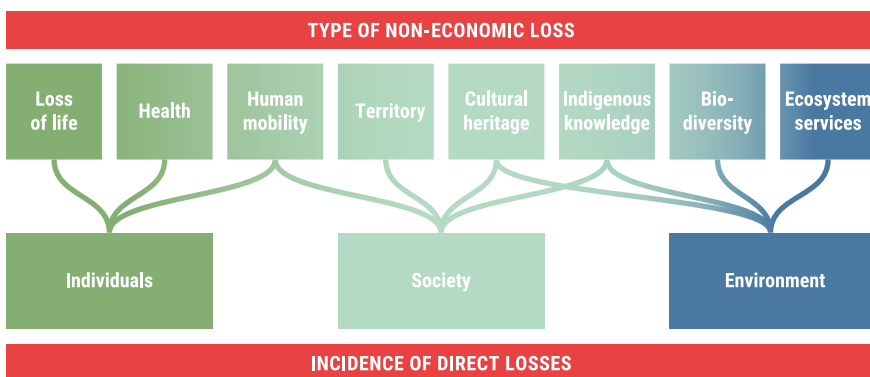
LINKING TO LOSS AND DAMAGE

A loss and damage approach to social cohesion entails not only understanding climate-related losses to social cohesion and the mechanisms behind them. It also includes considering how these may be addressed – recognising that renewed forms of social cohesion will be different than prior forms. This section therefore outlines existing knowledge on links between social cohesion, environment and climate, with a loss and damage lens. It includes a discussion of understanding social cohesion within a loss and damage framework as well as empirical findings relevant to addressing loss of social cohesion, including those linked to forced displacement.

UNDERSTANDING LOSS AND DAMAGE AND SOCIAL COHESION

Within loss and damage, negative impacts to social cohesion fall under the broad category of non-economic losses and damages (NELD), which are types of losses not typically traded in markets, such as loss of health, biodiversity, local knowledge, cultural practices and climate-related mobility (UNFCCC, 2013). There are in some instances overlaps or linkages between economic and non-economic losses. These are evident in cases of loss of ancestral lands or loss of livelihoods, which can be linked to loss of identity, local knowledge, cultural practices and social relations. For an indicative overview of non-economic losses, see Figure 1.

Figure 1. Non-economic losses and damages



Source: UNFCCC (2013). Figure from DIIS Report 2022: 07 Making headway on loss and damage.
Layout: Mark Gry Christiansen.

Research on losses considers both instrumental and intrinsic value of potential losses. Much of the literature on social cohesion and environment/climate has taken an instrumental approach to social cohesion, considering social cohesion's functionality. Instrumental value is extremely important, for instance in terms of adaptation, resilience and broader well-being. Yet a loss and damage approach also encompasses the intrinsic value of social cohesion – the value of social cohesion as an integral part of community integrity and identity. Intrinsic perspectives can provide an important contribution in relation to social cohesion understanding and engagement. In practice, instrumental and intrinsic value are closely intertwined, yet in policy and research it can be useful to disaggregate them somewhat to ensure attention to both and understand their interactions.

Further, growing research in relation to NELD calls for a value-based approach to understanding NELD (Serdeczny et al., 2016). By definition, NELDs are not quantifiable and are highly subjective, dependent on context-specific value judgements, that will likely differ not only across but within communities. Researchers emphasise that a value-based approach to NELD provides additional insights, beyond recognition of harm (McShane, 2017). For instance, a value-based framing sheds light on how the same climate event can have vastly different perceived impacts 'from reversible damages to irreversible losses and anticipated future risks, across numerous value dimensions' (Tschakert et al., 2019). Such a value-based approach is therefore able to provide nuanced, contextualised perspectives on loss and damage useful for situated responses. This aligns with similar findings within social cohesion work that point to the contextual nature of understandings of social cohesion as well as possible indicators.

Research also indicates that territorial and environmental factors are constitutive aspects of social cohesion (Cook and Swyngedouw, 2012; Fankhauser and Gradwell, 2014). This has been a relatively overlooked aspect of social cohesion that is slowly gaining more attention. Importantly, though, studies have shown a variety of different relationships between environmental factors and social relations. On the one hand, some empirical examples have indicated a loss of social cohesion linked to climate-related stress on livelihoods, climate mobility and loss of community knowledge, traditions and practices (Hirsch et al., 2017). However, there are also some documented instances of increased social cohesion and mobilisation in the aftermath of extreme events (Sweet, 1998; Christoplos et al., 2017).

A key body of literature on social-environmental relations is that on sense of place (Cresswell, 2004). This is a broad literature that provides insights into people's relationship to their environment, including changing environments and social cohesion. Sense of place describes the 'identity, including constructed meanings, values and emotional bonds, which one tends to form around their local environment' (McNamara et al., 2021a). Researchers describe how sense of place 'offers a useful approach to understanding perceptions of social and ecological change, and indeed a dynamic approach to place is particularly useful in understanding potential interactions' (Quinn et al., 2018: 39). Work on sense of place has engaged with disasters as well as mobility, with insights for social cohesion. In relation to climate risk and disasters, disasters can prompt both loss of place attachment as well as strengthened place attachment, with implications for individual and social well-

being. Strengthened place attachment can be produced through disaster response processes themselves, for instance in community restoration of affected landscapes (Silver and Grek-Martin, 2015; Henriët et al., 2023).

Sense of place has also been linked to climate-related mobility, with researchers describing how decreased sense of 'liveability' can prompt loss and potentially decisions to move (Dandy et al., 2019). At the same time, sense of place may lead others to stay (*ibid.*), underlining the highly variable implications of place attachment for different community members or groups. Physical environments also affect communities through spatial relations and organisations. This has been documented in climate-related planned relocations and displacement generally, where the spatial organisation of displaced and relocated groups affects both intra-group relations as well as inter-group relations with other communities (Bower and Weerasinghe, 2021; Sturridge et al., 2023).

Research also identifies social cohesion as a potentially important factor in relation to climate resilience (Ly and Cope, 2023). This builds on earlier studies of social cohesion's significance in relation to extreme events, including disaster preparedness and recovery. These studies indicate that place-based social cohesion increases disaster recovery and resilience (Townshend et al., 2015), that social cohesion influences decision-making on disaster preparedness (Prior and Eriksen, 2013), and points to the need for cultural awareness in order to harness social cohesion for climate and disaster resilience (Ly and Cope, 2023). Other studies suggest that community practices such as food and labour sharing have also constituted important aspects of social cohesion and climate resilience, but that these are increasingly coming under strain due to climate change (Boafo et al., 2023; Pickering et al., 2023). Together, these findings indicate that robust social cohesion can reduce losses and damages.

DOCUMENTED LOSS OF SOCIAL COHESION

There is currently only scattered documentation of climate impacts on social cohesion. This despite social cohesion being identified as a 'critical' area of NELD (McNamara et al., 2021b: 3). Lack of documentation is particularly true in relation to slow-onset climate change and repeated, small scale sudden-onset events. In relation to sudden-onset disaster settings, existing disaster response efforts have long recognised the psychosocial, social and cultural elements of disaster impacts (see e.g. Dückers, 2013), though these will likely also benefit from current

developments in climate and loss and damage related research and efforts. In relation to slow-onset climate change, early empirical findings are beginning to emerge across geographical contexts. This includes breakdown in communities' social practices, entailing loss of typical support structures and social relations within communities, detailed below. The implications of such breakdown are likely to be highly significant for communities in climate-vulnerable settings with limited social services, protection or external support.

Empirical examples include documented breakdown in communal structures and support systems, such as knowledge- and labour-sharing systems in Ghana (Boafo et al., 2024), food sharing in the Pacific Islands (Pickering et al., 2023), family relations and inter-community cohesion due to climate-related migration in the Pacific islands (McNamara et al., 2021b) and culture linked to climate-related displacement in the Caribbean (Thomas and Benjamin, 2020). Emerging in data collection for this study, we also see that climate impacts have undermined celebrations and festivals linked to harvests, that climate-related out-migration has undermined community practices around burials and grieving, and that cultural shifts linked to climate-related out-migration have reduced the quality of mutual support in the community. Together, these early findings indicate concurrent negative impacts to multiple, fundamental aspects of the social relations that are significant for social cohesion and resilience. It is important to note that these changes are occurring in the context of other transformations in social, economic and political relations both historically and in the present (e.g. in relation to food sharing and food security in the Pacific Islands see Campbell, 2015, and in relation to climate mobility in northern Ghana see Jarawura et al., 2024). In Box 2 we include respondents' own accounts of such breakdown across studies and geographic contexts.

BOX 2. IN RESPONDENTS' OWN WORDS: CLIMATE CHANGE AND LOSS OF SOCIAL COHESION

Pacific Islands. 'Social cohesion is disintegrating not only because of the physical/geographic fragmentation of the community but also because of increasing individuality as every family strives to fend for themselves economically rather than adopting the traditional communal approach. Climate change brings out the disparities in social and economic conditions in a community and those who are more vulnerable are made more vulnerable and stuck in misery while those who are better able to cope usually move forward. This increases the social divide, sometimes resulting in conflict and social instability (participant 29)' (In McNamara et al., 2021b: 6).

Pacific Islands. '[There are] changing family dynamics as parents or older siblings are displaced from rural communities to urban centres or overseas for seasonal work due to collapse of rural agriculture after cyclones/flood/droughts...' (participant 26), (In McNamara et al., 2021b: 6).

Ghana. 'In the past, when the rains were constant and farming seasons could be predicted, we could know the beginning of the farming season, so we organized ourselves for Nnobia [cultural practice of knowledge-sharing for farming]...It was useful for labor input and building social bonds and relations' (Isaac, 35 years of farming), (in Bofo et al., 2024L 114).

Ghana. 'Those days when there was hunger, we knew and understood that poor older men and women would have to migrate, but today how can we understand when you can find vegetables to eat from the work in the irrigated farms...we still prefer them to stay here with us' (Lindegard et al., forthcoming).

In relation to climate-related mobility, research on social losses remains sparse. Most research is focused on climate-related displacement, where existing studies find that displacement can severely disrupt '[c]ultural and social cohesion and family structures, place names and festivals' (Baltzer et al., 2023: 8). Others also find loss of collective action, in addition to social cohesion losses (Serdeczny et al., 2016). Beyond displacement itself, other factors can impact the nature and extent of social losses. For instance, spatial patterns of settlement are found to shape social cohesion, including potential losses subsequent to displacement (Sturridge et al., 2023). In relation to various forms of climate-related mobility, emphasis has most often been on receiving areas rather than sending areas. A notable exception to this has been in the Pacific Islands, where focus has long been on implications for those societies facing slow breakdown and possible existential loss. Findings indicate struggles to maintain cultural practices, knowledge, family ties and social cohesion, linked both to climate impacts and mobility (McNamara et al., 2021b).

As data remains limited on social losses, integration into decision-making and programming has also been lacking. This has been documented in concrete situations of climate-related displacement, where non-economic impacts to health, well-being, culture and agency were not recognised. Because assessments did not take these significant social and cultural losses into account, they recommended rebuilding and exposing populations to further risk of these losses (Thomas and Benjamin, 2020). This example underlines the importance of overcoming challenges of assessing non-economic losses and integrating social impacts and losses into decision-making processes.

ADDRESSING LOSS OF SOCIAL COHESION

There is early evidence for approaches to addressing social losses. One review of existing experiences, also drawing from other fields, emphasises the importance of a value-based or more intrinsic approach, as well as holistic and multi-level approaches (McNamara et al., 2021b). A loss and damage framing can be useful for ensuring a value-based approach recognising the intrinsic value of social relations and associated loss. These aspects may be overlooked from a more instrumental approach. The same is true for holistic approaches, which include attention to social, emotional, cultural, spiritual and physical aspects of loss and recovery. Finally, a multi-scalar approach is especially relevant for loss of social cohesion, where attention to group and collective levels, alongside individual levels, is critical.

Experiences from other fields can provide useful points of departure for efforts to address social losses, though these may need to be complemented by new approaches. For instance, there are extensive experiences from disaster response in relation to addressing loss and damage. These include, for instance, the importance of community response efforts for addressing loss, and 'reorienting' after an extreme event. As described in the literature, these include activities focused on the local environment, including landscape restoration (Silver and Grek-Martin, 2015, Henriet et al., 2023). Such efforts that bridge social-environmental relations are highly relevant for addressing loss and damage. Also, in disaster and humanitarian fields, experiences with post-disaster support (Dunkers, 2013) and more recently mental health and psychosocial support (Galappatti and Richardson, 2016) are highly relevant, though these will need to also be targeted at group and collective levels, which may entail a shift for some actors and approaches. Also, there are potentials in harnessing mutual support and social mobilisation, for instance in the aftermath of sudden-onset events such as storms and floods (e.g. Christoplos et al., 2017). In addition, it will be relevant to draw on experiences with addressing social cohesion more broadly, e.g. service delivery, social protection and cash transfers, etc., as described in the previous section. Some of these are already being employed in relation to loss and damage, particularly social protection (Aleksandrova and Costella, 2021).

However, these fairly well-established fields will likely need to be complemented with new approaches. Our review indicates that these should take their point of departure in efforts to address collective loss, grounded in local values, perceptions, beliefs and relations – emphasised both in relation to loss and damage literature and context-based approaches to social cohesion. We document clearly in the previous

section that such a grounded approach is not necessarily typical for social cohesion approaches in fields of development, conflict and displacement. However, it is also clear that social losses are mounting, undermining the very fabric of vulnerable communities, and engendering losses to meaning, identity, connection and togetherness. It is also evident that these intrinsic losses will likely have critical effects on communities' well-being and climate resilience. The gravity of a potential mismatch between external approaches and realities on the ground necessitates new, grounded approaches to social cohesion that draw on existing evidence from other fields that respond to loss.

Photos from data collection in Ghana

Below: A house partially destroyed by flooding.

Right: Report co-author Francis Jarawura interviews an older village resident. Photo: Baalayela Forsca.



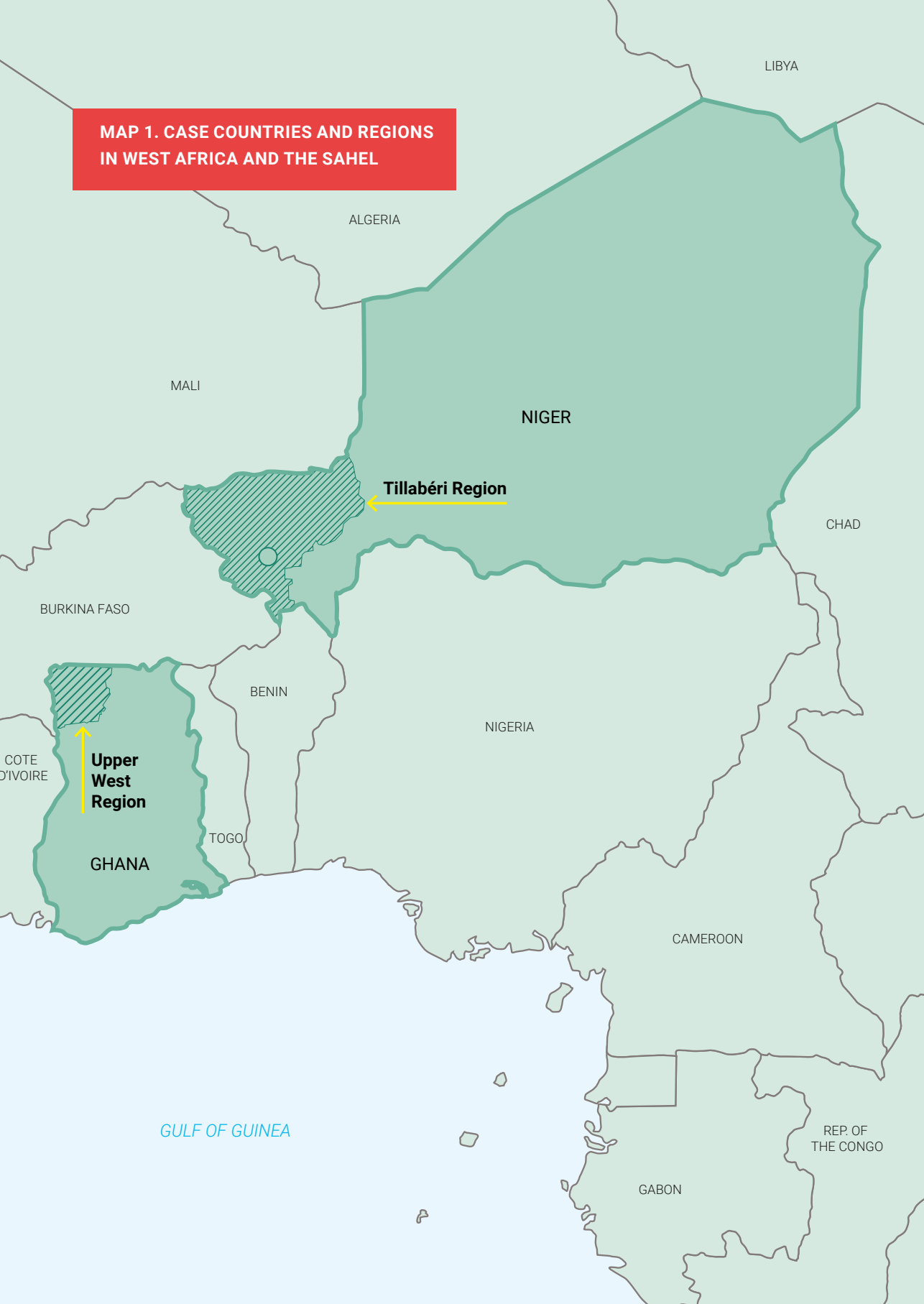
Left: A young man being interviewed. Above: Data collectors record an interview with an older village resident. Photos: Francis Xavier Jarawura.

BETWEEN COHESION AND BREAKDOWN IN GHANA AND NIGER

In Ghana and Niger, observed challenges to social relations and social cohesion are playing out in the context of climate change and significant forced mobility. However, existing knowledge on these issues is limited. To investigate these dynamics, we examined elements of social cohesion in relation to climate change and mobility dynamics as well as in relation to sense of loss. We did so in the Upper West Region of Ghana in the northwest corner of the country, bordering Burkina Faso, and in the Tillabéri Region of Niger, a region in the west of the country, surrounding the capital Niamey and bordering Burkina Faso and Benin.

The Upper West Region of Ghana is a highly climate vulnerable area due to governance and development factors in interplay with climate and environmental factors. Rural livelihoods are almost exclusively rainfed crop farming; out-migration and poverty levels are the highest in the country (GSS, 2018; Teye et al., 2021); and access to infrastructure, services and institutional support is low. At the same time, the area is extremely dry with a single rainfall season; climate and seasonal variability is increasing; and environmental and soil degradation have reduced yields (Teye et al., 2021; Jarawura et al., 2024). In the case study areas, recurring flooding has also contributed to a range of economic and non-economic losses. These and other factors have contributed to extremely high risk and uncertainty for farmers, who generally have few alternatives or external assistance to fall back on. Against this backdrop, mobility has been a key response, with individuals often moving to help support their households.

**MAP 1. CASE COUNTRIES AND REGIONS
IN WEST AFRICA AND THE SAHEL**



The Tillabéri Region of Niger is located at the western tip of the country and has a dry Sahelian climate. The whole of Niger is extremely vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change; 80% of the population is dependent on agriculture, which is highly vulnerable to changes in the environment and natural hazards (Danish Red Cross, 2022: 1). Over the last 20 years, Niger has experienced nine major droughts, five major floods, and food crisis every four years, on average (Baptista et al., 2023). The country is also experiencing armed conflict, violence and insecurity, driving displacements and loss of livelihoods. These challenges exacerbate the existing poverty-related vulnerabilities of large parts of the population, who struggle to cope. The Tillabéri Region is particularly hard hit. An increasing number of displaced people registered in the region is placing extra pressure on natural resources. Further, people in the region are exposed to both floods and droughts at various times of the year, which contributes to increased losses, vulnerability and insecurity (Danish Red Cross, 2022). The state has also declared a state of emergency in the region because of the deteriorating security situation.

We assessed three elements of social cohesion that emerged as significant during previous work in the case study regions and initial interviews: (1) sense of belonging; (2) sense of security and (3) sense of reliance and support. These elements reflect both international research-based definitions as well as context-based realities and perspectives.

Sense of belonging was considered relevant based on existing social cohesion literature and previously observed dynamics in the case study areas. It is particularly relevant in relation to the forced mobility dynamics in the two case countries and regions, which likely place strain on intra-community relations in sending areas in the case of Ghana and inter-community relations in receiving areas linked to widespread displacements in Niger.

Sense of security is not typically included as an element of social cohesion, but is a recognised principle of post-disaster support, drawing on scientific evidence (Dückers, 2013). In both case areas it is highly relevant to community and social relations, both in relation to conflict and violence, environmental insecurity, and to sense of physical place and connection. Environmental dimensions of sense of security come out clearly in research on sense of place, linked to disaster and climate risk (Quinn et al., 2018). In the study area in Niger, sense of security is evident primarily in insecurity dynamics, which are due not only to the threat of armed conflict and violence, but also physical insecurities associated with situations of

displacement and lack of basic protections. In the study area in Ghana, sense of security is linked to a greater degree to environmental shocks and stresses, for instance repeated floods.

Sense of reliance and support reflects elements of trust and co-operation common in social cohesion definitions, but tailored to the study areas. In the study areas of Ghana and Niger, trust and co-operation are embodied in mutual support and forms of reliance – both providing and receiving support – that are critical cultural practices and fundamental to communities’ social fabric. Support can both be material (food, money, livelihood inputs) and non-material (social support during hard times, shared celebrations, knowledge-sharing).

For more information on survey design and methods, see the Annex.

CLIMATE, COHESION AND FORCED MOBILITY IN GHANA

Contextual dynamics

The Upper West Region of Ghana is characterised by high poverty, climate variability and out-migration. The region, as in the rest of Ghana’s Savannah, is patriarchal. Thus social relations are pivoted on male dominance. People live together in communities headed by chiefs, priests and elders. Notions of collectivity and reciprocity are key elements of the communities. These notions and their practices have been challenged over time not least by modernisations of all kinds and changes in climate. The vast majority of livelihoods are agricultural, mostly subsistence and largely rainfed, making for a situation of high vulnerability. Regarding climate and environmental factors, the region is characterised by a single maxima rainfall regime which allows farmers to cultivate crops only once in a year. Some 80 per cent of the inhabitants depend on agriculture for their livelihoods relying largely on rainfall. Livelihoods are therefore highly vulnerable to changes in rainfall and climate, which are becoming more irregular and extreme (Teye et al., 2021).

In addition to agriculture, migration is also adopted as an important livelihood strategy and has been predominant among the youth for decades. It is generally a response to worsening poverty, both in relative and absolute terms over several decades (Songsore and Denkabe, 1992; Awumbilla, 2014; Teye et al., 2021). The Upper West Region has long remained among the poorest in the country, linked to deliberate colonial underdevelopment strategies engineered to ensure a flow of labour from the north (including Upper West) to the south of the country, a

less favourable climate in the north, and a development failure of modern-day governments to reverse structural inequalities (Teye et al., 2021; Jarawura et al., 2024). Over time, the southwards movement of the people has become a common practice among communities both as an ad hoc response or planned long term strategy to climate and other contingencies.

Our findings indicate that forced mobility, especially forced migration, is common in the study sites. Within the past five years, 75% of respondents moved to seek work and support their families when they would rather have stayed home. Additionally, 1.6% of respondents were displaced, or suddenly forced to move for survival, mainly due to environmental perturbations including flooding and droughts. There were also instances of forced immobility (11%) when people stayed home when they would rather have moved. Twenty-three per cent (23%) of the study population also moved voluntarily, e.g. for social reasons such as reuniting with loved ones.

Security is generally high and the situation is calm allowing for normal life. However, residents are affected by environmental insecurity, particularly recurring floods that at times force them to take shelter elsewhere as homes, possessions and food stores are damaged. Also, residents are sometimes affected by the declining security situation in Burkina Faso where rebels and bandits are constantly worrying the population and the government. These elements have occasionally made largely unsuccessful incursions into the Ghanaian study communities, which lie close to the border. The failures of these armed groups are largely attributed to the formidable security of family networks across the border that share information and act with their kin in Ghana to detain bandits, who are the most common armed actors. The Ghanaian security services are perceived by study respondents as performing a much lesser role.

Elements of social cohesion

To understand the nature of social cohesion, we examine sense of belonging, sense of security and sense of reliance and support. Here we present findings from: a survey of 304 respondents, interviews with nine key informants and focus group discussions with 60 participants in total.

Regarding **sense of belonging**, there is generally a high sense of belonging, but this is reported to be on the decline – migration and a gradual shift to capitalist and market-based relations are identified by respondents as key factors. This decline is affecting traditional modes of production, including sustainable practices (e.g use of organic fertilizers, agro-forestry) and communal labour.

Overall 60% of respondents reported a sense of belonging they characterised as being to a 'large' or 'very large' extent, with just under a third describing 'somewhat' experiencing a sense of belonging. This suggests a fairly high sense of belonging overall, though with a portion of respondents lacking a strong feeling of belonging. Comparing to ten years ago, 76% of respondents characterised sense of belonging to 'large' or 'very large' extent, clearly indicating a decline over time. When asked what factors currently contribute to sense of belonging, the most frequent responses were community activities/meetings (80%), shared infrastructure/facilities (53%) and religious beliefs (42%), indicating the differing mechanisms informing belonging.

Regarding **sense of security**, responses were mixed, though with a clear decline in sense of security over the last ten years. A small segment of respondents feel entirely insecure (2%). The majority, however, described the situation as secure albeit to varying extents. When asked to compare with a decade earlier, the survey reveals a 25 percentage point decline in perceptions of security – from 73% of respondents feeling secure (to a 'large' or 'very large' extent) ten years ago to only 48% currently. In terms of violence and insecurity, this downward trend is linked in qualitative responses to a range of factors including increased armed robberies, a general decline in neighbourliness, increasing individuality and increasing commodification of resources and social relations in the society.

Climate and environmental factors also emerge as major factors prompting declines in sense of security. Increasing occurrence of floods, erratic rains, rising temperatures, and dry spells are a serious concern. The climate of the Savannah zone of which the two communities are located is characterised by high rainfall variability within years and especially across years. This situation has led to the classification of the Savannah zone as the most climate vulnerable region in Ghana (Bawakyilenuo et al., 2016; Teye et al., 2024).

This finds expression in the lives of the inhabitants of the two communities as explained by an elderly man:

Over here we are already used to rainfall difficulties, the droughts come and go, the floods come and go, and when the rains get angry they don't even show up for long. But the thing is that most of these problems are not reducing but adding up every year. There are many reasons why they keep adding up. The rains are more these days than when we were kids,

hardly do you see any long droughts but the flooding now occurs every day (year). The patterns of particular rains that we know, have also changed so it makes it difficult to predict the rains and planting, and then it makes farming difficult. That is why many people now want to have a second source of income in case the crops fail.

Another elderly woman narrates:

In my early days (from 1950s), we grew early maize and beans in the low lands to help with the hunger of the middle of the rainfall season. Those days the rains were fewer but less dangerous so we often harvested without flooding problems or at least we had enough time to harvest before the area experienced flooding. But for the last twenty years this has changed with the rains coming more and more often, and more and more heavier, resulting in early flooding of the fertile lands.

An elderly man further explains:

Those days the rains were less heavier and less frequent but these days they occur anytime, anywhere, and many more times in the year. Also, more water comes from the Black Volta than before...We were told the people upstream have built an Akosombo (dam) so they send the water down here when they have had enough. This also makes it difficult to rely on the lowlands for growing crops because they get flooded that easily.

The quotations are quite elaborate on the nature of climate rainfall, river overflows and extreme events in the community over time. Focus groups discussions of males, females and youth generally agreed with the assertions of rising trends in rainfall amounts, increasing variability and increasing frequency and intensity of floods. The observations by respondents of the increase in total rainfall and its torrential nature are consistent with scientific reports of the wider and local region. For example Van der Geest (2011) and Yaro (2017) observe that rainfall in West Africa has generally increased from the 1990s. Codjoe et al. (2012; EPA, 2018) also report an increase in flooding in the Savannah agro-ecological zone largely due to torrential rainfall.

Regarding **sense of support**, almost all respondents report having access to social and material support when needed; the vast majority of support comes from relatives and friends – the government is almost missing. In terms of financial and material support, 89% of respondents reported having access when needed. The main sources of financial and material support are family (86%) and friends/personal networks (76%), with wider kin/ethnic groups (23%) also playing a role. The government was only mentioned as providing financial and material support by 5% of respondents. In terms of social support, 99% reported having access to various forms of social support when needed, again citing family (93%), friends/personal networks (77%), and wider kin or ethnic groups (33%) as main sources of support. Overall, there is negligible change in the level of sense of support over the last ten years. However, there are variations in the sources of support, for instance in terms of financial and material support, declines in support from family (94% to 86%) and NGOs (5% to 2%).

The prominent roles of the family, friends/personal networks and wider kin/ethnic groups as sources of both financial and material support and social support is notable given the background of high out-migration, increasing influence of capitalist values and rising individuality that respondents also describe. It is also critical to note that these sources remain significant even after many decades of state engagement and the rising presence and activities of NGOs and financial institutions. The marginal role or presence of the state is a reflection of the poor governance that has accompanied the trajectories of development in the area and manifest in various ways including the high rates of poverty and vulnerability to climate and other related hazards.

The nature of support varies widely. Most support from family, friends/networks and kin was in the form of group/community activities (80%), food (57%), taking about challenges/grief (57%), money or credit (55%) and accommodation (55%). The importance of group activities and sharing challenges is notable. In settings of subsistence agriculture, group activities are often linked to livelihoods and food security, illustrating overlaps between social and material support. Our findings on food support echo previous findings in northern Ghana documenting that household food (in)security is critically mediated by food support from kin and social networks (Yaro, 2006, Van der Geest, 2011). This form of support is referred to as 'social claims' by Amartya Sen (1981) in his classic analysis of food (in)security. It is considered critical to survival in times of poor or failed crop production as explained by a young female respondent:

When my husband migrates in search of food and money in a difficult year, before he even tries to send the first money, we already get food from his uncle on the other side of the village. Here, when people see that you are hungry, they try to share a little with you. That is how we live.

Only 11% and 1% of respondents, respectively, reported not having access to financial and material support or social support when needed. Focus groups emphasise that this group of people largely consists of unstable circular migrants with poor social connections in both home and destinations and people who do not have membership in modern associations as explained by a respondent:

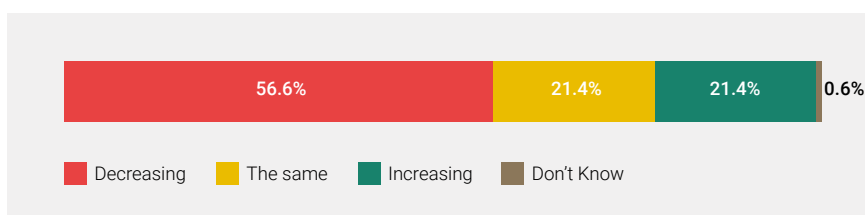
Those who migrate everywhere and do not stay anywhere long enough to know people well and also get to be known and trusted often do not get any support when in trouble. They miss out on many social events at home and at their many destinations, they get too busy to find their relations and friends as they are always looking for the thing called money. So they hardly make any good and trusted friends too. Also, because they are always on the move, they cannot be (actively) part of any groups of today's kind that deals in money.

Respondents describe lack of social connections as linked to failure to effectively participate in social life, poor or lack of engagement in reciprocity, or poor or lack of membership of modern associations such as the UNICEF's crafted 'Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLA). Such lack of social connection within reciprocal social systems can leave circular migrants without substantial networks needed to secure financial and material support when needed. As circular behaviour increasingly characterises migration in northern Ghana due largely to economic reasons resulting from poor governance and increasing climate impacts, the migration impact on social cohesion can be expected to increase in the near future.

Social cohesion: aggregate findings

Across quantitative and qualitative responses, most respondents reported a decline in social cohesion in their communities. Survey results indicate that almost six in ten respondents (57%) report a decrease in social cohesion, while only two in ten (21%) note an increase over the same period, see Figure 2.

Figure 2. Change in social cohesion over the last ten years



Source: Authors' analysis of study data.

Focus group discussions emphasise the role of migration in declines in social cohesion. Respondents describe that unlike other livelihood strategies, migration results in absence of the individuals from communities, which has detrimental effects on the functioning of norms on social support and vibrancy of community life. This is noted in the following statements by an elderly man and another respondent:

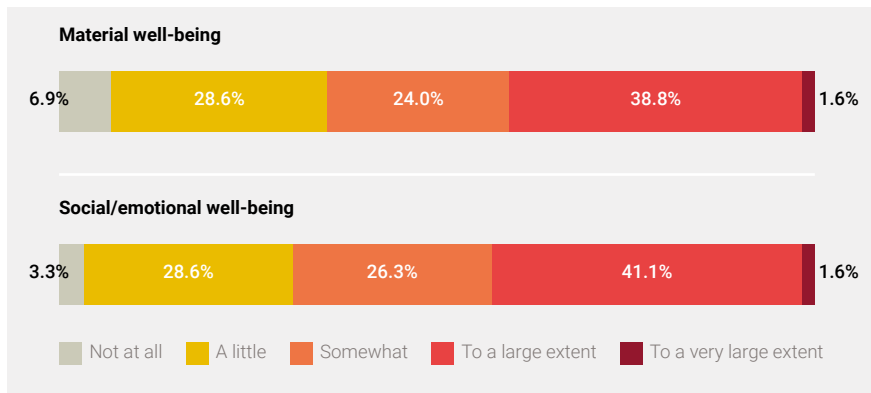
In a big house you know there are bigger strengths so you can be calm and assured, so you sleep well. But when they migrate it reduces this strength. Those that have migrated rarely show up here when you need them most for family and community activities. They may just send money... But money is not everything.

Some migrants no longer return for funerals so that the celebration will be as nice as before, they just send some money but it is not just the money we need but the people, to dance and to cry and to greet each other, and work for each other.

Losses and damages

There are clearly perceived losses to social cohesion in both the qualitative and quantitative data from Ghana. As stated above, 57% of respondents described a decline in cohesion over the last ten years. To understand the implications of this loss, we asked respondents what impact the nature of cohesion has had on their material and social/emotional well-being (if at all). Almost all respondents reported some negative impacts to material and social/emotional well-being, with over four in ten describing these as to a 'large' or 'very large' extent for both. Losses to social cohesion and secondary losses to social/emotional and material well-being are thus considerable and highly complex. They are linked to a range of other social and environmental dimensions, that are themselves rapidly changing.

Figure 3. Material and social/emotional impacts of losses to social cohesion



Source: Authors' analysis of study data.

As indicated in Figure 3, in terms of material well-being, 93% of respondents feel negatively affected to some extent, with 40% describing being affected to a 'large' or 'very large' extent. In other words, negative impacts to material well-being linked to declines in cohesion are clear and broadly felt throughout the community. Experiences with how this was felt emerged in interviews and focus group discussions, for instance where reductions in community practices such as labour-sharing have affected livelihoods. Overall, it is also clear from the study's qualitative and quantitative data that mutual support is central to cohesion, central to well-being and currently declining. The marked material dimension of this decline is notable. Interestingly, respondents clearly communicated that perceived declines in the nature and quality of mutual support (e.g. increase in monetary, impersonal support) were extremely significant to perceived declines in cohesion – apart from the amount of support.

Losses to social cohesion and secondary losses to social/emotional and material well-being are thus considerable and highly complex.

Regarding social/emotional well-being, 97% of respondents reported that declines in social cohesion affected their social/emotional well-being negatively. This includes over 43% that reported they were affected to a 'large' or 'very large' extent. In qualitative and quantitative data, negative effects to social/emotional well-being were linked to climate and environmental stress as well as cultural and livelihood practices. This was in addition to increasing penetration of capitalist market relations,

which are reported to undermine typical in-kind, collective and highly personal relations, e.g. due to monetisation of support and commodification of labour and resources. As values gradually change, social relations are affected in various ways, with shifts in community power and labour relations.

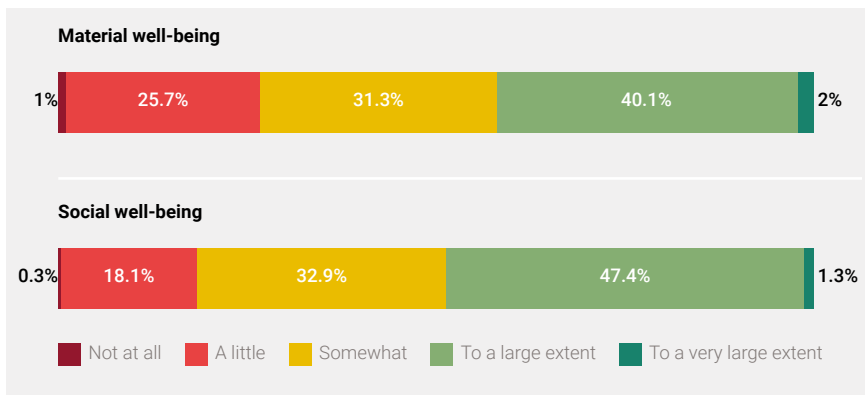
Possible solutions

In addition to understanding losses related to shifts in social cohesion, we also assessed to what extent respondents thought negative impacts to material and social/emotional well-being could be improved, and what solutions could be relevant.

Overall, respondents felt there was mixed potential to address negative impacts to well-being. For material well-being, 42% felt negative effects could be addressed to a 'large' or 'very large' extent, while 27% felt they could only be addressed 'a little' or 'not at all'. For social/emotional well-being, respondents felt there was more potential to address negative effects with half reporting to a 'large' or 'very large' extent, while only 18% reported 'a little' or 'not at all', see Figure 4. These findings document clear perceptions of irreversible losses – both material and social/emotional – linked to loss of social cohesion. They also indicate the importance of climate and social cohesion programming that integrates attention to both social and material needs.

Figure 4. Potential to address impacts to material and social well-being

Respondents' perceptions of to what extent negative impacts to well-being could be improved.

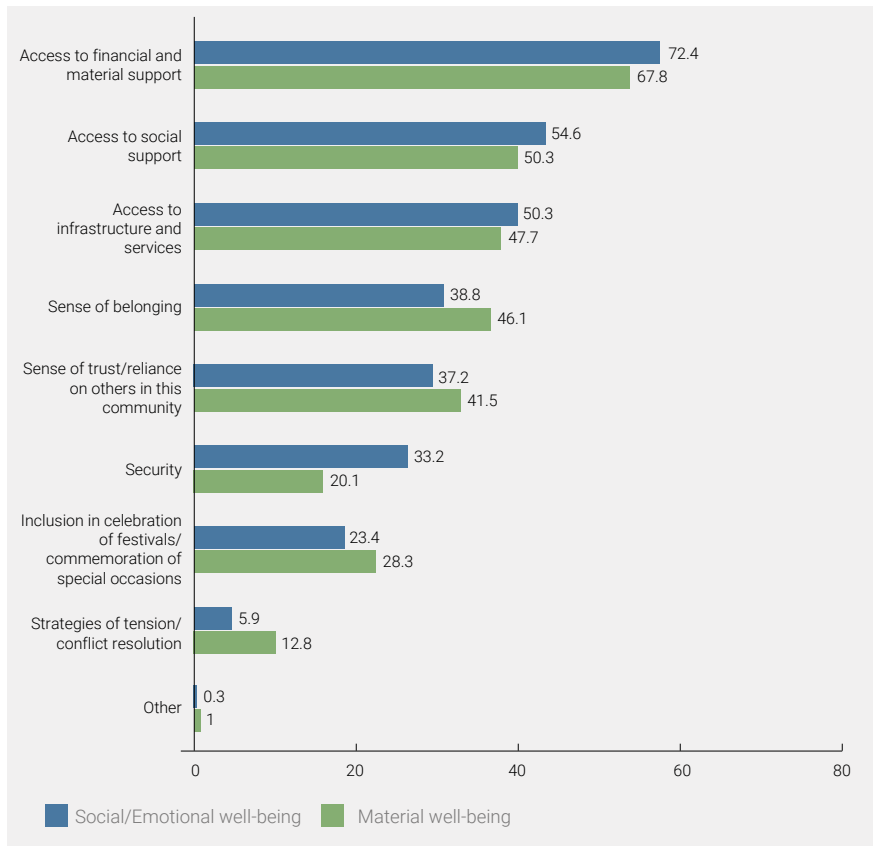


Source: Authors' analysis of study data.

Respondents were also asked what kinds of responses could help address impacts to material and social/emotional well-being. For material well-being, the most frequent response was improved access to financial and material support (68%). This was followed a cluster of responses: improved access to social support (50%), access to infrastructure and services (48%), and sense of belonging (46%). These findings underline the importance of social support alongside material support for material well-being.

For social/emotional well-being, similar responses were most prominent. The most frequently mentioned response was improved access to financial and material support (72%) followed by access to social support (55%) and access to infrastructure and services (50%). Improved sense of belonging (39%) and sense of

Figure 5. Strategies to address losses to social/emotional and material well-being



Source: Authors' analysis of study data.

trust/reliance were next most frequently mentioned. For an overview of all answer categories and responses for improving material and social/emotional well-being, see Figure 5.

These responses point to the importance of social support for improved material outcomes and vice versa. In addition, they indicate the primary importance of financial and material support, also for improved social outcomes, in areas affected by climate and livelihood stress. Together, the findings emphasise the relevance of programming integrating both material and social support to improve multiple aspects of well-being simultaneously.

CLIMATE, COHESION AND FORCED MOBILITY IN NIGER

Contextual dynamics

In the Tillabéri Region of Niger, respondents describe closely interlinked relations between climate change, security, displacement and social cohesion. Regarding the security situation, in the Tillabéri Region, military operations are underway and there are incursions by non-state armed groups, armed banditry and theft of goods and livestock. This rapidly shifting and at times extremely dangerous security situation has also impacted livelihoods and mobility. In situations of such extreme insecurity and risk, many move to try to find more secure areas to live and support themselves. In addition, in areas of severe livelihood stress, those who are better-off become targets of theft, for instance of livestock. This poses an additional challenge for surviving and thriving and can also inform decisions to move.

Security challenges are compounded by underlying climate and environmental pressures. Climate change, coupled with increased degradation of farmland, is perceived by those working in communities to be a major issue affecting yields and in connection livelihoods, health and well-being. Respondents report that this has been a driver of migration, especially of younger people, describing how 'many are leaving in search of something to live on' (KII 3). They explain that this is linked to lack of, and sometimes unsuccessful, adaptation efforts to address climate change's impacts on these areas and affected communities.

Red Cross staff further report a complex mobility context, where movement is common, but destinations, timing and degree of choice are highly varied. There is a high level of reported forced mobility, including forced migration and displacement. Regarding migration, respondents describe out-migration of younger residents,

sometimes seasonally during the agricultural off-season, though also more permanently where 'young people who are really productive today are very rare in the region because many are leaving in exodus' (KII 3). There are likely forced and voluntary elements in migration decisions; however, it is likely that forced elements are significant in settings where it is difficult to meet basic needs.

Regarding displacement, rather than protracted displacements and displacement camps, people experiencing displacement in Tillabéri often find themselves in more transient situations, settling in available, more secure areas for the time being, often moving again for livelihood-, climate- or security-related reasons (KII 7). In addition, because of pro-active out-migration of younger 'productive' community members in search of livelihoods, displaced populations may in some instances be composed of more vulnerable groups, such as elderly and children.

When displaced, people often move towards other rural or peri-urban areas they judge to be more secure. While some are able to stay with family, in many cases people find themselves on private or state-owned land without formal permissions to stay (KII 3). Overall, those seeking to leave situations of insecurity and climate and livelihood stress behind also face challenges in receiving areas. This includes livelihood insecurity and challenges in relations with host communities.

Elements of social cohesion

To better understand contextual social cohesion dynamics, we sought to examine sense of belonging, sense of security and sense of reliance and support. Due to the limitations of data collection in Niger, we were not able to gather perspectives from community members themselves. The analysis below is therefore a preliminary analysis conducted on the basis of interviews with Red Cross staff members and practitioners working with social cohesion in Niger and internationally.

Regarding **sense of belonging**, respondents report differing tendencies that are highly context dependent. Regarding social cohesion generally, one respondent noted that, 'it's a cultural thing for us, but this phenomenon is developing and there's still a lot to be done' (KII 2). Respondents working with communities describe that in some instances, tensions between ethnic groups have been observed, for instance describing repeated 'settling of scores' (KII 2). Another respondent notes that tensions have been increasing due to displacements into already resource-strapped communities. One informant describes how displaced persons come to rely 'on the same small resource that cannot even satisfy the [receiving area/local] community.

And so now it creates pressure. Pressure that is felt through conflicts that arise each time between the local population and the internally displaced population' (KII 1). Belonging is therefore also challenged due to pressures on resources in receiving areas. In some situations, active work to address tensions has been reported to aid in reducing some tensions. Though, as the respondent notes, 'others still exist' (KII 3).

Regarding **sense of security**, as described above, the security situation is challenging and subject to rapid change. In sending areas, this is both in relation to armed threats, inter-community tensions and climate-related threats. Respondents describe how, in relation to armed conflict, farmers 'can no longer go out because of the safety, because of the risk...they are caught and then slaughtered or attacked' (KII 2). Theft and banditry compound this insecurity, and there are also tensions between communities that can impact sense of security. Multiple respondents describe recurring seasonal tensions between farmers and herders, one noting that 'the state...and in particular certain humanitarian actors, really play an important role in establishing this social cohesion, maintaining it and reinforcing peace in these communities' (KII 3).

Climate and environmental factors also seem to contribute to a sense of insecurity. Respondents describe droughts, floods and temperature extremes and swings, which can all undermine livelihoods, health and well-being in the short term as well as undermine individuals' expectations of future security and well-being. One respondent links climate impacts, environmental degradation and resource shortages directly to conflict, noting 'we have seen several conflicts between these communities that are due to this shortage' (KII 1). The respondent describes in detail these perceived linkages:

Eighty to 90% of the conflicts that exist between these communities, they are conflicts related to land, therefore climate change is somewhat the cause. Why? Because. It's conflicts once rural families who rely on land and the land no longer produces. Now, they start, conflicts begin within the family because each wants to have something to feed their family or each wants to have something...to trade to feed their family. And that's what we've seen. Most of the conflicts are really caused by climate change.

Another respondent describes a more existential sense of insecurity, describing how 'conditions are getting worse, and at crop level, that's going to have an impact on hope and is going to affect farmers who hope to have more' (KII 2).

Regarding **reliance and support**, respondents describe differentiated access to support within affected populations, linked to intra-group relations. One respondent describes, for instance, how in customary relations in Niger, a chief or local ruler would distribute access to land in ways that reproduce inequality and marginalisation in his community: '...you'll see that the majority of arable land and the most profitable space goes to the royal family, the family of the ruler. As a result, the other underprivileged strata now find themselves dozens of kilometres from the village to go and grow crops...'. The respondent notes, however, that 'with the intervention of the state and...certain humanitarian actors, we're trying to break down this barrier between chief and community. So the chief has an obligation to support even the most vulnerable member of his village' (KII 3). Similar dynamics are evident in northern Ghana, where family-based patriarchal distribution of land and resources disadvantages women especially (Jarawura et al., forthcoming). Due to these dynamics, closely linked to existing cultural norms and social relations, some groups become more vulnerable to climate stress and shocks.

Regarding reliance and support between mobile and host populations, forms of reliance and support are reported to often be present across mobile and host populations, though in many cases declining over time. As one respondent describes 'what little wealth or property the locals have, they share with these displaced people...at a certain point, these locals are going to ask themselves, "Well, you're here, when are you going back?" Little by little, little by little, it would really destroy the social cohesion between these displaced people and the locals' (KII 3). Another respondent describes a more strained relation overall, noting that 'it's rare to find any who have been able to work with local populations to produce something' (KII 2). Similar dynamics are reported by a respondent working internationally. The respondent noted how tensions are often tied to shifting political dynamics as well as limited resources: 'Initially, the most incredible generosity, helping out saving lives. As time goes on, there are often more political questions about distribution, then conflict - often engineered politically' (KII 5).

In situations of displacement in agricultural settings, land emerged as especially significant in terms of reliance and support. In such settings, it can be challenging for displaced persons to support themselves because of lack of access to land as well as other resources and inputs. As described by one key informant, 'they find

themselves on private land, where they don't have the authorisation to grow crops, they don't have the authorisation to carry out profitable activities' (KII 3). If they do gain access to land, it can come at the expense of agricultural producers in the local community, creating the feeling of a zero-sum game and contributing to the tensions described above.

Social cohesion

Taken together, elements of sense of belonging, security and reliance and support indicate an increasing set of stressors imposed on a context of relative poverty and limited resources. While we were not able to gather perspectives from community members themselves, those working with communities describe that there are strong elements of social cohesion present, both within and across groups. Across certain groups, however, there are long-running tensions that will be challenging to address, likely linked both to group identity as well as matters of resource control and access. In other settings, challenges to cohesion are linked more to inadequate means of subsistence and livelihoods, especially over time. Finally, within groups, inequalities limiting access to resources and support may challenge intra-group cohesion or relations between marginal populations and local leaders who control resource distribution. Resource management and livelihoods thus emerge as key areas through which social relations are both challenged and have the potential to be strengthened. Addressing these through programming will need to be carried out in a setting of continued insecurity, which is a major factor driving resource and livelihood challenges.

Losses and damages

Both economic and non-economic losses are evident. Respondents describe losses including displacement and forced mobility; health impacts of heat, dry spells and flooding; loss of arable land and agricultural livelihoods; and loss of service facilities and infrastructure. Respondents also allude to premature deaths, food and water insecurity and malnutrition, all of which have been assessed to be significant in Niger (Baptista et al., 2023; UNICEF, 2023). These are reported to be compounded by inadequate adaptation efforts. As one of our respondents describes: 'if the population can't adapt to climate change, we're really going to continue to record more and more losses and damage' (KII 3).

In some instances, it is difficult to disaggregate the relative role of climate and insecurity in losses. For instance, loss of service facilities is explained by respondents to be linked to out-mobility, which can be due to both climate and security factors. When there is significant out-mobility from an area, facilities are sometimes

abandoned. Complexities in attributing losses to climate change is often observed, especially in situations of slow-onset climate change as well as situations of conflict and insecurity. Addressing losses and damages in such situations is a growing issue on the ground, as well as for the countries and organisations seeking to address these losses.

There is also an emerging loss in relation to aspirations and hope. In research, 'hope' has been developed as a concept in relation to mobility decisions and refers to the relation between aspirations for the future and uncertainty (Kleist and Thorsen, 2017). Respondents describe not only short-term non-economic losses, but also a loss of hope and confidence in a better future. This reflects research findings on sense of place, where populations in highly climate-affected areas, such as the Pacific Islands, experience the sense of a long-term existential threat and uncertain future (McNamara et al., 2021b). In these settings, long-running historical relations between populations and environments, at times highly significant for cultures, knowledge and daily practices, are themselves seeming to break down. It will be relevant in future work to further explore the relationship between this sense of breakdown and long-term loss and social cohesion in the present and near-term.

Possible solutions

Respondents also describe possible solutions to the challenges they perceive as undermining social cohesion. Interestingly, some suggestions focus exclusively on environmental and climate challenges. These include reclaiming land that is no longer arable, and supporting increased climate change response, particularly climate change adaptation, through local word-of-mouth awareness raising and knowledge sharing. Other climate response ideas also focused on knowledge sharing, described specifically in relation to cholera response after floods and useful seed varieties in increasingly dry areas.

In terms of how to structure responses, key informants emphasised bottom-up approaches. One respondent describes how their organisation's approach is appreciated by the communities they work with, describing it as 'an approach that's flexible in that we don't impose anything on them. We always try to...do things the way they want'. This points to the importance not just of what is done, but also how it is done. Another respondent discussed the idea of local protection committees, where, '[i]f you can analyse the community's protection needs, they'll always help us come up with solutions adapted to those needs' (KII 6). The respondent describes further benefits to this bottom-up approach including community ownership and inclusion of locally-relevant actors.

Finally, a more forward-looking response included the hope of greater inter-community cohesion in the future building on ties established during periods of displacement. This is linked to the nature of displacement in the case region, where displacements of relatively short distances (10-20 km) are typical in situations of sudden insecurity. The respondent describes community members' perceptions as follows: 'Because before I was with you, you helped me out a lot and now I'm back on my own land. So later on, I think these communities will be able to help each other' (KII 3). As described in our review of social cohesion in research, policy and practice, there are some documented positive cohesion outcomes in post-conflict and post-displacement settings. This respondent's hope may well be possible and warrants further investigation and potentially supporting efforts.



Photo and description: D5EDBF. Jack Maguire / Alamy Stock Photo. A bus loaded with people prepares to leave Nandom, in northern Ghana, for the journey south. March 2009.

INSIGHTS FROM THE GROUND

This study's novel research in northern Ghana and western Niger provides valuable insights into social cohesion and loss and damage in areas affected by climate change and forced mobility. Currently, there is limited empirical research on the links between these issues. This section identifies insights emerging across the two case countries, as well as variations across contexts. These insights shed light on complex, contextual relationships and support further engagement with these topics in policy and practice.

While many insights emerge from the study, here we highlight seven insights that came out especially clearly and are highly relevant for understanding and addressing losses in social cohesion. For an overview, see Box 3 below.

BOX 3. KEY INSIGHTS FROM GHANA AND NIGER

- Considerable losses and damages, including to social cohesion.
- Complex mobility dynamics, with a high degree of forced mobility.
- Centrality of broader environmental, sociocultural and temporal factors in impacts to social cohesion.
- Declining quality of mutual support, linked to growing individualism and monetisation of support.
- Trade-offs in social cohesion, especially for marginal groups.
- Context dependence of relevant authorities and organisations for cohesion.
- Some hope for improvement and unexpected ideas for solutions.

Considerable losses and damages, including to social cohesion

Across the study contexts in Ghana and Niger, we are seeing considerable losses and damages. These include economic losses to livelihoods, crops, infrastructure and homes. However, there are also significant non-economic losses to health, ways of life, feelings of security, cultural practices, and social relations and mutual support. These losses are also marked in the Ghanaian context, where conflict, violence and insecurity are minimal, yet environmental and resource-dependent rural residents feel increasingly insecure due to climate variability and shocks, coupled with strained mutual support systems.

Table 2. Losses described by study respondents

	GHANA	NIGER
Economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Destruction of infrastructure and homes • Loss of property • Destruction to livelihoods, incl. tools, crops, etc. • Destruction of stored food 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of agricultural livelihoods • Loss of arable land • Loss of service facilities • Loss of infrastructure
Non-economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Displacement and forced mobility • Undermined sociocultural events and celebrations, e.g. harvest festivals • Loss of livelihood practices • Increased sense of insecurity • Weakened mutual support in times of social crisis, e.g. deaths • Perceived damage to emotional and social well-being 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Displacement and forced mobility • Damages to health, incl. due to heat and flooding • Loss of arable land • Loss of agricultural livelihoods • Indications of premature deaths • Indications of water insecurity • Indications of food insecurity and malnutrition

Source: Data from this study.

Many of these losses are linked directly to social cohesion. This is more clearly evident for non-economic losses, such as weakening mutual support. However, economic losses, for instance in relation to livelihoods, can also affect cultural and social practices, knowledge and belonging; further, they can make it difficult for individuals to live up to the expectations embedded in social relations.

In both Ghana and Niger, we document declines in cohesion. This is especially clear in Ghana, where more robust data collection was able to capture local perceptions. Here, over half of respondents (57%) reported a decrease in social cohesion in their communities. Importantly, a significant number of respondents perceive that this decline in social cohesion has negatively affected their social/emotional (43%) and

material (40%) well-being to a 'large' or 'very large' extent. These findings challenge climate response measures that approach declining well-being and increasing vulnerability as primarily caused by tangible interactions between climate stressors and resources, livelihoods, infrastructure, etc. Rather, it indicates that social relations and cohesion are a highly significant mediating factor. This is a valuable insight for research and practice as climate impacts intensify and is a critical area for further knowledge development.

Losses in social cohesion were linked to complex relationships around declining environmental security and forced mobility that affected social relations and cultural practices. For mobility, this was regarding both displacement for survival and forced migration, where respondents moved when they would rather have stayed home.

Complex mobility dynamics, with a high degree of forced mobility

In both Ghana and Niger, we observe complex mobility dynamics of multiple movements and trans-local relations. In Niger, displacement is common and is typically characterised by short-distance movements in response to security issues, though these can become a chain of movements and repeated displacements. This can for instance be due to climate shocks such as floods, in search of livelihood opportunities or due to further security risks. Situations of repeated movements can increase people's vulnerability over time. It can also make support to displaced and mobile persons difficult, as their movements become transitory. Displacements occur against a backdrop of acute climate and environmental stress and climate-related out-migration. In rural areas, displaced and host populations often all depend on agricultural livelihoods, which are worsening. When rural displaced move to peri-urban areas, also reported to be common, they often struggle to find livelihoods and support themselves.

In Ghana, climate-related displacement due to extreme events is quite low (1.6%), while forced migration is the most common form of mobility reported (by 75% of respondents), described as 'moved when I would rather have stayed home'. This number is extremely high. Immobility, where people are unable to move, was also reported by a tenth of respondents. Among mobile populations, forms of circular migration are typical, e.g. seasonal migration. Importantly, migrants often move to support their families in the study sites.

The role of climate change in forced mobility varies between Ghana and Niger. While data from both countries emphasise greater effects from slow-onset changes, there are differences in the occurrence and intensity of climate hazards with implications for survival and social cohesion. In Ghana, respondents and government authorities emphasise more frequent, but brief dry spells and more torrential and erratic rainfall patterns, while in Niger the emphasis is on the rising frequency and intensity of serious droughts as well as localised floods. In the Ghana case, respondents were to a greater extent able to adapt local livelihoods to the situation. These were either on-farm or off-farm, depending on local opportunities, and enabled by a relatively less complex space of environmental, economic and social stressors. In Niger, severe droughts, coupled with a challenging security situation, environmental degradation and limited livelihood alternatives, have left little room for local adaptation. These dynamics are key contextual factors in migration and displacement in Niger, which have become more prominent with few signs of reversal.

When considering mobility, it is also necessary to recognise linkages between migrants and those who remain at home. These linkages, where migrants send in-kind or monetary support to families back home, are extremely important both for social relations and cohesion as well as for coping, resilience and livelihoods at home. Hometown and kin associations also play a role in trans-local support, where associations in destination areas send money and in-kind support to their villages in times of need. These forms of trans-local support are a typical social obligation for migrants, part of sociocultural practices of mutual support. Engaging in them is important for migrants to remain in good standing in their families and communities. Yet, it can place strain on migrants who are struggling in destination areas, a situation where social relations can exacerbate vulnerability for some. Similar dynamics are present in kin and family networks within and across villages, where expectations of mutual support can cause strain. Conversely, however, it is clear from interviews that absence from villages and limited ability to engage in village life has often been detrimental to social relations.

We are thus witnessing complex mobility situations, which most often have a forced character. In Ghana, these are more pre-emptive and cyclical, while in Niger, they are both pre-emptive as well as sudden movements triggered by acute climate and security situations. Both can place significant strain on social relations and cohesion, while in some instances being the only way for people to fulfil social responsibilities of supporting their families.

Centrality of broader environmental, sociocultural and temporal factors in impacts to social cohesion

Findings from Ghana and Niger indicate a broad range of factors that are important in relation to social cohesion. This stands in contrast to social cohesion definitions, which are often narrowed to focus on specific social factors such as social relations, trust, belonging, etc., as described in our review of existing definitions. Our findings from Ghana and Niger suggest the importance of a range of interlinked environmental, sociocultural and temporal factors in impacts to social cohesion from forced mobility or climate change.

Environmentally, findings indicate that environment and climate are central to respondents' feelings of security and well-being within their communities. This emerges in data from Ghana on declining sense of physical security due to climate change impacts, as well as indications from Niger of declining hope for the future linked to environmental as well as security challenges. This echoes a range of existing research findings. This includes the importance of sense of place for individuals and communities (McNamara et al., 2021a); of spatial dynamics for social relations and cohesion in relation to climate-related mobility (Bower and Weerasinghe, 2021); and of engagement with environment, resources and livelihood practices for identity and community relations (McNamara et al., 2021b).

Regarding social factors, social cohesion points to the largely overlooked aspect of collective impacts and response to climate change. Attention to collective approaches is beginning to grow, for instance in studies of 'collective adaptation' (Wannewitz and Garschagen, 2023). These in some ways evoke early work on the importance of social capital for adaptation (Adger, 2003), though early social capital approaches reflected largely Western understandings of the role of individuals vis-à-vis the collective and governance institutions. Newer approaches take their point of departure to a greater degree in non-Western worldviews that may emphasise collectives, communities or kin. Findings from Ghana and Niger suggest that a shift in approach is necessary for developing context-relevant responses, and will likely increasingly emerge as community-formulated and -driven approaches are operationalised.

Temporally, findings suggest the importance of considering timelines in relation to negative impacts to social cohesion linked to displacement and forced mobility. Negative social relations, particularly inter-community relations between displaced and host populations, should not be assumed. However, long-term political, social and environmental dynamics can contribute to worsening relations over time.

Declining quality of mutual support, linked to growing individualism and monetisation of support

Our study also documented a decline not only in the extent of support, but the perceived quality of social support, with a negative impact on social cohesion. This was especially documented in Ghana, where we were able to gather more extensive data. Respondents describe how climate-related forced migration has meant that support is more often sent from afar in times of need, rather than provided personally. In addition, support is more often monetised, rather than provided as in-kind support, as was previously more common. This was a recurring theme in interviewees' responses, as evident in Box 4 below.

BOX 4. IN RESPONDENTS' OWN WORDS: DECLINING QUALITY OF SUPPORT IN GHANA

'Those that have migrated rarely show up here when you need them most for family and community activities. They may just send money... But money is not everything'.


'Some migrants no longer return for funerals...they just send some money, but it is not just the money we need but the people, to dance and to cry and to greet each other, and work for each other'.

'Those who migrate everywhere and do not stay anywhere long enough to know people well and also get to be known and trusted, often do not get any support when in trouble'.

Respondents describe that declining in-kind and social support is also more common within the village, often linked to perceptions of increased individualism among villagers. This is perceived to be especially among return migrants. These migrants have often left to support their families, but can return with other economic and cultural practices, such as increased monetisation and individualism, which can be at odds with established norms of mutual, in-kind support. This reflects findings of increased individualism and eroding community relations in other climate-affected contexts (McNamara et al., 2021b; Boafo et al., 2024). Also, as is evident in the final quote, migration can also lead to declining support for migrants themselves if they no longer actively engage in the social relations necessary to be a part of mutual support networks. Climate-related mobility can thus have diverging and long-term impacts on communities, an issue that is currently playing out around the world, and that necessitates increased attention in coming years.

Trade-offs in social cohesion, especially for marginal groups

Findings from Ghana and Niger also indicate trade-offs in social cohesion, especially for marginal groups. This can be both in sending and receiving areas. In Niger, this was described in relation to resource access and livelihoods in sending areas, where local leaders and customary authorities control access. Resource distribution may fall according to family lines, leaving some community members without access to land and water resources. Typically family-oriented forms of social cohesion, linked to established cultural practices and institutions, may therefore reproduce vulnerability for certain segments of the population without ties to local leadership. In the Upper West of Ghana, similar dynamics are also present in patriarchal, family-based distribution of land, where female family members must access land through their male relatives or farm on communal plots (Lindegard et al., in review). Trade-offs were also present for migrants in Ghana, where upholding social obligations of mutual support can place strain on migrants who are struggling in destination areas.



Forms of social cohesion linked to longstanding sociocultural practices can cut both ways – they can provide essential assistance in times of crisis and need, but they can also reproduce forms of marginalisation and exacerbate vulnerability for some.

This finding indicates that forms of social cohesion linked to longstanding sociocultural practices can cut both ways – they can provide essential assistance in times of crisis and need, but they can also reproduce forms of marginalisation and exacerbate vulnerability for some. For external actors, this presents a balancing act among aims that can become contradictory – e.g. engaging in culturally relevant, contextually grounded approaches; ensuring cohesion in an inclusive manner, with attention to vulnerable and marginalised groups; and avoiding externally-imposed ideas of cohesion. It also suggests that overwhelmingly positive portrayals of cohesion may not reflect complexities of social relations on the ground.

Context dependence of relevant authorities and organisations for cohesion

From case areas in Niger to Ghana, the study also points to divergent roles for government actors, customary and local authorities, and international organisations or donors. In Niger, respondents report active roles for government actors, international organisations and international NGOs (INGOs), though these

assessments come from individuals linked to an INGO. These actors are seen as important in social cohesion and peacebuilding in relation to inter-group tensions specifically. In Ghana, government actors and international organisations and donors are perceived to play a marginal role. Overall, in relation to support, 95% of respondents reported not receiving support from the government. Respondents typically receive support from family, friends/personal networks and kin.

Regarding climate response, there are limited adaptation and livelihood activities being implemented to support climate vulnerable communities. In situations of sudden-onset flooding, respondents in Ghana recount limited government support. There are also accounts of capture of disaster response resources by elites, so that these do not reach communities. Instead, residents help each other and rely on social networks, for example if temporarily displaced from their homes, if they have lost stored food, or if they have lost livelihood equipment. Regarding security, even when there are incursions by armed groups from Burkina Faso, these are largely responded to by local groups rather than the state security apparatus.

These diverging findings underline the need for context-relevant approaches that recognise differing actors and mechanisms in social support and social cohesion.

Some hope for improvement and unexpected ideas for solutions

A significant number of respondents reported experiencing a decline in social cohesion, with direct impacts to material and social well-being. Hope for improvement was mixed. In Ghana, only 42% of respondents believed that losses to material well-being due to declining social cohesion could be improved to a 'large' or 'very large' extent. For social/emotional well-being, this number was higher, at 49% - in other words almost half of respondents thought that loss of social well-being could be addressed to a 'large' or 'very large' extent. This statistic reflects both some hope, but also widespread uncertainty about the future, which will impact decision-making in relation to livelihoods, adaptation and mobility. In Niger, respondents also report mixed sense of hope for the future. Regarding climate-related losses specifically, respondents describe a bleak picture with little hope for changing conditions. However, they did indicate hope in relation to social cohesion, though this was predicated on an improved security situation.

In both contexts, respondents describe bottom-up ideas and solutions to address the challenges communities are facing. In Ghana, this includes new livelihood strategies, such as river fishing. In Niger, respondents describe a range of possible solutions to climate as well as cohesion challenges, including community-based awareness raising of climate impacts; reclaiming non-arable land; and adaptation and local protection committees that can improve cohesion through locally driven activities that bring together relevant community actors to generate change. External actors would do well to recognise and support these bottom-up ideas and solutions to generate lasting, context-relevant improvements. Otherwise, top-down interventions risk disrupting local strategies or sidelining community priorities (see e.g. Lindegaard and Sen, 2022).

In addition, survey data from Ghana clearly underlines the importance of both social and material responses to address losses to material and social/emotional well-being linked to declining cohesion. When looking at which responses were mentioned most frequently, similar response categories topped the list for both material and social/emotional well-being. For both, improved access to financial/material support was mentioned by seven in ten respondents. Additional prominent responses were dominated by social measures and included improved access to social support, access to infrastructure and services, sense of belonging, and sense of trust/reliance.

This also challenges dominant approaches in mainstream climate programming that prioritise livelihood support, services or infrastructure, often with little attention to cultural and social factors. Respondents clearly communicate a marked prioritisation of social interventions alongside material measures to address climate-related impacts and losses. As one respondent from another study vividly describes:

Although we focus more on economic loss, such as reduced crop yield and income, there are non-economic dimensions of climate change effects. The non-economic loss forms the intangible part of our culture that gives meaning to our life and existence. So, if we are losing that, it means we are losing our existence due to climate change.

(Thomas, 45 years of farming) (Boafo et al., 2024: 113).



Photo and description: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/climatecentre/50379379653/in/album-72157716101984431/> CRN / Flickr.com.

In late August 2020, with Belgian Red Cross support, the Niger Red Cross was able to use part of its new IFRC-DREF early action protocol. Niamey, Niger. August 2020.

LEARNINGS FROM POLICY AND PRACTICE

Adding to insights from the previous sections, here we consider current efforts in social cohesion programming and approaches, largely by donors, international organisations and INGOs. The analysis is based on information on current policy approaches, examples of programming and selected interviews with actors working with social cohesion and climate programming.

BOX 5. KEY INSIGHTS FROM POLICY AND PRACTICE

- Current social cohesion efforts are driven by major donors and international organisations.
- Social cohesion programming focuses on settings with conflict and displacement.
- Other vulnerable areas also experiencing social cohesion losses are overlooked.
- Social cohesion approaches may not be clearly defined, be contextually relevant or have a clear theory of change.
- Social cohesion approaches may be overly optimistic or fail to recognise trade-offs in cohesion.
- Protracted insecurity and interlinked crises will increasingly require integrated approaches.

Current social cohesion efforts are driven by major donors and international organisations

Overall, current social cohesion work is being driven by major donors and international organisations, such as the EU and World Bank. The World Bank particularly is seeking to build up a knowledge base on social cohesion (see World Bank Group, 2021), linked specifically to conflict and displacement. It is positive that there is increasing focus to social dynamics in donors' and international organisations' programming, as social relations and cohesion are clearly emerging as important, due to both their intrinsic and instrumental value.

However, there are also risks to ramping up social cohesion interventions by external actors. Multiple sources point to the risk of externally-driven approaches to understanding and engaging with context-specific social cohesion.

However, there are also risks to ramping up social cohesion interventions by external actors. Multiple sources point to the risk of externally-driven approaches to understanding and engaging with context-specific social cohesion. Our own analysis indicates that some organisations are seeking to develop universal definitions of social cohesion across contexts, which may undermine approaches foregrounding contextual understandings and factors. This risk is already manifesting in programming. Practitioners interviewed for this study have in some instances observed externally-driven approaches to social cohesion. They describe how organisations can 'come with a lot of assumptions that have nothing to do with the people we're there to serve' (KII 4). This indicates a critical need to take stock and reconsider approaches to social cohesion, even as social cohesion programming proliferates.

Social cohesion programming focuses on settings with conflict and displacement

Emphasis on conflict and displacement is also present in programming with a social cohesion focus. This is evident in Table 3, which provides a selection of programmes seeking to improve social cohesion, including brief descriptions and an analysis of key elements within each programme. Overall, projects often take a process-oriented approach, where implementation itself strengthens social relations. In addition, they

typically integrate efforts to strengthen social cohesion with tangible support, often to livelihoods or resource access, an approach supported by interviewed practitioners. Finally, they often include components of locally-anchored governance and citizen engagement, to support both social cohesion and project sustainability. Many projects integrate development and adaptation efforts on the one hand with peacebuilding efforts on the other. Initial evaluations indicate largely positive outcomes, though many of these projects are recent or ongoing, and more learning is needed in a rapidly-developing field.

Other vulnerable areas also experiencing social cohesion losses are overlooked

Overwhelming focus on settings of displacement, conflict and fragility in social cohesion programming sidelines other contexts and fields for which social cohesion considerations are also relevant. As emerges in the Ghana case, this is likely true for settings where ways of life and cultural values and practices are under strain linked to climate change and other social, political and economic transformations. In existing literature, considerations regarding social cohesion also emerge in the Pacific Islands context, where most focus has been on non-economic losses, particularly to culture. Drawing on these and other early findings in other geographic contexts, it is highly likely that major strain and losses to social cohesion are going overlooked in many climate-vulnerable areas globally.

Engaging with social cohesion in other contexts will require increased attention, both from actors engaging in policy and practice, but especially also researchers to improve understandings of the nature and scope of social cohesion losses, as well as possible ways to address these. Rather than rushing to address overlooked areas, our findings suggest that actors should first take stock of latest knowledge and early learnings from social cohesion engagement before developing programming for other contexts.

Social cohesion approaches may not be clearly delineated, be contextually relevant or have a clear theory of change

As is clear in Table 3, major programming to social cohesion is already underway. When overall definitions and approaches meet programming, there is a need for clear aims, theories of change and indicators. This is both for the sake of implementation, outcomes, transparency and accountability. One practitioner described situations where they observed donor engagement with social cohesion

Table 3. Social cohesion programming examples

ACTOR AND CONTEXT	DESCRIPTION EXCERPT	KEY ELEMENTS
<p>EU & UNEP; Sudan</p>	<p>Climate Change and Security Project: Building Resilience to Climate-related Security Risks in North Darfur, Sudan. Seeking to address the underlying drivers of conflict in the region, the pilot used a combination of climate change adaptation and peacebuilding activities to promote more effective and equitable management of shared natural resources between and among different groups. Specifically, the project aimed to achieve three core objectives: Strengthen local governance mechanisms for inclusive natural resource management, dialogue and mediation; Enhance relationships, and trust between communities; and Promote sustainable and climate-resilient livelihood options for vulnerable groups...The project’s integrated approach yielded positive results for livelihoods, natural resource management and climate change adaptation, as well as for social cohesion, governance, dialogue, and mediation (UNEP & EU 2022a, pp. 3, 9).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Post-conflict peacebuilding, addressing ‘underlying drivers’. • Community-based, inclusive approach. • Locally-anchored mediation alongside livelihood and adaptation measures.
<p>World Bank; Djibouti, Ethiopia, Uganda</p>	<p>Development Response to Displacement Impacts Project in the Horn of Africa. The Project Development Objective (PDO) is to improve access to basic social services, expand economic opportunities, and enhance environmental management for communities hosting refugees in the targeted areas of Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Uganda. The proposed regional project will ensure that citizens participate and engage in the process of identifying and prioritizing their developmental needs, including expanding socioeconomic infrastructure and livelihood opportunities to improve self-reliance among refugee-hosting communities, improving social cohesion between refugees and refugee-hosting communities, increasing the voices and roles of citizens in decision making regarding development, and eliciting a greater demand for social accountability. The operational approach will be CDD and will involve: (i) capacity support to grassroots institutions; (ii) ensuring that the voices of all communities are heard in the decision making process; (iii) strengthening 9 decentralized government administrative functions; and (iv) investing in public-service delivery and social mobilization to enhance social cohesion among beneficiary communities. (World Bank Group 2016, pp. 8-9).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aims to prevent conflicts between refugee and hosting communities. • Citizen-driven approach, with support to local organisations and governments. • Improved service delivery coupled with social mobilisation.

ACTOR AND CONTEXT	DESCRIPTION EXCERPT	KEY ELEMENTS
<p>World Bank; Burkina Faso</p>	<p>Communal Climate Action and Landscape Management project. The CCALM project...was designed to promote dialogue between different land users (including vulnerable groups) and collectively define strategic development and land use choices that benefit the whole community. The project then funded communal investments to make these choices viable and generate economic opportunities. This approach has helped reduce conflicts over land use and strengthen social cohesion. (Ahmadnia et al. 2022, p. 79).</p> <p>The project relies on a strong citizen engagement approach...: (a) community consultations, participatory needs assessments, and participatory planning (TerriStories); (b) multi-level arrangements for registering and addressing grievances and complaints; and (c) a community monitoring mechanism that will be embedded at the local level and associated to remote supervision... (World Bank Group 2022b, p. 40).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aims to proactively address conflict drivers. • Participatory approach engaging citizens and local and customary authorities. • Emphasis on process, not just outcome. • Integrated development and grievance management approach.
<p>EU & UNEP; Nepal</p>	<p>EU-UNEP Climate Change and Security Project: Building Resilience to Climate-related Security Risks in West Karnali, Nepal In 2018, the EU-UNEP partnership on Climate Change and Security established a pilot project (...) to improve understanding of climate change risks in the country and test integrated approaches to programming that address the underlying drivers of insecurity and enhance resilience to climate change. Using a combination of climate change adaptation and peacebuilding activities, the project aimed to achieve three core objectives: promote sustainable and climate-resilient livelihood options for vulnerable groups; strengthen local governance capacities for natural resource management and dispute resolution; and enhance relationships, social cohesion, and trust between communities. (...). A community-led process to improve water infrastructure and management supported by the project reduced incentives for conflict over water and improved capacities to cope with increasing weather extremes. (...). this pilot project demonstrated the added value of combining climate change adaptation and peacebuilding activities. The project's integrated approach yielded positive results for livelihoods, natural resource management and climate change adaptation as well as for social cohesion, governance, dialogue, and mediation. (UNEP & EU 2022b, pp. 2, 6, 8).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on prevention and resolution of small-scale conflict over natural resources. • Community-led, inclusive approach to both adaptation and cooperation interventions. • Supplements adaptation of agriculture with efforts for livelihood diversification, thus increasing resilience to climate impacts.

characterised by 'lack of understanding when they roll out a call for proposals. What does that mean? How do you measure that?'. The respondent went on to suggest that 'there is no one definition of social cohesion. Therefore, if [working as/in] a donor, policy group or thinktank, there is a need to be clear about definitions if working in a programme. What change you want to see?' (KII 4).

This issue has emerged in existing assessments of some social cohesion programming. One country-based review of social cohesion programming found that 'none of the social cohesion interventions...were supported by a [virtually available] logical theory of change or tracking indicators' (Sturridge et al., 2023). Externally-driven approaches that lack contextually-based theories of change or indicators are risky in vulnerable contexts and may undermine the 'do no harm' principle.

Importantly, clearly delineated theories of change and indicators do not need to be top-down or externally driven. Rather, actors should '[i]nvestigate how social cohesion works in developing countries so that assumptions based on how it operates in the northern context do not negatively influence developing world programming' (Barolsky et al., 2016: 3). This requires organisational approaches that foreground context. Respondents linked this to localisation, which they perceived as a way forward to ensure locally driven and relevant programming. One respondent suggested the idea of local protection committees that 'can meet at a level where the key players need to be taken into account' (KII 6).

Social cohesion approaches may be overly optimistic, or fail to recognise trade-offs in cohesion

Donor approaches to social cohesion have at times been described as overly ambitious or optimistic (Sturridge et al., 2023; KII 4). This is linked to high expectations of what programming can achieve in limited time frames or scope in the face of highly complex social relations and cohesion. Our findings underline that cohesion is related to a range of broad sociocultural, environmental, political, security and temporal dynamics. While projects may be able to address fairly specific relations or dynamics, they will likely struggle to engender broader change in contextual and structural factors that are linked to some aspects of social cohesion. Programming experience with locally-driven and anchored integrated approaches have shown promise (see e.g. Bedelian et al., 2024), but expectations of project outcomes in relation to cohesion should remain realistic.

Actors also urgently need to recognise and reconsider approaches that worsen cohesion. For instance, differentiating support according to group or status has been documented to worsen social relations and exacerbate tensions. However, this approach remains common in settings of displacement, linked to limited resources but also institutional priorities and mandates (Sturridge et al., 2023; KII 4).

Additionally, policy and programming have at times been overly optimistic due to failure to recognise potential trade-offs in social cohesion. Existing cohesion dynamics maintain dominant social structures, which entail gains for some, but also marginalisation for others, as illustrated in accounts from both Niger and Ghana. Many organisations emphasise inclusion of marginal, or particularly vulnerable groups such as women or minorities in programming. However, this may be at odds with contextually dominant cohesion dynamics, for instance patriarchal relations. When organisations engage in such settings, these trade-offs should be made explicit, balancing culturally relevant approaches with actors' own principles. One practitioner interviewed described such dilemmas of local versus external perspectives, asking: 'How do we inspire new ideas without imposing them – allowing people to have the room to say "I don't care – not for me"?' (KII 5).

Protracted insecurity and interlinked crises increasingly require integrated approaches

Finally, contexts affected by interlinked, protracted crises or instability require integrated approaches that cross silos – of humanitarian, development, climate and peacebuilding efforts. There have been movements towards crossing silos and linking efforts, for instance nexus approaches. However, challenges remain, not only in overcoming silos, but also in relation to realities on the ground. Practitioners describe people increasingly affected by entrenched conflict and long-term displacements, noting that much more than before they are 'not conflicts that end' (KII 4).

In such settings, programming that addresses multiple needs simultaneously, in challenging situations, is necessary. Positively, donors have in some instances responded with highly integrated approaches, as illustrated in the programming examples provided above, an important step forward. In addition, respondents describe the increasing need to partner across fields and organisations to bring together the necessary capacities to support programme formulation and implementation in such settings.



Photo and description: Luis Tato / AFP / Ritzau Scanpix. A Woman plants some seeds as part of a tree plantation project to reforest the Sahel in Malamawa village, Niger. July 2019.

TAKEAWAYS: STEPS FOR SUPPORTING SOCIAL COHESION

Below we synthesise key takeaways emerging from our review of existing knowledge, novel research in Ghana and Niger and policy and programming analysis. These points are aimed at actors and organisations engaging with social cohesion policy, programming and practice and focus on next steps in efforts to strengthen social cohesion. While the overall focus of this report is on the linkages between climate change and social cohesion, with a spotlight on forced mobility, many of these takeaways will be relevant in contexts and programming without major climate challenges.

The takeaways speak to the report's overall conclusions: losses to social cohesion are likely more widespread than realised, especially in areas highly impacted by climate change, and these losses can have significant, negative impacts on both material and social/emotional well-being. In many cases, these impacts are likely going overlooked and unaddressed. Mainstream conflict and climate programming approaches may not be well-suited to addressing social cohesion losses, for instance due to lack of focus on complex, contextual cohesion dynamics or social dynamics generally. And many of the contexts with considerable cohesion losses are likely also experiencing other major challenges such as forced mobility or insecurity, requiring approaches that can simultaneously address interlinked challenges.

An overview of the takeaways is included in Box 6. Subsequently, each point is presented with brief considerations and possible concrete steps.

BOX 6. TAKEAWAYS FOR SOCIAL COHESION ENGAGEMENT GOING FORWARD

- Rethink definitions.
- Take stock and update approaches.
- Consider other contexts beyond conflict and displacement.
- Develop programming to integrate social aspects and address loss.
- Integrate broader environmental, sociocultural and temporal dynamics.
- Recognise complexity and trade-offs in cohesion.
- Enable context-based, community-driven efforts.
- Establish innovative partnerships and integrated approaches.

Rethink definitions

There is a need for balance between definitional clarity within external institutions (donors, IOs, etc.) and contextual relevance. Moving towards a contextually tailored definition of social cohesion is in line with a grounded theory research approach, a more bottom-up, rather than top-down approach to explaining social phenomena. In practice, grounded approaches have recently gained traction in the form of ‘localisation’ in development and humanitarian work and ‘locally-led adaptation’. While a bottom-up approach can add complexity to policy and programming efforts, it is better able to capture local understandings, challenges and also possibilities. It may therefore be able to support better interventions and outcomes. Possible steps include:

- Develop a flexible definition of non-exhaustive core elements that can be adjusted to particular contexts.
- Alternatively, develop a definition consisting of very broad core elements with indicators tailored to local contexts.

- Formulate indicators and approaches on the basis of contextual assessments (e.g. needs or vulnerability assessments) considering collectives (groups, communities, etc.) as well as individuals.
- For programming attempting to intervene in social cohesion dynamics, conduct assessments specifically tailored to capturing contextual social cohesion dynamics, to at the very least avoid unintended negative outcomes in line with do no harm principles.

Take stock and update approaches

Social cohesion programming has gained ground over the last several years. It has spread across regions and continents as well as different fields of intervention. Some organisations now have experience with engagement focused on social cohesion. Others may be considering how to engage. All should take the opportunity to take stock based on experiences and learning garnered over the last years. It is critical that approaches and programming are updated on the basis of this knowledge as social cohesion programming seems likely to expand, particularly within highly vulnerable contexts. Possible steps include:

- Conduct internal stock-takes and evaluations, feeding into assessments of existing as well as new programming.
- Facilitate internal training and exchange to improve awareness as well as gather insights.
- Share knowledge and facilitate professional sparring and exchange across organisations, including local actors and organisations. This should include best practices as well as pitfalls, with the recognition that this a new and developing area of programming.
- Draw on existing experiences in other fields, for instance humanitarian engagement with mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) and post-disaster ‘Hobfoll’ principles (Dückers, 2013).
- Draw on existing resources on social cohesion, for instance the online Social Cohesion Knowledge Hub: www.socialcohesion.info.

- Consider what additional, perhaps underrepresented knowledge or perspectives should be included for robust understandings of diverse forms of cohesion, and actively engage with and support these.

Consider other contexts beyond conflict and displacement

Social cohesion challenges are emerging beyond contexts of conflict and displacement, particularly in vulnerable areas acutely affected by climate change. Programming in these contexts should integrate social cohesion components in order to support communities and strengthen resilience. Possible steps include:

- For funders and researchers, support an improved knowledge base on the nature and scope of potential social cohesion challenges in various geographical and developmental settings, particularly in vulnerable, climate-affected contexts.
- For implementing organisations, cohesion elements can be integrated into needs assessments to identify possible cohesion needs in other contexts.

If social cohesion engagement is assessed to be relevant:

- Consider if your organisation has the capacity or mandate to integrate relevant cohesion support. If not, despite an assessment that social cohesion engagement is relevant, consider partnering or alerting relevant organisations of the observed need.
- Consider how social cohesion support can be integrated alongside other programming or components, for instance through implementation processes themselves, and drawing on existing experience.

Develop programming to integrate social aspects and address loss

Our findings indicate that social losses are likely much more widespread than currently recognised. Further, social cohesion and resilience generally go hand in hand, where negative impacts to one can undermine the other – though the inverse is also true. This emphasises the need for increased attention to social loss, in research, policy and programming. Importantly, efforts to address social losses will

not be able to revive previous forms of cohesion, but will likely entail new forms of cohesion. This may, however, provide an opportunity to support forms of cohesion that can better respond to dynamic, transforming societies and challenges.

Development of new programming will be critical. Current forms of programming that focus on tangible climate impacts likely overlook important social mechanisms affecting both material and social well-being. Development of programming is also increasingly relevant as dedicated finance to loss and damage begins to flow. Possible next steps include:

- Ramp up programming and engagement with non-tangible social and cultural dynamics, as these are critical for well-being and resilience. These can complement programming on tangible support.
- Draw on existing experiences with social losses, including from displacement, relocation and disaster and humanitarian contexts, as well as recent experiences with integrated approaches.
- Engage community and local organisations to understand what social losses they are observing and what they see as relevant areas for engagement.
- For early efforts, prioritise contexts with long-running organisational presence and established relationships of trust. In new contexts, emphasise establishing relationships and trust across groups.
- While project frameworks may be developed in country offices or headquarters, concrete activities and approaches should be based on community led processes where possible.

Integrate broader environmental, sociocultural and temporal dynamics

Understandings of cohesion should also integrate broader environmental, socio-cultural and temporal dynamics in order to understand and address context-specific factors and mechanisms affecting cohesion, and how these change over time. Social transformations of all kinds – linked to environmental, social, economic and political factors – are affecting long held cultural notions and practices around social cohesion. In Ghana, this was evident in increasing individualism, monetisation of support and commodification of labour and other resources. These have markedly

influenced the nature and robustness of social relations. Recognising the broader dynamics and transformations affecting social cohesion is essential for accurate understandings of cohesion dynamics and ability to respond. Possible steps include:

- Assessments of social cohesion should not only capture the state of cohesion, but the broader factors and mechanisms affecting it. This can be through initial open-ended formats to identify relevant factors, followed by closed-ended formats to identify occurrence and trends.
- Consider environmental, not only social, factors in cohesion assessments and approaches. This can go beyond instrumental approaches focused on livelihoods and resources. Inspiration can be drawn from disaster, climate, and loss and damage approaches, e.g. sense of place, sense of security and sociocultural relations tied to the environment.
- Assess at different levels, e.g. community, groups and individuals; factors and mechanisms will likely be different for different groups, linked to social and demographic factors.
- Monitor shifts in social cohesion dynamics and needs over time and integrate into timelines for engagement.
- Once relevant factors and mechanisms have been identified, be realistic about which are feasible for the project or programming to address within its timeframe and scope.

Recognise complexity and trade-offs in cohesion

Actors working with social cohesion must recognise complexity and trade-offs of social cohesion to ensure realistic and relevant interventions. Trade-offs can be present in cultural norms versus organisations' own principles; support to marginalised groups versus supporting dominant social relations; institutional mandates and scope for interventions versus best practices of how best to support cohesion; and bottom-up versus non-consultative external interventions, approaches and priorities. These trade-offs and dilemmas come out as common across cohesion interventions, and it is important to recognise them and engage with them explicitly and transparently. Possible steps include:

- Include possible dilemmas in programming risk assessments and monitoring and evaluation.
- Navigate organisational requirements and local priorities, for instance by supporting those priorities that best align with organisational capacities, mandates and principles.
- Be transparent and actively communicate your organisation's approach, mandate and scope of interventions – including limitations – with the recognition that this may be challenging in volatile settings and at times inadequate to address dissatisfaction and possible shortcomings.
- When engaging with local actors, include local authorities and associations where relevant and consider how to supplement these to meet identified cohesion needs and ensure inclusion.
- Include mediation and grievance redress mechanisms where relevant, with the recognition that conflict and tensions are likely in settings of undermined cohesion.

Enable context-based, community-driven efforts

Study findings underline the necessity of context-based efforts and the strength of community-driven approaches for outcomes. Consider how your organisation can best enable these. Possible steps include:

- Start with internal programming guidelines, including definitions and approaches that make room for community-driven interventions.
- Draw on existing localisation and locally led approaches and experience.
- Look to existing social cohesion programming with community-driven approaches, e.g. the programme examples provided in this report.
- Consider how to foster inclusive community-driven engagement to also reach vulnerable and marginalised groups.
- Consider how to ensure anchorage in local communities and settings, while avoiding placing burdens and recognising that anchorage will be difficult when working with transient populations.

Establish innovative partnerships and integrated approaches

In order to address multifaceted challenges and concurrent, protracted crises, integrated programming approaches and innovative partnerships are critical. The former entails working across fields of intervention and silos, e.g. development, humanitarian, climate and peacebuilding fields, while the latter entails partnering strategically with actors in other fields to enable the joint capacities necessary to support communities on the ground. These approaches are based on the recognition that complex situations of long-term conflict, displacement and environmental challenges are increasingly the norm, with little prospect of decline of this trend in sight. Possible steps include:

- On the basis of needs assessments, consider what needs your organisation can fulfil, what other major needs are emerging and which other organisations may be able to provide the relevant capacities.
- When partnering, take time to integrate different areas of expertise from the project design stage for meaningful integration that can address interlinked challenges on the ground.
- Set aside extra time for new approaches and partnerships, recognising that meaningful co-operation across organisations, areas of expertise and fields of intervention is an initially time-consuming but important investment.
- Consider how new partnerships and integrated approaches can be piloted and scaled up, including possible trade-offs. Dedicated pilots may be preferable for new, integrated approaches but difficult where there are critical protection needs to prioritise. Integrating into existing components or implementing in parallel to existing programming may be more feasible but may limit novel, integrated approaches.
- For social and cohesion support, provide alongside tangible support and consider taking process-based approaches, where implementation processes themselves boost cohesion.
- Also consider how your organisation can cooperate with actors at other levels – from international, national to local levels – to incorporate different expertise and knowledge.

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ANNEX: METHODS

To examine the relationship between social cohesion and loss and damage, with focus on climate-related forced mobility, we conducted a literature review, a multi-sited empirical study, policy and programming analysis and key informant interviews of practitioners.

The literature review provides an overview of existing knowledge and approaches to social cohesion. It drew on scholarly and grey literature, with three main aims: (1) provide an overview of definitions of and approaches to social cohesion in research and policy; (2) synthesise findings on social cohesion in relevant fields, including international development, conflict and peacebuilding and forced mobility – including experiences with assessing and addressing social cohesion challenges; and (3) explore linkages between social cohesion and loss and damage, including emerging findings on social cohesion impacts linked to environmental and climate stresses and shocks and relevant responses.

The multi-sited empirical study provides novel primary research exploring perceptions of climate change, social cohesion and elements of loss among communities affected by forced mobility in climate vulnerable settings. The study focused on the following geographical contexts, each providing insight into different aspects of the identified themes of the study:

- Upper West Region of northern Ghana, where localised floods are becoming increasingly common, linked to extreme rainfall, against a backdrop of slow-onset climate change. They are driving recurring, short-term displacements, as well as dynamics of forced migration and immobility. In this setting, the study considers social cohesion and loss and damage dynamics in relation to (1) recurring displacements, (2) forced (im)mobility, and (3) sending areas.
- Tillabéri Region in western Niger, where a significant number of people are experiencing longer term displacement due to conflict and security issues as well as climate stress and extreme weather events. In some cases, displaced persons have experienced secondary displacements, where they are displaced again, for instance due to flooding, after an initial displacement. In addition, there have been issues of tensions in displaced receiving areas between displaced and host populations. In this setting, the study focuses on (1) multiple displacements, (2) issues of conflict/security, and (3) receiving areas.

In each country, the study design included one rural and one peri-urban area, each randomly selected from a list of areas with characteristics relevant to the study design.

The study was designed to include key informant interviews (KIIs), a survey of individuals in the study sites, supplementary interviews with some survey respondents and focus group discussions where the security situation allowed. These were supplemented by secondary data on issues of security, climate and environmental change, conditions of displaced persons, etc.

- Key informant interviews: Key informant interviews were carried out with community leaders and individuals with insight into the communities, as well as an overview of climate change, social relations and mobility dynamics. They provided insights that informed the survey tool.
- Survey of community members: The survey of community members was a primarily closed-ended survey format selected to enable data collection by Red Cross community volunteers in Niger not trained in qualitative data collection. It was an individual survey, with some questions on their household as a whole. The survey included questions on demographics, livelihoods, perceptions of climate change and mobility practices; these were followed by questions on social cohesion, with focus on belonging, sense of security and sense of reliance and support, the elements of cohesion identified as relevant in the case areas. Finally, the survey asked about perceived material and social losses due to declines in social cohesion, to what extent respondents felt these could be addressed and what kinds of responses they saw as relevant.

The Yemane (1969) sampling method was used to determine the sample size from a sample frame determined from a census conducted in the initial phase of the project. Stratified random sampling was used to capture male and female perspectives.

- Interviews with survey respondents: To add additional insight to survey responses, a limited number of survey respondents were interviewed.
- Focus group discussions: Focus groups discussions were also held with women, men and youth with each group consisting of eight to twelve participants.

This study design was carried through in Ghana. However, due to a shifting political situation in Niger and delays in obtaining an ethical approval, the study design was altered in Niger to rely on key informant interviews and secondary data. Unfortunately,

this means that perceptions of community members in Tillabéri, Niger are not well represented in this report. Instead, additional data was gathered to partially address this gap. As this report was being finalised, the ethical clearance was obtained and further data collection in Niger will be carried out. For the latest updated data and analysis, see the project website at www.diis.dk/social-cohesion. In addition, a more comprehensive data report with qualitative and quantitative findings from Ghana is also available at the project website.

The analysis of policy and programming provides a brief assessment of current programmatic approaches to improve social cohesion. It provides examples of existing interventions with focus on elements including climate and resources, displacement and conflict and peacebuilding. It focuses on interventions implemented by major donors and international organisations, who are identified as driving current revival in social cohesion as a focus for policy and intervention.

This is combined with insights from key informant interviews with practitioners working with issues of climate change, forced mobility and social cohesion. Interviews were conducted with practitioners working in Niger as well as internationally with these issues. They were conducted with Danish Red Cross and Niger Red Cross staff as a supplementary source of information due to the challenges obtaining research permits in Niger for data collection with community members directly. These interviews provided insights into dynamics in Tillabéri, Niger, as well as further afield.

Table 4. Key informant interviews of Red Cross practitioners*

NAME AND ROLE	ORGANISATION
Hachimou A. Ibrahim, Social Cohesion Project Officer	Niger Red Cross
Amadou Soumana, Protection and MHPSS Project Officer	Niger Red Cross
Dr. Alio Majid, PRECO (Protection, Resilience, Social Cohesion) Program Coordinator	Niger Red Cross
Anne Mette Meyer, Climate & Anticipatory Action Lead	Danish Red Cross
Emma Moss, Migration & Health Delegate	Danish Red Cross
Olivier Mugwaneza, MHPSS Delegate	Danish Red Cross, Niger
Laura Bonanomi, Resilience Programme Delegate	Danish Red Cross, Niger

*The order of key informants listed here does not reflect the numbering in the report.

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