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Social Cohesion in Protracted Displacement: Limits to Peace Between Young People in Camps

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ABSTRACT

This article brings to light the limits to peace that currently exist between young people in Kakuma refugee camp through a framework of social cohesion. The main drivers of conflict among the vastly diverse youth of Kakuma are examined to provide evidence of the gaps in social cohesion that endure in the camp. A framework of analysis built around notions related to social cohesion is applied to the qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews with humanitarian professionals working in the camp. The discussion arising from the findings offers key considerations on humanitarian work with young people in contexts of protracted encampment such as Kakuma, and on how such work can more effectively address cohesion among diverse youth. Ultimately, the insights offered want to inform the trajectory of humanitarian work with encamped young people, with the view of enhancing peace, wellbeing and cohesion in camps.

1 | Introduction

This article brings to light the limits to peace that currently exist between young people in Kakuma refugee camp. The notion of social cohesion in displacement has been explored at length, both by scholars and international aid agencies; yet, the focus of this exploration has mainly revolved around the relationship between refugees and hosts. In contexts of protracted encampment, however, where refugees are confined within a limited, resource-scarce and aid-dependent reality, understanding the relationships and interactions between different refugee groups becomes salient. Within this reality, in particular, young people are those who too often are faced with conflict among their peers.

The article begins with a review of the literature on social cohesion, with particular focus on realities affected by displacement. This paves the way for an introduction to the context of Kakuma

camp and the reality of protracted displacement. A presentation of the findings from qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews with humanitarian professionals working in the camp is then offered, utilising a framework of analysis built around notions related to social cohesion. In particular, the main drivers of conflict among the vastly diverse youth of Kakuma are examined to provide evidence of the gaps in social cohesion that endure in the camp.

The ensuing discussion offers a number of considerations on humanitarian work with young people in contexts of protracted encampment such as Kakuma, and on how such work can more effectively address cohesion among diverse youth. Ultimately, this article wants to provide insights to inform the trajectory of humanitarian work with encamped young people, with the view of enhancing peace, wellbeing and cohesion within camps.

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2 | Social Cohesion in Displacement: A Review of the Literature

The complexity of social cohesion as a concept stems from the way cohesion itself is being recognised. Key to that is the idea that individual members and groups within a society are able to perceive a sense of belonging, and that they regard society as a larger whole rather than an assemblage of different parts; it is also based on the belief that, when differences manifest, a peaceful process exists that leads to their acceptance. Therefore, not only is social cohesion positive in itself, as it improves people's living conditions in a society, but it is also helpful in avoiding violent conflict (Langer et al. 2017).

Schiefer and van der Noll (2017, 592) define social cohesion as 'a descriptive attribute of a collective, indicating the quality of collective togetherness. [...] Th[e] degree of cohesion manifests itself in the attitudes and behaviours of all individuals and groups within the society and comprises both ideational and relational components'. King et al. (2010, 337) go further to state that 'social cohesion refers to behaviour and attitudes within a community that reflect a propensity of community members to cooperate'. When a society is socially cohesive, the distribution of power and material resources are largely perceived as fair among its members. In line with this, Langer et al. (2017, 324) identify *inequalities*, *trust* and *identities* as three components that are critical in influencing societal relationships and attitudes towards cohesiveness. These authors clarify that the first component is in fact 'the extent of perceived *inequalities*', whereas the second one is related to the 'perceptions of the extent of *trust* among people' (Langer et al. 2017, 325).

In their review of the literature on social cohesion in displacement, Holloway and Sturridge (2022) have concluded that although a broad range of interventions focusing on social cohesion have been implemented, the changes that these have brought about in relation to social cohesion do not seem to have been clearly assessed. In instances where social cohesion has been explicitly cited as an objective of a project and a component of its design, the actual intended outcomes have remained rather abstract. These interventions have received criticism, in particular, for exaggerating claims in relation to their impact on social cohesion and for advancing only basic connections between community-driven development—including employment, social protection and participatory decision-making—and cohesion (Holloway and Sturridge 2022).

Despite this lack of substance and consistency in the literature, reflecting on social cohesion in contexts of displacement has been a prevalent topic. Perspectives from published work on this topic range from regarding social cohesion as the equivalent of community relations, to the establishment of community organisations, or 'both [as] an end-in-itself and a means-to-an-end' (Finn 2017, 18). This evidences the flexibility of the concept.

Holloway and Sturridge (2022), again, explain how social cohesion can be viewed both from a vertical and from a horizontal lens, according to the kinds of social relations involved. While the vertical concerns the relationships between individuals and institutions, or state and society, the horizontal addresses the

relationships between individuals and groups, and also within a communal group or between such groups. For this reason, it is not uncommon to utilise terms such as intragroup or intergroup social cohesion. UNHCR focuses on horizontal cohesion as the bond that 'hold(s) people together within a community'. It also outlines the types of bonds that can effectively serve this purpose, such as groups interaction, shared cultural interests or religious beliefs, and the capacity to reduce inequality and prevent marginalisation (UNHCR 2013, cited in UNHCR 2018b, 16). In line with UNHCR focus, this article addresses issues affecting horizontal social cohesion among young people in Kakuma refugee camp.

As Madonsela (2017) reminds us, a broad definition of social cohesion stresses the importance of indicators of *inequality* (also in line with Langer et al. 2017). This scholar highlights that social cohesion refers to a society's ability to promote the wellbeing of all its members by reducing inequalities and preventing divisions. In African pre-colonial societies, for example, every individual played a role in daily life and provided assistance during emergencies and similar situations: these dependencies and connections also made the community stronger (Wortmann-Kolundžija 2023).

Finn (2017) highlights how, both in theory and in practice, the idea of cohesive communities is often presented as an important component in sustainable development. Developing a shared vision for the betterment of an area that accommodates displaced populations, building leadership capacity and investing in youth instigate a process through which social cohesion can be secured. In other words, social cohesion is not regarded as a precursor to development, but rather as its foundation (Finn 2017).

Similarly, Qasmi and Ahmed (2019) underline the strong ties that exist between the two concepts. In order to achieve development, people must come together and work towards the attainment of a shared goal. This cooperation towards a mutual objective stands as an indicator of a strong bond within a group. At the same time, for development to occur meaningfully, elements such as people's participation, the inclusion of all groups, and the opportunity for marginalised groups to be heard need to be present at every step. Interaction between people and groups is central in establishing social relationships, building social cohesion, developing trust and lessening tensions (Qasmi and Ahmed 2019). In particular, Finn (2017) emphasises how the application of development strategies to contexts of displacement, which move away from a mere humanitarian response, can bring a positive impact to social cohesion when development programming directly addresses the relationships among different communities.

Finn (2017) also observes that social cohesion has a context-specific nature that is connected to a group or society, rather than to individuals. This gains particular relevance through the recognition that social cohesion in displacement, as the World Bank has suggested, is not only related to the interactions between host communities and migrants, but also to those among migrant groups themselves. In accepting that social cohesion is a trait that needs to characterise society as a whole, then it cannot be observed only between receiving and displaced communities. As a result of these considerations, development interventions that focus on social cohesion in contexts of displacement are

often designed as peacebuilding or trust-building assignments involving different social groups (Finn 2017).

As also recognised previously by Langer et al. (2017), *trust* is a key measurement of how cohesive a society is and how strong the bonds that connect people to one another within a particular society are. Finn (2017) adds that trust is what best defines the level of social cohesion, and that social cohesion can be regarded as a synonym of trust. More specifically, what is being referred to is trust among members of society, trust between different groups (including displaced communities) and trust between people and institutions (the state). Laurence et al. (2019) highlight how a number of theories posit that local cohesion may decrease as a result of the trust that develops more eagerly between individuals of the same ethnicity; this can stem from people's propensity to liaise with others from their own group, from shared social norms, or even from an unmanifest partiality in regarding others from one's own ethnic group as more trustworthy.

The third and last component of social cohesion in diverse societies, *identities*, is related to 'the strength of people's adherence to national identity in relation to their group (or ethnic) identity' (Langer et al. 2017, 325). As Langer et al. (2017) underscore, this element is central in societies where multiple ethnic groups co-exist, such as the African ones, as the continent's national boundaries were not instituted organically but rather enforced somewhat recently by colonial powers. Ouchou and Williams (2017) also explain how certain societies temporarily show a strong sense of unity when they are focused on a shared goal, but they tend to disband once that goal is achieved. These authors stress how this was the case with many African societies before they gained independence: various ethnic groups came together to expel colonial rulers and achieve independence, but after reaching that goal, they reverted to their individual ethnic communities.

In its review of background papers on social cohesion in displacement, the World Bank (2018) concludes that the multiple definitions and frameworks for analysis on this concept do not come to a consensus on what social cohesion is. An important consideration that arises from the literature, based on the Bank's desk review, is that although a number of studies have focused on the social connection between host and displaced people, scarce attention has been paid to the dynamics and social fractures between displaced communities themselves (World Bank 2018). Yet, tensions both within and between groups of displaced people may be equally, if not more, important to social cohesion than relationships between other groups (World Bank 2022).

This review, built around some of the literature on social cohesion and with special attention paid to contexts of displacement, allows us to understand the main concepts that drive the rationale of the next sections of this article. In particular, the introduction to social cohesion provided above offers a reading lens for recognising where the main disconnections exist among some of the youth in Kakuma refugee camp.

3 | Study Background: Contextualising Long-Term Encampment

With conflicts now enduring for prolonged periods of time, the experience of displacement for those affected can extend to many

years, with little prospect on the possibility of planning a return home. As protractedness seems to have become an attribute of displacement, those who have been studying this complex reality have come to acknowledge that the lives of those who are displaced are not to be viewed as entirely reliant on external aid. On the contrary, displaced people have been taking steps to address their situation and implementing initiatives to find their way. In response, humanitarian organisations have been redirecting their programmes to support self-reliance (Crawford et al. 2015).

Protracted situations can have different characteristics, based on a number of factors. These have to do with the conditions in the countries refugees have originated from; the conditions in the host countries, including socioeconomic and policy-related; the opportunities for sustainable solutions; and the involvement and support of the international community, which varies depending on each case. Protracted situations can be related to urban refugees but can also be camp-based (UNHCR 2019).

In protracted situations of displacement, refugee camps too often become cities that only exist timelessly in a parallel dimension from their surroundings. Their context is considered that of a humanitarian emergency; yet, those who have found shelter in the camps and are forced to stay have laid roots for a chapter of their lives in those settings. From an aid assistance perspective, services provided and activities organised in the camps represent a mix between humanitarian and development work.

Kakuma camp, in Western Kenya, is a protracted refugee situation, which UNHCR defines specifically as one 'where more than 25,000 refugees from the same country of origin have been in exile in a given low- or middle-income host country for at least five consecutive years' (UNHCR 2023, 22). According to the agency, 'in protracted situations, refugee populations have moved beyond the emergency phase—where the focus is on life-saving protection and assistance—but have not yet achieved durable solutions and, based on current trends, are unlikely to do so in the foreseeable future' (UNHCR 2018a, 22).

Kakuma camp is located in Turkana County, at driving distance from the South Sudanese border. Together with Kalobeyei Integrated Settlement, it has a population of almost 295,000 registered refugees and asylum-seekers (UNHCR Kakuma, November 2024 data). The camp, which was started in 1992 with the arrival of young boys fleeing the war in Sudan, is now home to a large number of communities, including South Sudanese and Sudanese, Ethiopians, Somalis, Congolese, Ugandans, Rwandans and Burundians.

While a number of scholars have rejected the idea of a refugee camp becoming a community for those residing in it, Grayson (2014) argues that a multiplicity of communities do exist in a camp, and that these tend to develop social ties based on collective experiences and a shared space. This author, in particular, rebuts the argument from Hyndman, who recognises 'evidence of communal interest and refugee cooperation—organised, for example, among refugees of common nationality, sub-clan affiliation, or proximate physical location' (2000, 139, cited in Grayson 2014, 111) whilst disputing the presence of a structured community in a camp. Hyndman (2000, cited in Grayson 2014, 111) asserts

that, as their movement is confined to camps, refugees have no access to jobs, resources and land, and hold no historical association with the camp's geographical location. Hence, they cannot form a community. Grayson (2014), on the other hand, suggests that, with time, and without seeing the growth of a community as a whole, the different communities co-existing in the camp establish important bonds.

As Kakuma's living arrangements are often planned on the basis of nationality, what should be noted is that the social dynamics that arise from that planning often end up replicating those in refugees' respective countries of origin, as the different areas of the camp represent microcosms of their own lives. Therefore, the camp creates a separation not only between the hosts and the displaced, but also between the displaced themselves (Jaji 2012). At the same time, the protracted nature of displacement places strain on social relationships, as the interactions between displaced communities become more frequent and long-lasting, increasing competition and pressure (Holloway and Sturridge 2022).

With no right to work or freedom of movement, and with the unlikely prospect of naturalisation, young people do not see themselves as permanently settled in Kakuma. This leads to the youth engaging in negative behaviours such as crime, drug abuse and early pregnancy, which are some of the main issues experienced by the young refugees in the camp. While humanitarian agencies offer a number of opportunities for self-development and entertainment, such as training courses, sports competitions and cultural activities, these are too often not sufficient to motivate young people (Grayson 2017) and to prevent unsafe behaviour.

4 | Methodology and Framework of Analysis

At the end of 2022, 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives from different humanitarian organisations operating in Kakuma camp (including one local community-development organisation). These are listed in Table 1.

The interviews were conducted in English by this researcher during fieldwork carried out in Kakuma camp in October 2022. The study received ethics approval and written consent was provided by participants. This researcher has extensive experience in working with conflict-affected communities, as well as with development and humanitarian actors in different areas of the Global South. In the one hour long semi-structured discussions, at least one staff member from each organisation was asked questions related to their work with young people, their knowledge around young people's communication practices within the camp, and the main causes of conflict between the youth. Recruitment was conducted through the support of FilmAid Kenya, a humanitarian organisation working in Kakuma, who has provided significant assistance to this researcher during fieldvisits, which included different research activities with both humanitarian workers and young refugees. For this particular study, FilmAid Kenya contacted the directors of each organisation with information on the research and a call for volunteers to participate in independent research. These were then shared by the directors to relevant staff. Respondents who agreed to take

part in the study were local staff members who worked closely with the youth at a programme level; the latter was the main criterion for recruitment.

The initial objective of this study was to understand how humanitarian organisations communicate with young people in the camp and how young people connect with one another—whether socially or through specific channels. It also wanted to uncover how current communication practices addressed the incidence of violence occurring among young people. Besides the intended purpose, insights provided by participants were incredibly rich in reflections, considerations and experiences related to conflicts taking place in the camp among the youth. Hence, although the interviews did not directly address social cohesion, the data collected have been helpful, through the analysis outlined below, in providing an understanding of the factors that affect social cohesion among young people in Kakuma, based on the main reasons for dispute.

Schiefer and van der Noll (2017) have conducted a comprehensive review of the literature on social cohesion. The authors aimed to pinpoint key aspects of social cohesion discussed in existing literature that are crucial for evaluating societal cohesion and formulating improvement policies. They reviewed and organised a substantial body of literature inductively, which included academic, grey literature, and even media, and identified six pertinent dimensions of social cohesion and their interrelationships based on the frequency of their use. These resulting dimensions are relevant and applicable to a context of protracted encampment thanks to their disposition towards horizontal cohesion.

For this study, each interview was transcribed in NVivo and an inductive thematic analysis was conducted by the author to interpret the data. The themes emerging from this analysis denoted a connection, in particular, with two dimensions from Schiefer and van der Noll's (2017) model: *social relations* and *equality/inequality*. Themes were then associated with these dimensions in order to form coherent narratives that addressed different elements of social cohesion. Table 2 introduces the final framework that has been utilised to organise and present the findings, including the specific elements of each dimension as presented in Schiefer and van der Noll (2017).

5 | Young Refugees and Conflict: Uncovering Challenges in Diversity and Co-Existence

What follows is an analysis of participants' answers in light of the framework presented in the previous section. The dimensions of 'social networks' and 'participation' have been omitted from the analysis as they were not observed in participants' answers. This may be due to the fact that the interview questions revolved primarily around drivers of conflict rather than evidence of cohesion. Moreover, factors affecting the element of trust have been recognised as those relatable to institutionalised conflict where, based on the definition of Mitchell and Allen Nan (1997, 160), a system of conflict is constructed within rules, which can be material but also behavioural.

TABLE 1 | Organisations participating in this study.

| Participating organisations |
|--|
| UNHCR |
| Humanity & Inclusion HI |
| LWF World Service—The Lutheran World Federation |
| Danish Refugee Council DRC |
| SNV Dutch development agency |
| FilmAid Kenya (<i>Note</i> : 2 representatives were interviewed) |
| PeaceWinds Japan |
| Norwegian Refugee Council NRC (<i>Note</i> : 2 representatives were interviewed) |
| Co Here—formerly Xavier Project |
| Windle International Kenya WIK |
| GIZ German development agency |
| World Vision |
| Echuman Wellness and Rehabilitation Centre (<i>Note</i> : not officially a UNHCR partner but works with young people in the camp) |

TABLE 2 | Dimensions of social cohesion from Schiefer and van der Noll (2017, 586).

| Social relations | Equality/Inequality |
|---|--|
| <i>Trust</i> - between people and institutions | <i>(Un)equal distribution of resources</i> - accessibility to both material and non-material resources across all members of a society |
| <i>Mutual tolerance</i> - between various groups within a society, may it be cultural, ethnic, or groups with a certain lifestyle or sexual orientation | <i>Social exclusion</i> - isolation of individuals or groups from the social and cultural life as a consequence of an unequal distribution of resources or their accessibility |
| <i>Social networks</i> - quality and quantity of social interactions with family members, friends, and acquaintances | <i>Cultural diversity</i> - (in)equality between people in terms of cultural, ethnic, religious, and social background |
| <i>Participation</i> - participation in public life through civic engagement | |

5.1 | Social Relations

5.1.1 | Trust

Trust is a critical element in the relationships among the different communities residing in Kakuma camp. The multitude of languages, cultural traditions, ethnicities and religious beliefs can often lead to misunderstanding and discordance, even among the youth. Participants have provided examples of how this discord consistently manifests, in particular, between the largest ethnic groups from South Sudan.

There are a lot of conflicts that arise in the camp, both inter and intra communities amongst the youth. They arise during football matches. Mostly it's among the South Sudanese. Nuer and Dinka, they are both South Sudanese, but they have blood grudges from their native country. While playing football, you hurt one and they start fighting there and it becomes a big fight in the community. [...] Because you hurt one of

ours, we'll come for you in the community. When we come for you, of course, we'll hurt your family and maybe a neighbour who's from another nationality will also get hurt. So the conflict spreads to be now South Sudanese fighting with Congolese and South Sudanese fighting amongst themselves, and it becomes a very big issue - **Respondent 1**

If you look at South Sudanese, for example, the Nuers and the Dinkas, they have always been at war with each other. If, let's say, a Nuer youth and a Dinka youth meet and they happen to have a minor conflict, which would not normally necessitate a serious discussion, then it will escalate until they fight. If they fight, then each person goes back to the community and mobilises his people; this one also mobilises his people; then it now becomes a community issue - **Respondent 10**

This shows how a relatively small dispute among these groups has the potential to evolve into a wider conflict involving a number of different parties. As the next two quotes from other participants clarify, some of the reasons behind these conflicts can be found both in current and past divergences among the groups, with the latter beginning in their countries of origin and leading to an enduring loss of trust. Most young people in Kakuma have either arrived in the camp at a very young age or were born there. Therefore, these types of conflicts can be regarded as an intergenerational problem that needs to be addressed before its messaging influences the actions of the youth.

The causes of conflicts sometimes are beyond the youths themselves, because some of them run back to where they're coming from. Like, for example, if I may give you an example, two warring communities in South Sudan found themselves in the camp: the Nuer and the Dinkas. And whatever brought them here sometimes sparks issues in the community here, and it actually blows out of hand again - **Respondent 2**

Another thing also which is coming from the youth is the inherent conflicts from their country of origin. You find those conflicts, especially whatever made them come here or run away, they spill over into the camp. You find a small interaction in a football match that becomes a trigger. Just a small fall in the pitch is enough to create a major conflict that will erupt and can involve even the larger community. [...] If a conflict has happened in the football pitch, and you find now maybe a boy from the Nuer tribe injures a boy from the Dinka community... teamwork goes out of the door when this happens. Now, even if I'm from your team, and I'm from the Nuer, I will side with the Nuer and try to exert revenge on the Dinka. It becomes a Dinka - Nuer business, or rather a conflict. The community members, even those who had come to watch the match, even them will gang up according to their side. That's how it grows - **Respondent 3**

This is also evidence of the lack of trust existing among different tribes, which is deeply rooted in ideas and events that are beyond the reality of the camp, where young people have built their everyday lives. The differences perceived through traditional beliefs, tribal affiliation and even political inclination continue to be a major obstacle in building trust and, in turn, social cohesion among the youth. As this interviewee explains:

Some of the conflicts that come up within young people in the camp is because most of them follow whatever happens back home. For instance, when we talk about the Nuer and the Dinka from Southern Sudan, when they come here, most of them, they still have that hostility amongst themselves. I think a Dinka is not a friend to a Nuer. When we talk about the Somali, again,

amongst themselves, amongst the clans, there are those who are seen as the lowest, there are those who are seen as the most superior - **Respondent 5**

5.1.2 | Mutual Tolerance

Trust also permeates tolerance among groups. Hence, when the first is missing, the latter is likely to decline significantly. This becomes visible especially in the interactions between young men and women, and in the consequences that these may carry both at the family and community level, when different tribes or nationalities are involved. Such circumstances often turn out to be the flame that ignites conflict, thus affecting cohesion across the camp.

It can spark from the slightest thing, like, "You, you are approaching our girls." You know there are those communities who don't want any other nationality talking to their ladies - **Respondent 1**

One of the conflicts I remember here in Kakuma was about teenage pregnancy. A member of the host community had impregnated a South Sudanese girl. This led to community conflict. One or two people lost their lives - **Respondent 9**

Lack of acceptance towards other groups' choices, behaviour or lifestyle is also impacting social cohesion in Kakuma. This affects young people in particular, as they are the ones who are still navigating questions around identity, sexuality and relationships. When issues that arise during their life journeys are not tolerated, peace in the camp is also challenged. Some of the respondents exemplified this:

Sometimes young people are also in the process of growing up and there are cultural issues here. How you get to know a girl or a boy, and how you proceed from knowing each other to the other steps of adulthood, is determined by cultural factors. If those cultural processes are not respected, or something goes wrong with them, that can result into a full-blown conflict, either between young people themselves or between young people and other members of the community - **Respondent 7**

I remember a while back there were issues with the LGBTI community in the camp. You'll find a number of these are youths. Those things you'll find the community didn't want, even the host community. They're asking "why are they here? These are not culturally appropriate things". At the end it becomes an issue because the community now rises up against them, beating them. Some of them were injured. Some of them they were saying that they sustained injuries as a result of burns - **Respondent 11**

5.2 | Equality/Inequality

5.2.1 | Unequal Resources

The scarcity of resources in Kakuma camp often results in people resorting to their own means in order to gain access to basic items that are needed for their survival, including food. For this reason, it is not uncommon that the youth engage in petty crime with the aim of obtaining what is lacking. This, however, has a great impact on the relationships between both individuals and groups, particularly when a theft occurs inter-tribe. Several interviewees spoke to this problem:

Resources are a bit challenging in any setup, but here in Kakuma, you find the reducing food rations leave the youth vulnerable, where to get that food. Many opt for alternative ways to get that food including engaging in robbery activities - **Respondent 3**

Sometimes you find people don't get enough food, and if they don't get enough food, you'll find their youth also go to maybe even steal other people's food. Then that one, if you're caught, brings a conflict. [Conflicts] are actually fuelled by lack of access to something: lack of access to water, maybe food. Especially when you talk about the basic commodities, that's where things are, lack of money, and all that - **Respondent 4**

Poverty is quite high. Things are quite expensive. You find that the only way for people to even the odds is to try to take something by force from another person. Someone can come and steal your iron sheets at night, or the poles of your latrine at night, or try the petty violence so that they could, at least, try to make ends meet. That theft or violence, which is occasioned by the need to acquire resources or provide for yourself, I think, is one of the main drivers of conflict - **Respondent 6**

Misperception also exists in relation to who is gaining access to resources based on their role or position of privilege. This often sparks rumours that in turn fuel discord, causing conflict both between and within communities. One of the respondents illustrates this effectively:

Conflicts can also come because of sharing of resources. The resources here are relatively scarce. Sometimes if people are not targeted properly, you may end up over-targeting a particular group of people and then the rest of the people can look at it like it's only so and so [who is receiving something]. Sometimes when that so and so is the one who is being targeted, it may be that so and so is also a leader in the community, for example; so the community thinks that they're using their leadership position to be at an advantage over other communities - **Respondent 7**

5.2.2 | Social Exclusion

Feelings around exclusion among the youth are not uncommon. Yet, in the context of a protracted situation of encampment, these can yield a rupture in the relationship among different groups. When a group of young people develops the perception of being treated differently from the others on the basis of their identity, cohesion is likely to fracture. The quote below provides a useful example:

There is an issue of resources where you see that some youth from a particular community feel they're being left out in the distribution of sports items, or are being assigned fewer resources. Some would feel like one community has ten teams in the tournament while the other one has two - **Respondent 2**

Social exclusion is also, at times, strongly connected to the issue of trust. One can be deprived of an opportunity simply as a result of their community affiliation, as their ethnic group or nationality may signify to others that they should be considered untrustworthy.

You'll see even in terms of opportunities, if you give somebody an opportunity maybe to head the rest of the people, even the way they treat the rest, there's that feeling of, "this one, I cannot give him the best because he is my enemy back home, we don't come from the same clan" or something like that. That is one of the main reasons for conflict within the camp - **Respondent 5**

The perception that one group may have of being excluded often derives from inaccurate information that has been received. Humanitarian actors here play an important role in ensuring that processes and systems are understood correctly by those residing in the camp. Yet, given the large number of people living in Kakuma and its significantly diverse social composition, it is not uncommon that messages are not delivered effectively or do not reach all interested parties. As this interviewee highlights:

I've also realised that misinformation sometimes can also create conflicts in the community, how something is said. Sometimes you, the government or the agencies, or whoever the actor is, may be doing something with very good intention, but if the right information is not shared with the community, it can end up creating conflict - **Respondent 7**

5.2.3 | Cultural Diversity

Where social cohesion is weak, cultural diversity can be a cause of conflict. The wide range of customs, beliefs and social norms that characterise an environment such as that of Kakuma is often a source of disagreements between or even discrimination against

specific groups. It is not unusual for the youth to engage in quarrels where derogatory remarks are exchanged, especially in relation to one's cultural and ethnic background.

It's sometimes the cultural background at home, the issue of superiority, one community feeling superior than the other - **Respondent 2**

You start fighting over those [cultural] differences, or even appearance [related to one's ethnic background]. Somebody says, "Oh, you're tall like this, you are short, you are that," and that now protracts into a conflict - **Respondent 12**

Traditional cultural practices can also represent a limit to social cohesion in the camp, including on issues related to the youth. When practices are undermined by young people, conflict can erupt both at the family and community level, causing disputes, particularly when diverse groups are involved. Although such practices may not be in compliance with local legislation, they are still being upheld by various communities on the basis of their traditional beliefs, and, as such, value is placed on these being sustained. One respondent offers a relevant illustration of these circumstances in relation to the camp:

You find that the youth are also mostly involved in the conflicts that we address in the camp, that we respond to. One, if I can mention, that involves youth or that youth are involved in, is the issue of cultural marriages, where you find there is a forced marriage. A girl is being forced to someone she has not consented to. Those are common, especially among those of South Sudanese descent. [...] Conflict about a forced marriage starts with an individual and spreads out. If, for example, the girl runs away to seek help, once the legal systems comes in place the other family feels affected, especially if something has already been given in terms of dowry. This now becomes an interfamily thing, and it grows, particularly if the marriage is between two different ethnic groups - **Respondent 3**

6 | Discussing Implications for Social Cohesion Among Young People in Refugee Camps

In this section, the findings that were presented previously are discussed through a lens of humanitarian and peacebuilding work. In particular, the discussion connects the main points that have arisen from the interviews with the perspectives and work of development and humanitarian organisations working with affected populations. At the same time, reflections and recommendations on how these findings can constructively inform both current and future practice are offered, addressing specifically each element of the dimensions analysed.

In order to prevent or rectify *social exclusion*, both local and international organisations largely look for strategic and rightful

ways to both elicit and promote social cohesion. Yet, in this process, agencies can at times inadvertently strengthen social divisions: this has occurred, namely, during attempts to gain prompt access for aid delivery or while establishing peacebuilding and development programmes either in regions or with communities affected by conflict (Cox and Sisk 2017). In Kakuma, this is also shown through an example of social exclusion presented in the findings, where young people from a certain community felt they were not being provided with the same amount of resources to participate in sports as other groups. This indicates the delicate work that aid providers take on, also when the aim is not necessarily that of aid provision but rather promoting development in the community through youth-targeted activities.

International peacebuilding non-governmental organisation (NGO) Search for Common Ground (Search), for example, maintains that pathways to social cohesion are not linear. Therefore, measuring the degree of cohesiveness between groups is complex. In addition to that, the organisation notes that both practitioners and scholars have recognised that, although cohesion may be present, either as a shared sense of belonging or collective solidarity, it does not preclude the existence of exclusionary norms and values, including ethno-nationalism and xenophobia. Search claims that, in order to address these issues, development interventions are being designed with the aim of building the capacity of social groups and increasing opportunities; yet, at the same time, these may be overlooking other important aspects. This observation conveys that interventions that are promoted to pursue justice may involuntarily produce a number of effects that negatively impact social cohesion (SFCG 2020). The findings of the study presented in this article evidence that it is when an individual's opportunities, such as their enrolment in a leadership position in the camp, become limited as a result of their membership to a specific group and the perception that others may have of this group, that the effects of an absence of social cohesion materialise. This is despite the many interventions that humanitarian agencies in Kakuma are implementing to make the camp community more cohesive.

The issue of conflict during sports is also significant, as the findings of this study highlight. These types of direct-contact interventions are typically programmes that are designed to enhance social cohesion by providing different groups with the opportunity to meet and interact (Holloway and Sturridge 2022). With specific reference to sport, Schulenkorf (2012, 7) highlights how, 'from an intercommunity perspective, sport projects may bridge social gaps between groups, for example by encouraging teamwork, intergroup learning and reciprocal skill [...] Positive social impacts can for example lead to an improved social connection with "others", which in turn influences intergroup behaviour in the newly established 'imagined sport community'. On the other hand 'negative social impacts may, for example, result in a revival of historical and prejudicial stereotypes, which can undermine intergroup development efforts'. This author goes as far as suggesting that 'a focus on social rather than overly competitive sport encounters seems the most promising in designing an environment conducive to intergroup development' (6).

These ideas reflect the situation in Kakuma in relation to sports tournaments. Many of the interviewees have emphasised how the

football pitch, for example, is one of the first places where violent conflict erupts among young people, and how such conflict frequently extends beyond the sportsground and into the rest of the community. This is due to the longstanding and embedded lack of **trust** existing among specific groups, which originates in the countries these groups have fled.

International peacebuilding NGO Mercy Corps observes that in order to advance equitable solutions to the problems that drive intergroup tension, development work needs to place peace outcomes first. This approach can also play a part in improving long-term stability in vulnerable contexts. Resource competition is one of the main factors driving tension between different groups, and it is too often not adequately addressed (Petryniak et al. 2020). The findings of this study demonstrate that the perception of **unequal resources** that arises from the very limited access to basic means of survival is central not only in preventing the establishment of positive relationships between groups, but also in the engagement with violence and theft from the youth. In a context of protracted encampment such as Kakuma, humanitarian work needs to advance alongside development in order to break this perception, even when basic resources are effectively scarce.

At the same time, it is important to note that the positive role of young people in camps should not be underestimated in humanitarian work. The youth should not be regarded as passive representatives who are at the service of elders or other family members for household-related activities. Nor should formal education be considered their only significant responsibility. Young people's participation in camp society can be meaningful, as they 'have the potential to act as major forces for change and peacebuilding in their communities' (Guyot 2007, 164). This is why their role on issues related to **mutual tolerance** and **cultural diversity** is critical. The youth can be intermediaries between different groups and are more likely to establish relationships across diverse communities. Hence, it is vital that the work implemented in the camp is designed to hone their skills so that they become bridges, rather than barriers, among parties. As one of the humanitarian professionals interviewed in this study also highlights in relation to young people's contribution to social cohesion in Kakuma:

When you start engaging youth from a particular community, you should be open from the beginning in a way that they also feel they can open up; when they do so, you're able to see from a programmatic level what kind of issues or risks pertain the activities you are implementing, so that you can more easily understand how to mitigate or address them. Sometimes, it's just perception: I don't like you, I don't like your community, or I don't like your personality. Then we are out doing an activity and I remember that.

UNHCR (2016) has also engaged in consulting with young people with the aim of identifying what actions need to be taken by humanitarian actors in order to bolster the abilities of young refugees to establish social connections across linguistic, cultural and political differences, and to enable their meaningful

contribution in peace-oriented processes. The agency emphasises that steps can be taken in order to promote young refugees' role in creating new relationships. These include:

- utilising youth's cultural and artistic skills in order to move beyond boundaries and start building intercultural and inter-community connections;
- leveraging youth as mediators between different communities in order to foster a peaceful co-existence;
- employing a range of media and other innovative channels to create large networks of people from different ethnicities, ages, cultures and nationalities (UNHCR 2016).

While these and other actions are typically taken in programme implementation by agencies in Kakuma, the findings of this study show that significant progress still needs to be made in the work with young people in order to strengthen their ability to create meaningful and peaceful connections. In relation to social cohesion, these findings can be incorporated in the development of specific interventions or programmatic changes, including targeted youth engagement strategies or conflict resolution mechanisms tailored to the unique context of the camp. This confirms that this type of work needs to be strongly connected to the notions of **social relations** and **equality/inequality** in the camp, whose foundations lay in trust, tolerance, availability of resources, inclusion and diversity, as demonstrated through this research. Lifting the present limits to peace in the lives of the youth through targeted humanitarian programming that incorporates these notions means directly and actively addressing the obstacles to social cohesion. Ultimately, the latter can play a significant role in the wellbeing of young people in protracted situations of encampment such as Kakuma. As Schiefer and van der Noll (2017) comment:

A society is not cohesive because their members live in good conditions and feel well, but a stronger societal cohesion might contribute to the wellbeing of the society's members. [...] Equality, cohesion, and quality of life can thus be put in a causal chain: when individuals and groups have equal access to resources, this will strengthen their trust in others and in institutions, enable them to participate and network, and facilitate a positive sense of belonging. This, in turn, contributes to their wellbeing and health, which in turn increases their general quality of life (594).

7 | Conclusions

This article has examined the limits to peace among young people in Kakuma refugee camp through the lens of social cohesion. It has identified key drivers of conflict, particularly among diverse youth populations, and highlighted significant gaps in social cohesion that hinder harmonious coexistence. The findings reveal that historical grievances, cultural differences, and competition for scarce resources exacerbate tensions, leading to violence and social fragmentation.

In particular, novel insights on specific aspects of inter-tribal youth conflicts in Kakuma have been presented, which advance our understanding of social cohesion in refugee contexts. The framework of analysis used to generate findings has been useful to provide insights into specific notions and elements constituting social cohesion, both between and within communities, and to provide evidence on how such critical domains are presently affected.

The article demonstrates that, to enhance peace among the various groups represented in the camp, agencies should further strengthen their work in promoting trust-building initiatives, encouraging mutual tolerance, addressing resource inequality, enhancing youth participation, and implementing educational programmes. Media and communication can also be leveraged in this effort. The final discussion has offered reflections on the importance of both humanitarian and development work in the context of protracted displacement, and on how interventions in the camp that target young people should be designed with those barriers in mind.

This study has limitations: fifteen interviews provide rich qualitative insights but may not represent the full range of perspectives in the camp; findings may also not be generalisable to other refugee camps or contexts due to the unique dynamics of Kakuma as a specific location, as well as political and organisational factors impacting the agencies operating there; humanitarian workers' perspectives may also, at times, miss or misinterpret youth experiences and motivations. Further research that incorporates more directly the voices of young people is needed, including follow-up studies based on interviews and participatory methods with the youth themselves to better understand their perspectives on conflict and cohesion. On the whole, however, this article provides a contribution in informing the direction of development and humanitarian work with encamped youth, with the aim of promoting peace, wellbeing and cohesion in their realities of displacement.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Research data are not shared.

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