COMMUNITY CENTRES AND SOCIAL COHESION

JORDAN

The Danish Refugee Council (DRC) is a humanitarian, non-governmental, non-profit organisation founded in 1956 that works in more than 40 countries throughout the world. DRC fulfils its mandate by providing direct assistance to conflict-affected populations – refugees, Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and host communities in the conflict areas of the world and by advocating on their behalf internationally and in Denmark.

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DRC’s community centre in Amman, Jordan. October 2017. Photo By: Louise Wateridge
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INTRODUCTION

Currently almost 660,000 Syrian refugees are registered in Jordan, most of whom arrived in the country more than two years ago. The protraction of the refugee crisis has generated higher competition for jobs and saturation of access to public services. A lack of social integration of the Syrian community in Jordan has allowed blame and tension for these economic problems to grow between the two communities. ¹ Humanitarian stakeholders in Jordan are concerned that this erosion of or limitation to ‘social cohesion’ could threaten the fragile stability in Jordan.

Social cohesion is considered as an inclusive society that promotes a sense of belonging and trust of all its members, and offers members the opportunity for upward mobility.

Studies show that a high level of social cohesion helps to achieve economic growth and social security², while rising social tensions between communities have the potential to generate secondary conflict in host countries. Tension can also lead to isolation of displaced

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¹ https://reliefweb.int/report/jordan/social-cohesion-host-communities-northern-jordan
communities with women and children staying at home, affecting access to basic goods and services. Competition for employment and growing discrimination can cause frustrations among income earners, and may contribute to household-level protection concerns. To stem the observed accumulation of these trends and associated risks in Jordan, INGOs, donors and other stakeholders are emphasising the need to concentrate efforts on improving social cohesion.

DRC Jordan has committed to improving social cohesion in its areas of intervention, and assumes to do so in part through its four community centres in Mafrak, East Amman, Karak and Ma’an governorates in Jordan. DRC Jordan looks at social cohesion both in the social sense and productive sense, and will therefore refer to two mutually reinforcing definitions. Socially, ‘social cohesion as the belief held by citizens… that they share a moral community, which enables them to trust each other’\(^5\), while this translates to productive relationships, where ‘social cohesion is defined as the willingness of members of a society to cooperate with each other in order to survive and prosper.’\(^6\) **DRC aims to strength social cohesion through its community centres by encouraging frequent, continuous and positive interaction between different communities through a variety of project activities.** These include joint community events, group psychosocial support counselling, mixed self-reliance and financial literacy trainings, and child friendly spaces where principles of sharing and joint learning are promoted. So far, events have brought together over 14,000 individuals from different communities. Approximately 55% of beneficiaries are Syrian refugees and 40% are host community members, including 5% Palestinians and/or other refugees.

Although several actors in Jordan are currently running programmes with social cohesion objectives through community centres or livelihoods centres,\(^7\) there is a significant gap in the evidence base for community centre participation and its effects on social cohesion in Jordan specifically. Currently related programming largely rests on the assumption that bringing people together in a safe, constructive, social space will lead to better relationships, with reference to a number of studies that have highlighted social cohesion concerns in Jordan\(^8\) and the potential of community centres to address similar concerns in other countries.\(^9\) To address this evidence gap DRC Jordan conducted a mixed-methods study between March 2016 and April 2017, to evaluate the effectiveness and relevance of the community centre approach for strengthening social cohesion between Syrian and Jordanian populations in Amman, Karak and Ma’an specifically, and identify how it may be improved and modified. This paper presents the key research findings with implications for programme and policy.

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5 Larsen, 2013
6 Stanley, 2001
Key Findings

Immediate Impact

- DRC community centres were considered safe spaces in the community and contribute to a feeling of safety in the local area.
- Syrian and Jordanian communities in Karak and Ma’an largely agree that their local centre is contributing to their improved perception of the other community (72% of Syrians and 79% of Jordanians).
- Building social cohesion through the community centre in Amman is more challenging due to the greater presence of tensions such as competition over jobs.

Longer term impact

- The majority (89%) of both Jordanian and Syrian respondents in Karak and Ma’an said they feel the centre is helping the community grow stronger in the longer term.
- Extended learning and/or productive activities over time at the centre, as well as joint employment facilitated through the centre, were found to have a bigger impact on trust and friendships compared to cultural events and psycho-social support activities.
- The type of interaction can better facilitate the development of improved perceptions into active relationships, relative to the frequency of interaction.
- Increased friendships did not automatically foster productive relationships or enhance the Syrian communities’ ability to participate in decision-making for the community.
- Most of the members of the community centre are women and/or youth due to the opening hours, and thus the impact on cohesion for the broader community is limited.

RESPONDENT PROFILE

The large majority of respondents in the social cohesion survey were women, with a similar proportion in the grant survey (90%). Indeed, this gender balance largely reflects the profile of attendees at the community centres.

In Amman and Ma’an the sample of respondents in the social cohesion survey included more Syrians than Jordanians, to a large extent reflective of the proportional attendance.
FACILITATING INTERACTION

When looking at the social integration of the Syrian refugees in their local communities, 19% of Syrian centre users across all three governorates said that they do not feel they are part of the community. This was lower in Karak (0%) compared to Ma’an (18%) and Ma’ar (18%). Panel discussions and the survey confirmed that this limited social cohesion in the areas of intervention are characterized in part by limited social interactions beyond immediate neighbours or work.

Figure 2: % of Syrian centre users who did not feel a part of their local community
The research validates that the community centres do increase the frequency of interaction between and within the local communities. The main reported purposes of visiting the centre were to socialize (65%), gain new skills (78%) and learn new information (86%). Comparatively higher proportions of respondents in Karak (41%) and Ma’an (54%) reported that they meet people in their community through the community centre, while only 9% reported the same in Mahatta. Indeed, most Syrians and Jordanians, especially women, have limited opportunities to interact outside of the community centre or work. Most individuals reported that they are quite isolated and not involved in any group initiatives (81%). Rather, most community interactions take place with neighbours (72%), community events (26%) or religious groups (18%). Religious interaction was particularly important in Maan (45%).

**Figure 3: Most reported reasons for coming to the community centre**

![Bar chart showing reasons for visiting the community centre]

**BUILDING TRUST**

When examining whether this increased exposure to interaction with other community members helped to improve perceptions, more success was identified in Karak and to a lesser extent Ma’an, than in Amman. In both Karak and Amman the reported rate of change in perceptions was the same for both community groups, while this was more commonly reported by Syrians compared to Jordanians in Ma’an.

**Figure 4: % of Syrian centre users who did not feel a part of their local community**

![Bar chart showing percentage of Syrian centre users who did not feel a part of their local community]

- Jordanian
- Syrian
When asked to explain why perceptions have improved, many Syrians spoke of getting the unique chance to meet people at the centre, breaking boundaries through joint activities and sharing stories and ideas at the centre. In turn, Jordanians explained that the centre has allowed them to meet and interact with Syrian members directly when they normally would not do so. The overwhelming majority of respondents said that these interactions with other community members at the centre have been positive, which reinforces the improvement in perceptions.

In turn, while Jordanians mostly said they are treated the same way outside the centre, many Syrians were more effusive. This indicates that Syrians are treated better inside the centre, and thus the centre has a positive effect in the immediate rather than longer term on how the communities interact. Indeed, a small majority of Jordanian respondents who were making friends through the community centres said they are making friends with Syrians (56%) but the majority of Syrians still said they were mainly making friends with other Syrians (74%).

**FREQUENCY OF INTERACTION**

The frequency and regularity of attendance at the centre did not have a direct numerical correlation with the improved social cohesion as anticipated by the logic of intervention. Rather, successive interactions in a short period of time and the type of purpose to the interactions had a larger effect.

Observed improvements in perceptions and eventual development of new friendships occurred more often during trainings held over several days compared to single-day trainings or events. Even if the same individual returned for several single-day trainings, this did not have the same impact as on the group who attended only one multi-day training.

Interestingly, the main reason for attendance at the centre did not correspond directly with the rate of increased social integration. For example, although larger proportions of those who attend the centre more than once a week do so in part to socialize (82%) than those who attend once a week (46%), those who attend a limited number of times for a specific training are more like to make sustainable friendships. Those who attended trainings were more likely to respond that they would ‘definitely’ meet new friends again outside the centre (86%) compared to those who had attended community events (20%).

**Figure 5: % of respondents who would meet new friends again outside the centre, by type of activity**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>% of Respondents</th>
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<tr>
<td>Training</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event</td>
<td>20%</td>
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This suggests that although community events brings individuals together, the shared productive goal of learning was the most successful activity conducted by DRC for improving more sustainable social integration. Staff observed during all multi-day trainings last session had a much more friendly and talkative atmosphere. Commonly, participants would sit far away from each other in the first session, and either stay focused on their phones or mainly speak about traditional, formal subjects. Comparatively, in final sessions conversations were centered on more personal or informal subjects, such as their children and football scores. Many who did not know each other before exchanged phone numbers, travelled together to later sessions, made plans to go shopping together and even discussed sending their children to school together. In comparison, at one-day events participants rarely socialized outside of the group that they arrived with.

Beneficiaries who were later awarded micro-business grants following Financial Literacy Training also saw attributable improvements in social cohesion. 78% of grant beneficiaries said they benefitted in making more acquaintances from the grant programme, of which 33% managed to make lasting friends out of these relationships. In terms of social cohesion between Jordanian and Syrian communities, all Syrian beneficiaries reported positive relationship with the Jordanian community and 66% of them indicated that this relationship has improved since the time the grant was received. 67% of those who had experienced an improvement contributed all the positive change to the DRC supported business, and the remaining contributed an average of 45% of the change to the business and cited other factors including being sociable, existing new business other than the DRC’s, moving to a new house, and other work or a job.

On the other hand, 58% of the Jordanian beneficiaries confirmed that they have a positive relationship with the Syrian community; the remaining percentage did not have many interactions with Syrians as they live in small villages where they do not meet Syrians. Out of the group that reported positive relationship with Syrians, 36% reported that it has improved since the grant was received and contributed an average of 90% of the change to DRC supported business. These rates of attribution and identified external factors indicate that the livelihoods programmes implemented through the community centres had a higher influence on social cohesion than other factors that interfered with the logic of intervention.

**Figure 6: Proportion of grantees who reported improved relations with other community members since receiving the grant**

![Figure 6: Proportion of grantees who reported improved relations with other community members since receiving the grant](image)

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10 On accessory making and youth English courses
11 4 out of a total of the 11 who reported having positive relationships with Syrians
The importance of productive engagement and livelihoods-centred activities in improving social cohesion corresponds with findings on the reasons for tensions in the community. Findings confirmed previous evidence that social cohesion in the areas of intervention is characterized by tensions over the high cost of living and financial burdens. The high cost of living was reported as the main driver of tension by 74% of both Jordanian and Syrian community centre respondents and 100% of Syrians enrolled in the cash for work programme outside the centre in Karak. Discussions with beneficiaries linked financial burdens to a lack of job opportunities and rising rental cost (especially in Karak). The majority of centre respondents (72%) said that they had also noticed more frequent overcrowding in medical centres (80%) and increased overcrowding in schools (77%) in the past six months.

Competition for livelihoods between Jordanians and Syrians was observed to be rising, both by beneficiaries and local business owners. Syrians working in the service sector spoke of Jordanian employer exploitation and inadequate wages. In turn, Jordanian female discussion participants blamed migrants for the occurrence of harassment in public places, and some Jordanians in Karak blamed the presence of the Syrian community for the recent ISIS-affiliated attack. It follows that those with reduced financial burdens would have less frustrations and scapegoating towards other community members.

**PRODUCTIVE RELATIONSHIPS**

Although productive interactions at the community centres contributed to improvements in social cohesion at the social level, little evidence was found to suggest that current programming also contributes to the development of new productive cohesion. Several of the women who attended accessory-making trainings discussed setting up a joint venture but did not complete this aim. In addition, a handful of Jordanian grantees submitted a joint proposal together with a Syrian partner but the endline study found that soon after the receipt of funds the pair would split the business initiatives. 71% of group businesses applied during the first part of year 2 were established and managed as individual businesses. The motivation behind applying as a group business was to increase chances of being selected. Though the DRC team encourage people to apply in groups, they noticed that the number of group business applicants declined since people do not seem to prefer working in partnership.

It should be noted that the outreach of the community centres has largely been to women and youth, or unemployed men. Due to the opening hours of the centres, most employed male heads of households are at work and are not able to attend most of the activities. Interestingly, the potential for work-related programming to foster social cohesion was also evidenced in a separate internal study conducted by DRC Jordan all Syrians enrolled through DRC in a municipality cash for work programme in Karak reported that working with Jordanians helped to improve their perceptions of the other community and build friendships. A GIZ staff member noted that initially the two communities had been reluctant to work together but dynamics had quickly improved once they had begun their work. The beneficiaries reported that these relationships continue to be positive outside work. Notably, all Syrians said they felt a sense of belonging at their work, and almost all they feel part of the local community. Indeed, all but one of the Syrian cash for workers interviewed said that when they have an urgent or emergency need that they cannot cope with on their own, they turn to both Syrian and Jordanian friends.
FEELINGS OF SAFETY AND ACCESS TO CIVIL SOCIETY

The physical structure of the community centre plays a vital role as a unique safe space for the community to spend their time constructively and to socialize outside of the home. While an average 14% reported that they feel at least slightly unsafe in local public spaces, almost all survey respondents said that they feel safe at the community centre. All training and event participants also reported that they had felt the centre was a safe space.

![Figure 7: % of respondents who feel unsafe in local public spaces and DRC community centres](image)

Just over a third of respondents were travelling to the centre alone, indicating that they feel safe enough to do so. Most (43%) would usually travel with one or two other people. Joint attendance was not very often due to perceptions of safety (11%) but more related to sharing costs of transport and gender roles.

The assessment demonstrated that the structure of the community centres can also have an impact on available support networks for refugee communities – 18% of Syrians perceived their support network had changed once they joined the centre, while only 6% of Jordanians said the same. 28% of Syrians also reported that they rely on CBOs for help; this indicates a level of integration into the local community support network through the referral system and local partnerships organised by the community centres. Without these linkages and information provision, many refugee community members would not be able to access a civil society support network.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study found evidence to support that DRC Jordan’s community centres do improve local social cohesion, although certain aspects of the logic of intervention can be modified to increase efficacy of results and maximise upon other influencers identified.

The majority of both Syrian and Jordanian communities reported that they feel their perceptions of other community members have improved since attending activities at the centre. However, rates were lower in Eastern Amman likely due to the higher population saturation which yields more opportunities to interact with other community members as well as higher competition for jobs and services. Indeed, evidence suggests that activities addressing the root causes of tension, namely economic frustration and access to services, have a higher impact on improvement to social cohesion. Improved trust and development of friendships between the communities was more attributable to the type of activities (namely livelihoods trainings and productive workshops) rather than an accumulation of frequency attendance at cultural events held at the centre. Although feelings of social cohesion had
often improved since attendance at the centres, sometimes these have also been attributed to other work interactions or individual personality traits. The community centres are all considered safe spaces, but many explained that the centres are somewhat remote and not accessible to all – even though many attendees were able to travel to the centre in groups in order to cut down on transport costs. Lastly, the community centres were found to have little impact on participation in decision-making within the community.

To integrate these learnings into programming, DRC Jordan will seek to have more immediate impact on social cohesion through:

- Work with partner CBOs to strengthen their social cohesion focus
- Develop a toolkit on how to include social cohesion objectives into all community centre activities
- Encourage more shared transport options for people in the same area (regardless of whether they are Jordanian or Syrian.
- Seek to attract more men through alternative outreach strategies that, for instance, use space in commercial areas, religious institutions, or other locations frequented by men after work hours. This will aim to ultimately improve the heads’ of households’ and more decision-makers’ perceptions of other community members in the area as well.

DRC will also seek to contribute to social cohesion indirectly by:

- Establish programmatic standards in both livelihoods and protection to mainstream social cohesion programming, such as ensuring training sessions are mixed, incorporating group work to encourage interaction, and planning for longer-term courses or activity groups.
- Increase local job matching services at the centre for Syrian job seekers with Jordanian employers, to address the root causes of tensions.
- Integrate more information on the economic context in order to address some of the (mis)perceptions around the affect Syrians have had on the economy.
- Further strengthen information provision and referral networks, to position itself as an entry point for migrant and refugee communities into wider community support and information sharing networks.
- Expand the mandate of community centers to act as a platform for broader stakeholder engagement, particularly on issues pertaining to local economic development.
- Continue research and learning of social cohesion development as a result of the community centre approach.
ANNEX I: METHODOLOGY

Given the difficulties in defining and thus measuring social cohesion, the study brought together different research methods and tools to better capture developments attributable to the community centre programming.

DRC Jordan hypothesised that a research approach looking at the relationships between each milestone in the programme theory of change would yield robust results. Each stage of the theory of change was addressed through specific tools and where possible integrated into regular monitoring tools for each activity. This included attendance registration, event and training feedback, observational behavioural journals, a stand-alone community survey at a 95% confidence level and 10% margin of error of participants who had attended the centre regularly and for at least six months (a total of 126 individuals were sampled) and micro-grant endline surveys; a representative sample of 47 (out of 127) grantees from year 1 and 32 (out of 46) grantees from year 2 were randomly selected. To subsequently examine if any changes in individual-level beneficiary perceptions have led to an impact on social cohesion at the community level, two panel discussions were held at each community centre, separated by gender, with select participants who had been attending the centre regularly for at least a year. The panels discussed community changes over time in depth and any developments in beneficiaries’ ability to participate in decision-making and feel safe in the community.

Limitations: Findings cover activities conducted at DRC Jordan’s community centres specifically. Survey results are representative to the treatment group of regular centre users and activity beneficiary groups, but data cannot be generalised to the broader Syrian refugee population across Jordan. Most community centre attendees are female, and therefore beneficiary respondents for the most part represent the views of female beneficiaries.