



## Building Social Cohesion through Livelihood Support in Climate-Related Internal Displacement Settings

### Evidence from Zimbabwe and Mozambique

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#### Summary

Climate-related extreme weather events are increasingly displacing communities across Southern Africa, with negative implications for social cohesion, livelihoods, and community resilience. Understanding how displacement erodes social cohesion is important for developing strategies for restoring it. Evidence shows that livelihood support interventions, for example, cash-based assistance, in-kind transfers (agricultural inputs) up to skills development programmes, are a pathway for mending or strengthening social cohesion in displacement contexts. Yet, in some cases, they can further fragment it. This requires strategies under which such interventions can be deployed to positively shape social cohesion outcomes.

This Policy Brief synthesises insights from qualitative research conducted from 2023 to 2025 with displaced communities and host populations in Zimbabwe (Chimanimani and Tsholotsho districts) and Mozambique (Guara Guara, Grudja and Praia Nova). It examines how livelihood interventions can either rebuild or further fragment social cohesion, identifies critical factors driving cohesion outcomes, and provides evidence-based recommendations for national governments, humanitarian actors, and development cooperation actors working in climate-displacement contexts across Southern Africa.

In Zimbabwe, vertical social cohesion in displacement contexts is eroded by a lack of designated policies on displacement, leading to poor socioeconomic outcomes for displaced individuals; ad hoc recovery and reconstruction efforts that undermine durable solutions and long-term recovery; and a lack of accountability infrastructure that undermines trust in the gov-

ernment. In Mozambique, the slow implementation and unequal distribution of recovery interventions undermine cooperation between communities and the institutions involved in post-disaster recovery efforts. This has led to large-scale returns of people to high-risk areas.

Drawing insights from both case studies, we provide key recommendations and conditions for implementing livelihood support to achieve social cohesion in climate-related displacement contexts.

#### Key policy messages

- Livelihood interventions can lead to maladaptation if not supported by strong governance mechanisms including policy frameworks and institutional coordination in planning and implementation.
- People-centred, area-based approaches to livelihood programming that account for pre-displacement livelihoods and support post-displacement transitions, while benefiting both displaced populations and host communities, should be adopted. One-size-fits-all interventions risk undermining economic recovery and social cohesion.
- Horizontal and vertical social cohesion indicators should be embedded in livelihood programmes from the outset to assess the social impacts before and after implementation.
- Inclusive, participatory decision-making in the delivery of livelihood support programmes should be mandated to prevent exclusionary practices that erode trust in institutions.

## Introduction

Climate-related displacement is reshaping social relations in Africa, affecting interactions both within communities and between communities and governing institutions. By the close of 2024, 7.8 million new weather- and climate-related displacements were recorded in Africa. In relation to the case studies, in March 2019, Cyclone Idai displaced over 400,000 people in Mozambique, and over 50,000 in Zimbabwe, while destroying thousands of homes, and severing communities from their traditional livelihoods. Five years later, many survivors remain in protracted internal displacement while living in temporary shelters and resettlement sites, unable to cultivate land, with social bonds deteriorating due to competition for scarce resources.

Social cohesion is understood as the quality of relationships within and across groups in society, and with institutions that they rely on (Leininger et al., 2021). Social cohesion is characterised by dimensions of trust, cooperation and shared identity. Horizontally, it relates to the relationship between internally displaced persons (IDPs) and members of host communities; and the shared characteristics that bind them together. Vertically, it reflects communities' confidence in institutions that provide them with support. Climate-related displacement stress-tests both dimensions. At community level, people scramble for scarce resources, reshaping inter-group dynamics; across different levels of government, communities' expectations of institutional support heighten, and government responses determine whether existing trust and cooperation strengthen or collapse.

Livelihood support interventions by governmental, humanitarian and development actors, ranging from agricultural inputs and land allocation to vocational training and cash transfers, represent a critical pathway for both economic recovery and the rebuilding of social cohesion. Through the equitable provision of livelihood support, national and sub-national state institutions, together with humanitarian and development cooperation

actors, can build public trust in institutions as well as within and across groups in the society. Yet evidence from the aftermath of cyclones in Mozambique and Zimbabwe reveals that poorly designed livelihood interventions can erode trust in public institutions.

## Rationale for building social cohesion in climate-related displacement contexts

Strong social cohesion is important for achieving durable solutions and fostering the peaceful cohabitation of host and displaced communities in contexts of escalating climate risk. Its importance operates across multiple dimensions, ranging from enabling collective adaptation and resilience, to preventing secondary displacement and protracted crisis. Cohesive communities share resources effectively, rebuild livelihoods collectively, and adapt to recurrent disasters. In Mozambique, resettled fisher communities benefit from host knowledge about agriculture and markets, while contributing labour and diverse perspectives. In Zimbabwe, the absence of immediate external intervention after Cyclone Idai prompted local collective action, with residents and "local heroes" providing food, psychological support, and other aid, demonstrating the potential of positive social cohesion.

Social cohesion strengthens trust between communities and institutions, enhancing programme acceptance, enabling adaptive programming, and fostering productive engagement. When communities trust government actors, humanitarian organisations and development actors, they share information about emerging needs. Institutions play a central role in shaping social cohesion outcomes. National and sub-national state institutions, together with humanitarian and development cooperation actors, influence how communities perceive fairness, accountability, and responsiveness in crisis settings. Their ability to deliver services equitably, to communicate transparently, and to engage communities meaningfully can either reinforce trust or deepen existing

grievances. In displacement contexts marked by escalating climate risks, institutional behaviour becomes a critical determinant of whether social cohesion is strengthened, maintained, or eroded.

### **Drivers of eroding social cohesion in climate-related displacement contexts: Zimbabwe and Mozambique**

Across the case studies, climate-related displacement erodes social cohesion through multiple pathways, influencing trust between groups, and between communities and institutions. In this context, social cohesion is not necessarily broken but is increasingly under strain, with existing relationships gradually weakening over time. We find that, at the vertical level, policy frameworks, resettlement approaches, and governance of livelihood support and aid are key determinants of social cohesion. At the horizontal level, equitable access to resources among different groups such as IDPs and host communities, determines social cohesion in climate-related displacement settings (see Table 1 below for a summary). This is especially visible in efforts to relocate cyclone-displaced populations from high-risk to safer locations.

### *Policy frameworks*

Vertically, when disaster responses fail to meet basic needs or uphold accountability and dignity – a situation which is often shaped by policy frameworks and government capacity, relationships between IDPs and host communities, and between IDPs and national/sub-national institutions – humanitarian and development actors are threatened. In Zimbabwe, the absence of designated policies for internal displacement has led to ad hoc responses, and the existence of a weak accountability infrastructure, leading to poor socioeconomic outcomes for the IDPs (Ncube & Murray, 2025). In Mozambique, although policies exist, local-level implementation gaps arising from procedural and distributional issues undermine long-term recovery efforts. In both countries, governmental, international, and national humanitarian and development actors successfully delivered short-term emergency responses following Cyclone Idai. However, resettlement – a longer-term intervention – has often failed as a durable solution. This is because communities were not meaningfully involved in the decision-making process. Additionally, short-term humanitarian programmes were disconnected from longer-term development expectations, particularly in improving livelihood prospects.

**Table 1: Drivers of fractured social cohesion in climate-related displacement contexts (Zimbabwe and Mozambique)**

| Dimension   | Zimbabwe  | Mozambique  | Implications for social cohesion                               |
|---|---|---|--|
| <b>Vertical social cohesion</b>   |   |   |  |
| Policy framework  | Absence of a dedicated internal displacement policy; ad hoc responses | Strong legal framework exists but weak implementation   | Weak vertical cohesion in both contexts via different pathways |
| Livelihood support and aid governance   | Context-blind agricultural inputs in infertile areas                  | Livelihood mismatch (fisher communities resettled in core agricultural areas) with limited training | Signals institutional incompetence; prolongs dependence        |
|   | Favouritism, elite capture  | Opaque beneficiary selection processes  | Bidirectional erosion of social cohesion                       |
| Resettlement approach   | Top-down relocation, minimal consultation                             | Limited consultation, misunderstandings about voluntariness   | Erosion of trust in institutions                               |
| <b>Horizontal social cohesion</b>   |   |   |  |
| Access to resources (IDP-host relations)  | Conflicts over land, water, grazing                                   | Resource pressure and aid-related grievances  | Heightened IDP-host tensions                                   |
| <b>Key actors</b>   |   |   |  |
| Humanitarian and developmental actors, national and sub-national government actors – including those responsible for disaster risk reduction, response and recovery, local NGOs (non-governmental organisations), community chiefs, other local leaders, community associations |   |   |  |

Source: Authors

**Livelihood support and aid governance**

Delays in livelihood support have prompted returns to communities of origin in Mozambique, either intermittently or permanently, while elite capture and favouritism in Zimbabwe have similarly limited the effectiveness of livelihood assistance, prompting returns. Although national governments frequently adopt resettlement as a rapid response to high-risk areas, post-settlement support is often limited. In Praia Nova, resettled fishing communities lacked agricultural skills and were deprived of social and cultural ties to fishing, leading some to return. Similarly, farmers from Grudja returned due to more fertile land in origin areas and delays in support for alternative livelihoods in resettlement areas. Although livelihood interventions such as training in honey production, house construction, and bread production were viewed positively by the community,

challenges related to market access and limited coverage meant that these initiatives fell short of meeting broader needs. In Zimbabwe, limited government support has led IDPs to adopt negotiated (im)mobility, moving between resettlement sites and their original households in response to constrained livelihoods. This strategy reflects partial trust, limited accountability, and cautious engagement with subnational institutions.

**Resettlement approach**

Context-insensitive, top-down interventions risk entrenching protracted socioeconomic displacement and may be perceived as evidence of limited institutional responsiveness. In Mozambique and Zimbabwe, livelihood interventions such as land allocation and the distribution of farming inputs often failed due to infertile land at resettlement sites and insufficient support to transition to new

livelihoods, and a lack of meaningful consultation with affected communities. In some cases, land titles were not provided, and exclusion from decision-making processes further eroded trust.

#### *Access to resources among IDPs and host communities*

Horizontally, displacement reshapes relationships between IDPs and host communities, with tensions emerging over scarce resources such as land, water, grazing areas, and informal employment. In Chimanimani and Tsholotsho (Zimbabwe), conflicts arose over grazing and water. Also, inequities in aid distribution by district-level institutions threatened cohesion among the IDPs themselves, between IDPs and host communities, as well as between community-leaders and communities. In Chimanimani, the involvement of male IDPs in informal and environmentally damaging illegal gold mining has generated negative perceptions among host communities, who associate them with land degradation, river pollution, and unsafe mining practices. These perceptions have reduced the willingness to cooperate, illustrating how social cohesion can erode in both directions (bidirectional): host communities become less trusting and inclusive, while displaced groups feel increasingly marginalised and excluded. In Mozambique, shared ethnic identities and general solidarity with IDPs foster positive social cohesion between IDPs and host communities (Jaji, 2024). However, the unequal distribution of aid by governmental and non-governmental actors is starting to strain relations between host communities and IDPs.

## **Conclusions**

Climate-related internal displacement in Zimbabwe and Mozambique exposes persistent gaps in livelihood recovery and social cohesion, reflecting shortcomings in both humanitarian responses and development cooperation programmes by governmental actors and donors. While emergency assistance offers short-term relief, inadequate resettlement and livelihood support can undermine trust and strain relations between dis-

placed and host communities. Addressing these challenges requires integrated, context-specific approaches that rebuild economic independence and social trust.

## **Recommendations**

The following recommendations are based on evidence from Mozambique and Zimbabwe (adaptable in similar displacement contexts), and are designed for specific actors, though successful implementation requires coordination across stakeholders.

#### *For national governments (Zimbabwe and Mozambique)*

- Zimbabwe must develop comprehensive national policies on climate-related internal displacement (across durable solutions, including resettlement and emergency support as well as livelihood support/development programmes) that clarify government responsibilities to ensure accountability mechanisms and guarantee the rights of displaced populations.
- Mozambique should strengthen the implementation of existing disaster risk reduction and recovery frameworks at the district level, ensuring resettlement adheres to legal standards requiring community consultation, consensus-seeking, adequate compensation, and livelihood re-establishment.
- To promote productive livelihoods at resettlement sites, responsible government agencies and departments should develop context-specific livelihood interventions aligned with pre- and post-displacement livelihoods.
- Resettlement can be an opportunity for transformative development, but this requires assessments of pre-displacement economic activities to either (i) relocate populations to areas supporting similar livelihoods, or (ii) provide comprehensive and timely vocational training and start-up support for sector transitions, thus requiring governments to plan and provide resources for resettlement in a coordinated,

multi-sectoral manner that supports long-term livelihood recovery.

- Host communities usually require the same support as IDPs; thus, governments should adopt area-based approaches in designing livelihood interventions to benefit both IDPs and host communities to prevent resentment and achieve community-wide development.
- Accountability to affected communities builds vertical cohesion. Both the governments of Mozambique and Zimbabwe should establish independent accountability and grievance systems to prevent corruption and elite capture in livelihood interventions.

*For international humanitarian and development actors*

- In climate-displacement settings, humanitarian and development actors should systematically monitor and address the effects of interventions on social cohesion using context-specific

indicators, particularly with regard to the equitable distribution of benefits within and across groups, in order to prevent aid-induced tensions and grievances.

- While coordination platforms often exist, international humanitarian and development actors should build on existing coordination mechanisms with national and sub-national institutions by strengthening alignment, information-sharing, joint planning and involving representatives of the community in these processes.
- The gap between short-term humanitarian interventions and long-term recovery undermines durable solutions for IDPs in climate-displacement settings. The emerging loss and damage architecture can help bridge this gap by financing locally-led recovery and resilience initiatives, through the Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage (FRLD) and technical assistance through the Santiago Network.

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