



# Youth Concepts of Social Cohesion in the Middle East

*Building a Social Cohesion Index That Defines Success Through the Eyes and Experiences of Young People*

**Summary Report**



## Executive Summary

Social cohesion is critical to the development and empowerment of youth and adolescents in their communities by establishing the conditions and providing platforms to build relationships and become engaged and influential actors. Ensuring social cohesion is particularly important in communities in Jordan and Lebanon with high refugee populations, where many refugee youth live in unstable and insecure environments. This instability can lead to frustration and disenfranchisement among displaced populations. Consequently, this report is based on the premise that improving social cohesion is particularly important in these communities, and therefore having a succinct definition and accurate measurement tools is of the utmost importance.

Mercy Corps' programming in Jordan and Lebanon is aimed at supporting communities, and, in particular, engaging with adolescents and youth through programs ranging from humanitarian response and protection to social stability. Social cohesion, therefore, is an important concept in both the implementation and measurement of programming. The ability to measure this concept accurately and effectively is critical to ensuring that programs are effective and relevant to the needs of the communities they serve. This report, therefore, addresses the importance of defining social cohesion and its related terminology. In particular, the report delves into the understandings of key terms such as 'community' by youth participants, and how respective understandings align with Mercy Corps definitions. By identifying any disconnects between common understandings held by youth and Mercy Corps definitions and metrics, this report will recommend adaptations for more accurate measurement.

Social cohesion is a complex and context-dependent concept that is employed in a range of academic and nongovernmental literature but rarely defined explicitly. This lack of universal definition, however, has not prevented the broad use of the concept throughout the region by NGOs such as UNDP, UNICEF, ActionAid, Save the Children, among others. Moreover, existing measurement tools and indicators are expansive and diverse. Of both the nongovernmental reports and the empirically validated tools, very few are designed specifically for the Middle East context, despite the well-recognized importance of developing tools that consider the sociopolitical and cultural nuances of the region.

Mercy Corps defines social cohesion as:

*“The state of relationships within a community based on the behaviors, attitudes, levels of trust, and collaboration that promote and foster commitment to and cooperation among the overall community.”*

This project aims to evaluate this existing definition, and to determine whether it accurately portrays and encompasses the ways in which youth participants understand the notion of social cohesion and their individual and collective aspirations concerning social cohesion in their respective societies. For the purposes of this research, “youth”

is defined as individuals age 15 to 24. Furthermore, the project focuses on programming in Lebanon and Jordan, particularly focusing on inter- and intra-group relations between Lebanese/Jordanian host community populations and refugee populations.

The intended meaning behind Mercy Corps' existing tools and questions were largely misunderstood by youth, and common terms such as 'ethnicity' were understood through a multiplicity of disparate lenses. Consequently, the existing tools that are being utilized often produce data that is skewed and/or not fully reflective of youth experiences and outlooks; thus Mercy Corps must focus on setting parameters to the terms and language that it employs in its measurement tools. As emphasized above, social cohesion is a multi-faceted, multi-generational, and multi-directional concept and the Mercy Corps definition should reflect its myriad layers as comprehensively as possible.

## KEY FINDINGS

The report aims at identifying young people's perception of social cohesion in their communities in Jordan and Lebanon, and to use this data to reflect on appropriate tools and indicators for measuring social cohesion in the Middle East.

### Youth Perspectives

In both Jordan and Lebanon, the research team conducted Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Cognitive Interviews (CIs) with youth, as well as Key Informant Interviews with Mercy Corps staff and partner organizations, in order to understand a) what they feel makes a 'good, strong, and positive community' and b) youth perspectives on cohesion as it exists within their own communities. The research included a total of 109 Syrian, Jordanian, Lebanese, and Palestinian young people between the ages of 15-24. Across both countries, and all nationalities, the young people commonly highlighted the following issues:

- Desire for safety and stability in their communities and in public spaces;
- Equal citizenship and rights, in particular with reference to employment;
- Higher quality of, and more diverse opportunities for, education, such as training and skills building; and
- Absence of discrimination and a respect for other cultures, traditions and values



1. Safety and Security
2. Socioeconomic
3. Political Factors
4. Institutional Factors
5. Tolerance and Acceptance
6. Community Relations
7. Interpersonal Efforts

Through analysis of the data collected in the field, there emerged a number of key themes across participants, location, and nationality. They were identified as:

These themes largely emerged from the focus groups that were conducted in both countries, and they reveal the most important dimensions of social cohesion from the

perspective of youth participants, encapsulating both citizen-to-citizen relationships and citizen-to-state relationships at the micro, meso, and macro-levels of interaction.

While all themes occurred in both Jordan and Lebanon, there were several interesting divergences between youth responses in each country. Youth in Jordan, for example, placed far greater emphasis on macro-level institutional factors than youth in Lebanon, citing factors such as “governmental provision of education, health, housing, jobs and other social services”. In contrast, youth in Lebanon were more focused on micro-level ‘Interpersonal Efforts’, actions which derive from an internal motivation to empathize and engage with others, especially with people from different backgrounds, cultures and traditions.

### **Youth Understandings of Key Terms**

Our research also incorporated existing empirically validated social cohesion measurement tools, including Mercy Corps survey questions, to create a Cognitive Interview script whereby youth were asked to select answers to 20 questions, followed by a set of probing questions to determine whether the participant’s interpretation and understanding of each question aligned with, or deviated from, the intended meanings of the questions. Distinct from understanding the concept of social cohesion itself, this focused on understanding on youth perceptions of terms commonly used to *measure* social cohesion.

As such, this methodology revealed the discrepancies between the ways in which youth comprehended the questions and their intended meaning(s), as well as young people’s diverse understandings of common terms used by Mercy Corps in their surveys and evaluations of programmes, such as ‘social group’, ‘community’, ‘values’, etc. The rate of understanding question as intended ranged from as low as 26% to highs of 82%, with the narrow and more specific questions understood more clearly than vague and open-ended questions such as, “Have you had individual contact with members from different communities in the past 6 months?”. This question was meant to gather data about contact between different nationalities within a country, but many of the youth stated that they understood “different communities” to mean non-Arabs.

Terms such as ‘community’ produced an array of understandings from close family and friends to the entire Arab world. The disjunctures between Mercy Corps’ understanding of key terms and youth understandings has far-reaching implications for the validity of measurement tools currently in use.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### For Defining Social Cohesion

- **Actively and explicitly define the term ‘community’ and its respective unit of measurement**
  - This research found that the concept of ‘community’ is understood differently across youth groups, ranging from ‘close family’ to ‘the Arab world’.
- **Expanding definition to include horizontal and vertical dimensions of social cohesion**
  - Through both the desk review and an analysis of the collected data, the importance of recognizing that an individual simultaneously experiences relations between themselves and fellow citizens, as well as between themselves and the apparatus of the state, emerged. This horizontal-vertical distinction is particularly important for refugees who have a more complex relationship with their host communities and host state.
- **Setting parameters within the definition of social cohesion**
  - Mercy Corps should consider expanding its definition(s) of social cohesion to include elements of the aforementioned seven themes. These themes succinctly cover the expansive nature of social cohesion from the youth perspective, and also encompass the horizontal-vertical dimensions of social cohesion.

### For Measuring Social Cohesion

- **Standardize surveying process**
  - In order to streamline results across the region, the surveying process should be standardized using scripts, specific timings, and reassurance to the participants of the confidentiality of the process.
- **Importance of clarifying language and terminology**
  - Terms such as ‘ethnicity’ created confusion among participants given that ethnicity is not a commonly used concept in the Middle East. If such terms are to be used, they should be specifically defined. The scripts should be translated into colloquial Arabic to facilitate mutual understanding between researchers and respondents.
- **Promising tools to consider and alternative methods of measurement**
  - The report has suggested a set of 16 existing tools for measuring social cohesion that merit further consideration.
  - Alternative methods of measurement to be considered include: empathy-related measures; narrative & storytelling methods; and game-based methods.

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