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Fostering social cohesion in border contexts: Learning from the experience of host communities and migrants in Casablanca

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Fostering Social Cohesion in Border Contexts

Learning from the Experience of Host Communities and Migrants in Casablanca

Elise Delespesse & Charles Martin-Shields

Summary

In recent years, Morocco has shifted from being primarily a country of transit and emigration to becoming a country of settlement. This evolution is largely driven by increased border restrictions and pushbacks, which have made migration routes to the EU less accessible. As a result, the city of Casablanca has become a hub of urban settlement instead of a transitional step in onward movement. Interviews conducted with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society organisations (CSOs) working with urban migrants and displaced people in Casablanca highlighted ways that development cooperation can have a positive impact on urban migration contexts.

Indeed, the more hands-off approach of local authorities in Casablanca when dealing with migrant communities contrasts with the aggressive policing common in Rabat and border areas, creating space for the establishment of informal migrant organisations in host communities. These organisations have become interlocutors with official institutions, playing a critical role in re-establishing migrants' and host communities' trust in official institutions.

With CSO and NGO support, communities themselves have also found ways to build inclusion and cooperation. Islamic values and Moroccan tradition of hospitality influence the provision of common goods at the household and neighbourhood level. Hosts and migrants also legally benefit from education and health services provided by governmental and non-governmental organisations;

the challenge lies in ensuring that all parties are aware of the services available to them, in many cases regardless of their immigration status.

Still, the contemporary discourse around migration and displacement in Morocco is infused with xenophobia, exclusion and racism, problems compounded by a media environment highly critical of migrants and displaced people. However, experts underlined the impact of repeated positive interactions between migrant and host communities in tempering hostile rhetoric.

Key policy messages:

- Health, education, and housing are universal needs for both host communities and migrants. Ensure that funded programmes are available to everyone who lives in the neighbourhood, host or migrant, and that these are common goods around which community identity can be built.
- Communicating the history of migration in areas of arrival is critical. These histories can help international organisations contextualise their programming and make immigration and settlement part of a wider story that inclusive identity can be built around.
- Build cooperation between city- and municipal-level organisations nationally. City-to-city cooperation can fill knowledge gaps about national migration policy and reduce duplication of efforts by CSOs and NGOs who work with migrants.

Introduction

While many contexts of forced displacement and migration involve some form of settlement, there are contexts, such as countries along the Mediterranean, where migration and displacement patterns are marked by attempts at onward movement, pushbacks and a *lack* of settlement. From a policy perspective, how do donors create local and national infrastructures to help host communities and local institutions meet not only their own needs but the needs of displaced people in zones of contested mobility and a lack of settlement? Social cohesion is often the answer to this question, and applying it in urban migration settings may help integration efforts. While there are different definitions of social cohesion, we work with the concept of Leininger et al (2021) in which social cohesion is considered to comprise:

Trust: Individuals build trust across social circles (horizontal trust), and build trust in city and national government institutions (vertical trust).

Inclusive identity: Within a society, people representing multiple identities can live together without their identities superseding the society's collective overarching identity. In migration and displacement contexts, the "melting pot" nature of mixed nationalities and ethnicities can make social cohesion challenging.

Cooperation for the common good: Individuals and groups cooperate to achieve interests beyond the individual level, as well as cooperating with local organisations and, when possible, the city and state authorities to achieve common aims.

Migration and displacement represent one of the most challenging contexts for building social cohesion. Vertical trust is often low between migrants and the government of Morocco, the inclusive nature of Moroccan identity often faces xenophobic headwinds, and cooperation for the common good is challenging since local laws make it dangerous or illegal for migrants and refugees to be part of public life. Despite this, many local NGOs and CSOs, which include secular and religious organisations, still manage to provide

support to host communities and displaced people in border regions despite the limitations they face due to delays in support from municipal and national institutions, and from aid donors.

The case of Casablanca

With its strategic position at the crossroad between Europe and Africa, Morocco balances, on one hand, an enduring partnership with Western countries and the European Union on migration policies, and on the other hand, a growing commitment to deepening ties with African countries. On top of being a country of emigration, with 9% of its population living abroad, Morocco is also a country of immigration, encompassing a wide variety of profiles: labour migrants, foreign students, irregular migrants, refugees and asylum seekers (Lemaizi, 2022).

Since 2018 the country has adopted a shift in migration policy, implementing increasingly repressive measures against migrants. Following the warming of relations between Madrid and Rabat in 2022, notably due to the evolution in Spain's position on Western Sahara, its former colony, Morocco adopted an approach oriented towards security. The country has assumed the outsourced management of European borders, implementing tighter border controls and pushback policies (El Arabi, 2023). The 2022 Melilla incident, a coordinated attempt by thousands of migrants to enter the Spanish enclaves that led to 23 migrants being killed and more than 70 injured, hardened the stance of Moroccan authorities on migration and led to further pushbacks of Sub-Saharan migrants inland.

This shift in migration policies is felt acutely in Casablanca. Formerly a place of transit for migrants on their route to the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, the city has become a new border city between Africa and Europe. Moroccan migration control strategies have increasingly included the internal relocation of Sub-Saharan irregular migrants and asylum seekers from border zones in the north to cities farther south along the coast or in the centre of the country.

Béni-Mellal (see Figure 1) is frequently used as a drop-off point by immigration authorities. From there many migrants attempted to reach the border areas again, often bypassing Casablanca, before being pushed back toward Rabat. In response, a buffer zone between Rabat and Agadir was established, essentially forcing Sub-Saharan migrant populations to settle in Casablanca, where authorities have adopted a *laissez-faire* approach to migration control (Carretero, 2023). This less hostile environment led to the creation of the informal settlement of Ouled Ziane, first formed in 2015 and now dismantled, and located at the eponymous bus station in Casablanca up until 2019.

How does social cohesion manifest in Casablanca's migrant communities?

Given the paradoxical nature of internal migration policy and external border control, how does social cohesion evolve in contexts of urban displacement, especially when there is a great deal of onward movement and relatively little long-term settlement? Interviews with experts from local NGOs and CSOs helped put into perspective the challenges that come with building social cohesion in highly fluctuating urban migration and displacement contexts.

Institutional trust

While *horizontal* trust within communities exists and is aided by local CSOs and NGOs, building *vertical* trust between migrants and host communities, and city and national institutions is more difficult. In Casablanca the local authorities have a more tolerant, hands-off approach to deal with migrant communities, compared to more aggressive policing and pushbacks in Rabat and in border areas. Within this more permissive environment, interviewees described how informal migrant organisations and community focal points from the same nationality or ethnic group of migrants serve as the interlocutor between migrant communities and government institutions.

Figure 1: Urban migration hubs in Morocco



Source: Authors, created with Datawrapper

The use of focal points was critical because migrants generally do not trust formal institutions in Morocco, a problem fueled by competing policy preferences of the Moroccan government and the European Union. While there is a Moroccan government narrative of inclusion and holistic migration support, this runs up against the reality of hard border policies, and violent pushbacks at border crossings. The contradictory nature of migration policy is often magnified by language barriers for the migrants who do not speak French or Darija (the Moroccan Arabic dialect). For migrants, the unpredictability of engaging with institutional actors reduces trust, so community leaders and NGOs and CSOs serve as interlocutors until migrants have built sufficient vertical trust in Moroccan government institutions to engage directly themselves, for example registering their children for school on their own.

Inclusive identity

Respondents described Morocco as a country with a national and cultural identity of welcoming people, with examples of intra-regional migration and exchange, as well as a custom of welcoming people who wish to live in Morocco as long as local customs are respected. An example of the kinds of exchanges that served as the basis for

the current networks of community focal points were education and training exchanges between Morocco and Mali in the late 1980s (Khrouz & Lanza, 2015). Today's community focal points came and settled in Morocco through these programmes, and now serve as a key link in building institutional trust among migrants and displaced people.

However, there are challenges to maintaining the inclusive component of cultural identity at the horizontal level. Many host neighbourhoods and communities are already economically and socially marginalised, and the arrival of temporary migrants adds to the resource stress these communities face. This is compounded by a media environment that is very critical of migrants and displaced people coming to and passing through Morocco. To combat this, interviewees noted that repeated positive interactions between migrants and hosts tamped down the impact of hostile rhetoric in Casablanca, and helped host communities remain open to migrants settling in them.

Cooperation for the common good

In the past there was only a limited number of migrants settling in Casablanca, and a certain level of solidarity between migrants and lower-income Moroccan populations emerged. While spontaneous local-level collective organising between host communities and migrants was not something interviewees reported seeing, the provision of health and education services by CSOs and NGOs is a common good provided to both hosts and migrants. Given the transience of migrants and displaced people in Casablanca, building the kind of social networks required for spontaneous collective action is difficult, but provision of health and education services by CSOs and NGOs creates the space for building further neighbourhood- and individual-level cooperation.

However, a major challenge is ensuring migrant and displaced communities, and their hosts, know what services are available and what their rights are in Morocco. This requires a certain

level of coordination because local experts noted that broadcast media does not do a good job of reporting on immigration issues (Boukhssas, 2025). Thus, it takes a great deal of cooperation (and local-level coordination) to ensure that migrants are aware of the health and education services legally provided to them by local CSOs and NGOs.

Synthesising the findings

While the interviews and expert inputs in the previous section are only representative of the context in Casablanca, where the interviewees work, they can be indicative of social cohesion challenges policy makers will face generally in areas of high mobility, border pushbacks, and challenging environments for integration. Migrants settling in Casablanca is a relatively new phenomenon, and community leaders as well as community focal points play a key role in linking migrants to CSOs and NGOs, which can then help build migrants' trust toward city and national institutions. These community-level interlocutors are seen in other urban migration contexts (e.g. in Malaysia (Martin-Shields & Munir-Asen, 2024), and Ghana (Ekoh et al., 2025)), and they set the foundation for supporting inclusive identity and cooperation for the common good.

What was interesting about inclusive identity in this case was that the challenge was less about creating a new sense of inclusion and more about applying the inclusive identity inherent to Casablanca's and Morocco's culture to new patterns of settlement. Legal changes and pushbacks not only strain institutional trust, they have also led to greater numbers of migrants being forced to settle in Casablanca. With institutional trust as a foundation, it becomes easier to bring the Moroccan identity of inclusion and hospitality into play. The history of people arriving is a narrative that can serve as a reminder that migrants settling in Casablanca is not an alien phenomenon, but one that communities have managed for decades.

Finally, with institutional trust and inclusive identity established, cooperation for the common good becomes possible. The interviews highlighted

how this is currently small scale and often focused on things like the provision of food and meals within communities, but over time this can scale up. In cities like Nairobi, where refugee communities have been long established, there are examples of larger scale political and social organising which are built on foundations of institutional trust and layers of inclusive identity (Martin-Shields, 2024).

Recommendations

Based on the results of the interviews, our recommendations for supporting social cohesion in migration and displacement contexts are most applicable to the Moroccan case but do offer lessons for other settings.

For international donor agencies and foundations:

- Play a “good offices” role between the national government and city-level NGOs and CSOs. Building local-to-national level trust between institutional actors can help ensure that the national government does not feel undermined by local migration initiatives, and local institutions have a clearer sense of the legal boundaries they are working in when they provide services to migrants.
- Health, education and housing are universal needs for both host communities and migrants. Ensure that funded programmes are available to everyone who lives in the neighbourhood, host or migrant, and that these are common

goods around which community identity can be built.

- Ensure that legal updates and policies that affect migrants *and* host communities are communicated to all NGOs and CSOs. In many cases it is also host country nationals who are unaware of the relevant laws and rights, and they need to be as well informed as the migrant communities.

For local organisations working with urban migrants and host communities:

- Communicating the history of migration and how it has shaped neighbourhoods of arrival is critically important. These histories can help international organisations communicate how their technical programmes fit into community histories and identities, and offer counter narratives to xenophobic media and political discourses.
- Use all opportunities to network and build social cohesion between organisations. Horizontal social cohesion between CSOs and NGOs reduces the risks of competition and duplication of efforts and creates deeper resource pools for migrants and host communities.
- Build cooperation between city- and municipal-level organisations nationally. City-to-city cooperation could help solidify lessons learned across NGOs and CSOs, and improve the provision of local services.

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