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Research Report

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IDOS Policy Brief, No. 21/2026

Provided in Cooperation with:
German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS), Bonn

Suggested Citation: Jaji, Rose; Gonçalves, Euclides (2026) : Migration, internal displacement and social cohesion in northern Mozambique, IDOS Policy Brief, No. 21/2026, German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS), Bonn, https://doi.org/10.23661/ipb21.2026

This Version is available at:
https://hdl.handle.net/10419/343132

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IDOS POLICY BRIEF 21/2026



Migration, Internal Displacement and Social Cohesion in Northern Mozambique

Euclides Gonçalves & Rose Jaji

Summary

The majority of the people displaced by the armed conflict in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado Province live in host communities. Our research shows that many Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) live with family/friends. Less than half live in displacement camps. As in many other internal displacement contexts, the government of Mozambique, development partners and humanitarian organisations use the terms IDPs and host communities to distinguish between the people who fled the conflict and those who welcomed them, respectively. This is a necessary distinction because IDPs are in a particularly precarious situation, having lost homes, family members and means of livelihoods, which renders material and psychosocial support to them indispensable. However, this policy brief identifies two issues that are pertinent to this distinction and the provision of material support to IDPs. First, while the categories of IDPs and host communities may provide clarity for interventions, they do not always reflect the broader history of local communities and how people identify and relate to each other. Second, in contexts where economically vulnerable host communities share their meagre resources with IDPs prior to the arrival of external humanitarian support, humanitarian organisations need to be sensitive to the material circumstances of host communities so that these do not see such support as discriminatory, leading to conflict. When the material support that humanitarian organisations provide to IDPs is beyond the means of their hosts, the latter can become resentful and withdraw their own support from the IDPs. This is a common problem, and the policy brief shows some ways to address it. Governments, development partners and humanitarian organisations that adopt simplistic distinctions between IDPs and host communities without locating them in the specific socio-economic context risk missing local acts of solidarity and mutual identification as channels of inclusion that are central to maintaining social cohesion.

Key policy messages:

- **Contextualise displacement**. In contexts where displacement occurs within a broader history of regional migration, IDPs are not always seen as outsiders in their host communities because many have prior personal connections to host communities. The government of Mozambique, development partners and humanitarian actors need to embed and understand the current displacement within the long history of migration, ethnolinguistic identification and displacement which shapes relations and contributes to social cohesion.
- **Integrate local ethos of solidarity**. In the absence of external humanitarian support or prior to the arrival of emergency aid, host communities mobilise themselves through an ethos of solidarity, care and hospitality to help displaced people. External interventions coming into such situations need to be sensitive to this ethos and build on existing inclusive social support mechanisms and locally led initiatives so that they do not disrupt positive relations.
- **Build on locally led integration**. Locally led efforts are integral to local ownership of the integration of IDPs and its sustainability. When external support builds on local initiatives, this reduces unintended consequences such as resentment and conflicts between IDPs and host communities.

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Migration and the dynamics of displacement in northern Mozambique

The armed conflict in Cabo Delgado Province, which started in October 2017, has displaced more than 716,000 people, 80 per cent of whom remain in northern Mozambique (IOM [International Organization for Migration], 2025). The government of Mozambique created 76 displacement camps to accommodate the displaced people, but the majority of them, at 66 per cent, live in host communities (IOM, 2025).

Northern Mozambique has a long history of migration and mobility due to trade, work and kinship ties (Cruz e Silva et al., 2015). This history puts into perspective the current internal displacement and the distinctions between IDPs and host communities. It also explains the multi-directional and pendular displacement patterns in which IDPs move between displacement camps and host communities or between insurgent hotspots and areas considered safe. In addition, many people in northern Mozambique are likely to have migrated or been displaced at one point or another. They treat IDPs as fellow Mozambicans and often draw parallels between the current displacement and previous ones caused by the war of liberation against the Portuguese, which brought independence in 1975, and the civil war between the rebel group Mozambique National Resistance (RENAMO) and the government from 1977 to 1992, which affected many current host communities.

Despite the history of migration and shared experience of displacement, the government, development partners and humanitarian organisations use the category IDPs in ways that suggest that people do not belong to the areas they flee to. Research in northern Mozambique shows that the ahistorical conceptual distinction between IDPs and host communities poses challenges for development and humanitarian interventions because it overlooks ties that predate the current conflict and play an important role in maintaining social cohesion. IDPs are also not homogeneous; they have different backgrounds and levels of connection to the areas they flee to, which informs their circumstances. The following groups of IDPs emerged.

First, there were IDPs born and raised in Nampula Province who had migrated to Cabo Delgado Province before the conflict for reasons that include marriage, work, commerce and fishing. Although the means of livelihoods for these people were in Cabo Delgado, Nampula was their place of origin where they had the advantage of kinship relations, personal networks, entitlement to farmland and familiarity with the language and culture. Before the conflict, many of these people frequently travelled to Nampula to visit family. When they fled the conflict, they moved in with their parents, siblings, other relatives and acquaintances, or rented homes in rural and urban districts. They easily integrated into the host families' livelihood strategies. A common strategy among displaced people with personal networks in Nampula is to spread members of their households across different family units so that the burden of hosting them does not fall on a single household. This helps to maintain positive relations with the host families.

Second, some IDPs with no prior ties to Nampula fled Cabo Delgado with sufficient financial resources to settle and integrate without humanitarian support. Some of them received support from well-off relatives. They often do not see the need to identify themselves as displaced people and seldom register for assistance. Some in this group have opened businesses similar to those they ran in Cabo Delgado and have become self-reliant and less visible as displaced people. They are perceived as businesspeople who create jobs because of their financial resources as opposed to people who fled the war in Cabo Delgado.

Third, there were IDPs without previous connection to Nampula Province or resources to rebuild their lives without development and humanitarian support. Upon arrival, they found shelter on mosque premises and school grounds before assistance became available to them. Many of them received food, shelter, work opportunities

and farmland from host families. At each wave of displacement due to insurgent attacks in northern Mozambique, communities are the first line of support for IDPs. For this reason, the majority of IDPs in Nampula Province do not live in displacement camps but in host communities (IOM, 2025). However, hosting IDPs, whether family or strangers, also means striking a balance between acts of solidarity and security concerns deriving from suspicion that some IDPs are al-Shabaab insurgents. Keeping this balance often means supporting while maintaining relative distance, for example, by providing lodging in rooms outside the main house and offering farmland away from the host family's crops.

Although shared ethnolinguistic and religious identities and nationality are part of mutual identification and can contribute to the maintenance of social cohesion, they are not determinant. Host communities and local authorities often describe displacement as involuntary movement deserving of compassion and solidarity regardless of the affected people's identity. The largely positive reception of IDPs is a result of acts of solidarity with people in need rooted in local norms (Jaji, 2024) and the strong sense of national identity captured by an Afrobarometer (2025) survey which showed that 73 per cent of Mozambicans felt strong ties with other Mozambicans while 75 per cent believed that their compatriots thought of them as Mozambican. The majority of Mozambicans also show high levels of tolerance for differences in ethnicity, nationality, political affiliation, religion and sexual orientation (Afrobarometer, 2025).

Development and humanitarian interventions

Many development and humanitarian interventions have adopted models that provide 70 per cent of the services to IDPs and 30 per cent to the host community, or 50 per cent each, in response to host community resentment towards IDPs who received assistance. However, at the beginning of the humanitarian response in Nampula Province in 2020, assistance was given exclusively to registered IDPs. In a context of structural poverty, host communities equally needed support. The exclusive provision of aid to IDPs became a source of disputes between hosts and IDPs who did not live in the same households and share the material support they received with their hosts.

Host communities' responses to development and humanitarian interventions provide insights into the tension between external support and local acts of solidarity. Where acts of solidarity were once strong, jealousy and competition for scarce resources emerged. For example, some hosts took back the farmland they had lent to displaced families and evicted them from their houses as soon as the IDPs started receiving support from World Food Programme (WFP). In many cases, displaced families were not allowed to harvest their crops, and in extreme cases, host families cut off ties with IDPs, including friendships between host and IDP children. Due to limited funding, WFP food aid was short-lived, and its withdrawal left recipients in an even more precarious situation as they no longer had the support of the host families. The primary line of solidarity was broken and replaced by resentment and extortion (through payment for farmland) by people who had initially supported the displaced people despite being equally poor themselves.

Conclusions and recommendations

The circumstances in host communities in northern Mozambique illustrate two main points that are relevant to development cooperation and humanitarian interventions. First, displacement, as continuation of previous migrations, means that the category of "internally displaced persons" masks existing relationships that government and development actors need to build on to maintain social cohesion. Second, acts of solidarity, care and hospitality, which are a key building block for horizontal social cohesion, are negatively affected by interventions that exclude host families. This is a common problem in humanitarian programmes.

Based on these insights, the policy brief recommends the following:

- **Build on historical personal connections.** National governments and development partners need to build on personal connections that are rooted in historical migration and ethnolinguistic and family ties that cut across the IDP-host community distinction, foster social cohesion and influence IDPs' decisions on long-term solutions such as returning to the areas they fled or settling permanently in host communities.
- **Include local solidarity.** Humanitarian organisations need to be sensitive to local acts of charity that sustain IDPs before external support arrives so that their interventions do not disrupt the existing solidarity, alienate IDPs from their local benefactors and leave them in a worse off situation when the support gets discontinued.
- **Support locally led integration efforts.** National governments and development partners need to implement interventions that support existing locally led support structures and integration efforts in order to promote local ownership and sustainability of IDP integration as a long-term solution. This reduces unintended consequences such as resentment and conflicts between IDPs and host communities.

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The German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS) is institutionally financed by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), based on a resolution of the German Bundestag, and the state of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) as a member of the Johannes-Rau-Forschungsgemeinschaft (JRF).

Suggested citation:
Gonçalves, E., & Jaji, R. (2026). *Migration, internal displacement and social cohesion in northern Mozambique* (IDOS Policy Brief 21/2026). IDOS. https://doi.org/10.23661/ipb21.2026

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IDOS Policy Brief / German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS) gGmbH

ISSN (Print) 2751-4455
ISSN (Online) 2751-4463

DOI: https://doi.org/10.23661/ipb21.2026

© German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS) gGmbH
Tulpenfeld 6, 53113 Bonn
Email: publications@idos-research.de
https://www.idos-research.de

Printed on eco-friendly, certified paper.

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