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NAVIGATING COEXISTENCE UNDER SCARCITY: A TRIADIC ANALYSIS OF REFUGEE–HOST SOCIAL COHESION IN KULE, TIERKIDI, AND JEWI CAMPS, GAMBELLA, ETHIOPIA

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ABSTRACT

Gambella People's National Regional State in Ethiopia represents a vital humanitarian corridor within the Horn of Africa. As of early 2026, the region hosts a disproportionately dense population of South Sudanese refugees who fled civil conflict since 2013. This qualitative phenomenological study examines the micro-level social dynamics between South Sudanese refugees and host communities in the Kule, Tierkidi, and Jewi refugee camps of Gambella, Ethiopia. Conducted during a period of acute humanitarian funding contraction (2024–2025), the study draws on 30 Key Informant Interviews and 12 Focus Group Discussions to explore how ethnic identity, economic interdependence, and resource scarcity shape social relations. Advancing a triadic analytical framework, the research distinguishes among refugees, ethnic-kin host communities, and ethnic-other host communities, thereby moving beyond conventional binary models of refugee–host relations. The findings demonstrate that bonding, bridging, and negative social capital coexist simultaneously, continuously reshaped by competition over land, water, and firewood, perceived inequities in service delivery, and the mediating role of informal governance mechanisms. The analysis reveals that shared ethnicity facilitates cooperation but does not guarantee cohesion, while ethnic difference does not inevitably produce conflict. Ultimately, the study contributes to theories of social capital, ethnic boundary-making, and everyday peace, offering actionable insights for conflict-sensitive humanitarian programming in protracted displacement contexts.

Keywords: Refugee-host relations, Social cohesion, Social capital, Gambella, Ethiopia, Triadic framework

INTRODUCTION

The Gambella People's National Regional State (GPNRS) in Western Ethiopia remains one of the most significant humanitarian corridors in the Horn of Africa. As of early 2026, Ethiopia hosts over 1.1 million refugees, with approximately 40% concentrated in the Gambella region, primarily originating from South Sudan (UNHCR, 2026). The camps of Kule, Tierkidi, and Jewi were established to manage the massive influx following the 2013 South Sudanese civil war. While these sites provide essential sanctuary, they have become epicenters of complex social, economic, and political interactions

between the displaced populations and the local host communities. This regional concentration is particularly stark given that the refugee population in Gambella often exceeds the number of local inhabitants in specific woredas, creating a demographic pressure cooker wherein communities must navigate daily coexistence under structural scarcity, testing the limits of traditional social safety nets and local governance (Moreda, 2018; Feyissa, 2011).

Despite the implementation of the 2019 Refugee Proclamation and the Comprehensive Refugee

Response Framework (CRRF), refugee-host social cohesion in Gambella remain precarious. The 2019 Proclamation, regarded as one of the most progressive refugee laws on the African continent, granted refugees rights to work, freedom of movement, and access to primary education and health services (Feleke, 2020; Alix-Garcia et al., 2018). The "encampment" model is gradually transitioning toward "integrated settlement," yet this shift has exacerbated historical ethnic sensitivities and resource competition (Feyissa & Lar, 2021). The primary problem lies in the "asymmetric impact" of the refugee presence: while refugees receive structured international aid, the indigenous host communities (primarily Agnuak and local Nuer) often perceive themselves as neglected, leading to a "deprivation gap" (Jacobsen, 2002; Sanchi et al., 2016). This perception is empirically documented in Ethiopian contexts, where host community members consistently report being bypassed by targeted humanitarian interventions (Moreda, 2018; Kefale, 2020). This gap is widened by the fact that the Agnuak, traditionally sedentary agriculturists, find their ancestral land rights increasingly threatened by the pastoralist traditions of the incoming Nuer populations, leading to a clash of livelihoods that transcends simple economic competition (Feyissa, 2011).

In Kule and Tierkidi, environmental degradation, specifically the depletion of forest resources for fuelwood, has become a flashpoint for physical altercations. Similar dynamics have been documented across Sub-Saharan Africa, where environmental pressure in refugee-hosting areas is strongly associated with deteriorating host-refugee relations (Maystadt & Verwimp, 2014; Whitaker, 2002). In Jewi, the integration of health and education services has created a "shared burden" on infrastructure that was already fragile. Furthermore, the demographic shift caused by the South Sudanese Nuer refugee influx is viewed by the Agnuak host community as an "ethnic tilting" of regional political power, transforming a humanitarian situation into a

contest over indigenous land rights (Feyissa, 2011; Human Rights Watch, 2012). The situation is further complicated by the "security-humanitarian nexus," where the proximity of the border allows for the spillover of South Sudanese tribal politics into the camps, effectively importing external conflicts into the Ethiopian host landscape and complicating local peace-building efforts (Pinaud, 2021; Verhoeven, 2012).

Existing scholarship has extensively documented the macro-level economic and service-delivery impacts of refugees in Ethiopia, particularly in regions hosting large refugee populations (Alix-Garcia et al., 2018; Maystadt & Verwimp, 2014; Sanghi et al., 2016). Studies employing econometric methods in Gambella and the Dollo Ado corridor have found mixed effects of refugee presence on local wages, market prices, and public service quality, underscoring the context-sensitivity of these outcomes (Moreda, 2018; Taylor et al., 2016). However, there remains a critical gap in recent qualitative evidence examining the micro-level social cohesion dynamics that unfold within and between ethnic groups in refugee-hosting contexts. In particular, limited attention has been given to the intra-ethnic versus inter-ethnic dimensions of social relations, such as why Nuer refugee-Nuer host interactions often differ fundamentally from Nuer refugee-Anuak host interactions in Gambella (Feyissa & Lar, 2021; Dereje, 2006).

Moreover, little is known about how the 2024-2025 humanitarian funding "breaking point," marked by unprecedented global aid contraction, has affected local-level social trust, everyday coexistence, and coping strategies among refugees and host communities. Globally, protracted displacement research has demonstrated that funding contractions intensify resource competition and erode informal social safety nets (Betts et al., 2017; Zetter, 2021). Equally underexplored is the role of informal and customary conflict resolution mechanisms in mediating tensions in contexts where formal subnational governance and service

delivery capacity are weak or overstretched (Entelis, 2018; Cheeseman, 2019).

The novelty of this study lies in its multi-sited qualitative synthesis that moves beyond the conventional "host-refugee" binary to execute a triadic analysis of the social configuration involving refugees, ethnic-kin host communities, and ethnic-other host communities. This triadic conceptualization builds on and extends the foundational work of Crisp (2001), Jacobsen (2002), and Putnam (2000) on social capital in displacement contexts, as well as Wimmer's (2013) ethnic boundary-making framework and Mac Ginty's (2014) "everyday peace" paradigm. By focusing on the micro-dynamics of social interaction, reciprocity, and contestation in and around the Kule, Tierkidi, and Jewi refugee camps, this research captures how social capital is maintained, eroded, or reconstituted under conditions of extreme resource scarcity. Conducted during a period of acute humanitarian retrenchment, the study offers a timely and context-sensitive account of how social cohesion is renegotiated in protracted displacement settings.

This study contributes to the literature on forced migration, social cohesion, and ethnic relations by advancing a triadic analytical framework that challenges dominant dyadic models of refugee-host relations. By disaggregating host communities into ethnic-kin and ethnic-other groups, the research refines social capital theory (Putnam, 2000; Woolcock, 1998) and ethnic boundary-making perspectives (Wimmer, 2013), demonstrating that shared ethnicity does not automatically translate into social solidarity, nor does ethnic difference inevitably produce conflict. The findings deepen understanding of how bonding, bridging, and negative social capital operate simultaneously under humanitarian stress (Portes, 1998; Leonard, 2004), particularly in low-capacity governance environments. Furthermore, the study extends theoretical debates on resilience and adaptation in protracted displacement (Betts et al., 2017; Zetter, 2021) by illustrating how informal institutions and

everyday social practices compensate for declining formal assistance.

From a practical standpoint, the study generates actionable insights for humanitarian actors, development agencies, and regional authorities operating in refugee-hosting areas of Gambella. By identifying why and where social cohesion breaks down, or is sustained, across different ethnic configurations, the findings can inform conflict-sensitive aid targeting, community engagement strategies, and social cohesion programming. In the context of shrinking humanitarian budgets, the research highlights the importance of leveraging informal conflict resolution mechanisms and indigenous governance structures as complementary tools to formal systems (Cheeseman, 2019; Pantuliano, 2009). It also provides evidence to support ethnically nuanced programming, cautioning against one-size-fits-all "host community" approaches (Zetter & Ruadel, 2016). Ultimately, the study offers a grounded basis for designing more adaptive, locally legitimate, and socially sustainable refugee response interventions during periods of prolonged resource scarcity.

The study is guided by the overall research question: How do economic interdependence and ethnic identity shape the nature of social relations between refugees and host communities in the Kule, Tierkidi, and Jewi camps? To address this, the following sub-questions are examined: (i) To what extent does the shared use of social services (health and education) mitigate or exacerbate perceived inequities between refugees and hosts? (ii) How do host communities and refugees negotiate the usage of dwindling natural resources (water, land, and firewood) in the absence of state-led environmental protection? (iii) What role does ethnic kinship play in the socio-economic integration of refugees, and how does this affect inter-group relations with "non-kin" host populations?

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in three complementary theoretical traditions that, in combination, offer analytical purchase on the multi-layered dynamics of refugee-host social cohesion. First, social capital theory (Putnam, 2000; Woolcock, 1998; Coleman, 1988) provides the foundational lens through which trust, reciprocity, and intergroup networks are examined. Putnam's (2000) distinction between bonding social capital (ties within homogeneous groups) and bridging social capital (ties across group boundaries) is operationalized here at the ethnic-kin and ethnic-other axes of our triadic analysis (Figure

1). The concept of negative social capital (Portes, 1998) further captures instances where in-group solidarity generates exclusion or harm for outgroups, a dynamic prominent in the Agnuak-Nuer interface documented in this study. Leonard's (2004) application of social capital theory in forced migration contexts demonstrates that when communities are navigating coexistence under scarcity, bonding capital tends to deepen while bridging capital weakens, a pattern confirmed in the present findings.

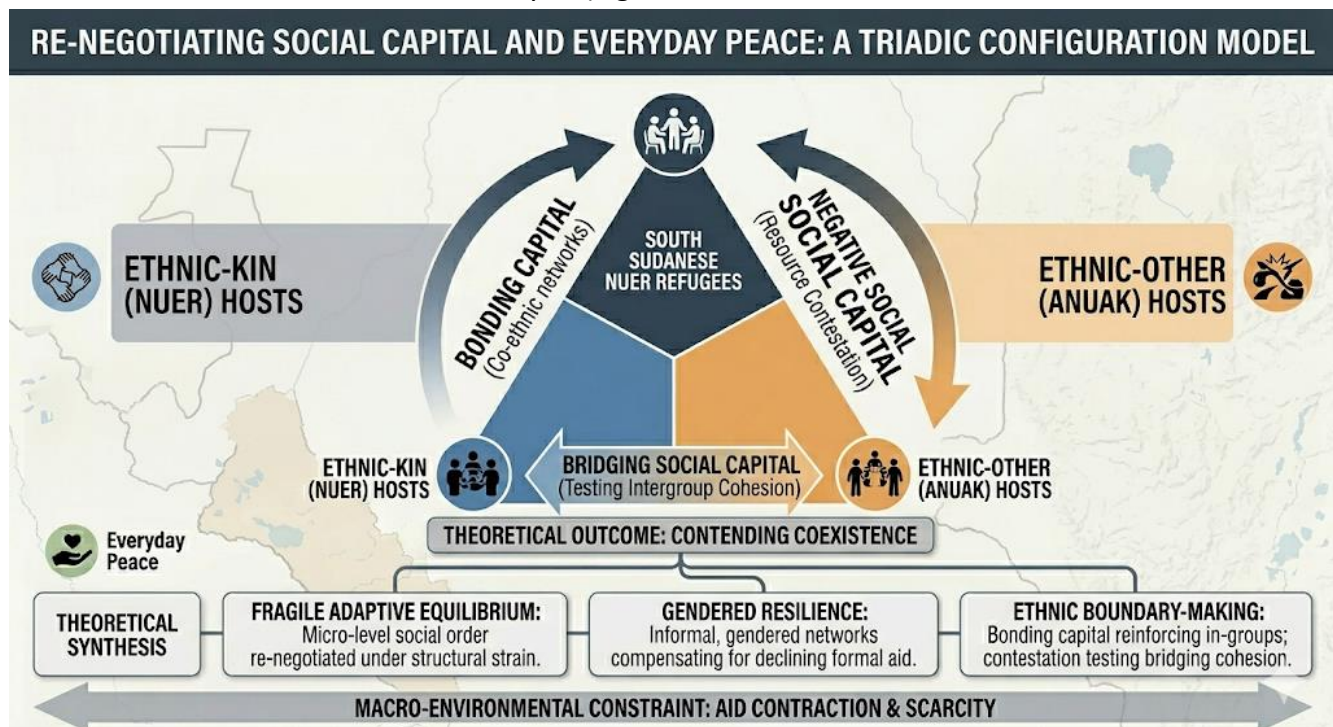


Figure 1: Triadic configuration; Source: Author's construction

Second, ethnic boundary-making theory (Wimmer, 2013; Barth, 1969) challenges primordialist assumptions that ethnic identity is fixed and inherently conflictual. Instead, it frames ethnicity as a dynamic boundary that is continuously drawn, contested, and renegotiated through social interaction. Applied to Gambella, this framework explains why Nuer refugee-Nuer host relations and

Nuer refugee-Agnuak host relations exhibit qualitatively different social textures, despite all parties operating under the same humanitarian regime. This perspective allows the study to explore how ethnic boundaries harden or soften in response to material conditions, perceived threats, and institutional arrangements amid structural resource scarcity (Dereje, 2006; Feyissa, 2011).

Third, the "everyday peace" paradigm (Mac Ginty, 2014; Jutila et al., 2008) foregrounds the informal, mundane, and locally grounded practices through which social order is maintained in the absence of formal peace-building institutions. Rather than focusing exclusively on conflict events or formal mediation, this framework attends to the routines, avoidance strategies, and micro-negotiations through which refugees and hosts sustain daily coexistence under scarcity. In protracted displacement settings characterized by weak state capacity, everyday peace mechanisms have been shown to be more reliable predictors of local social cohesion than formal institutional interventions (Autesserre, 2021; Mac Ginty, 2014).

Together, these frameworks enable the triadic analysis advanced in this study, disaggregating the "host community" into ethnic-kin and ethnic-other subgroups and tracking how bonding, bridging, and negative social capital operate differentially across each axis of the triadic configuration (Figure 2). This integration responds directly to calls by Betts et al. (2017) and Zetter (2021) for theoretically grounded, context-sensitive approaches to the study of refugee-host social cohesion.

Materials and Methods

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences and meaning-making processes of refugees and host community members in refugee-hosting settings. While quantitative survey methods can effectively measure levels of social cohesion or trust across groups, they are limited in their ability to explain the underlying reasons for variation in inter- and intra-ethnic relations or to capture informal norms and sensitive social processes (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Ethnographic approaches provide rich contextual insight but require prolonged immersion that is often impractical or ethically constrained in refugee camp settings (Jacobsen &

Landau, 2003). In contrast, the phenomenological design was particularly well aligned with the study's objectives of unpacking the micro-level dynamics of refugee-host social cohesion, trust, and ethnic relations as communities are navigating coexistence under scarcity. Phenomenological inquiry, rooted in the philosophical tradition of Husserl (1913) and developed for social science application by van Manen (1990), is concerned with recovering the essential structure of lived experience, making it especially suited for studies where subjective meaning-making is central to understanding a complex social phenomenon.

By foregrounding participants' own narratives, perceptions, and everyday interactions, this approach enabled a nuanced understanding of the subjective "realities" through which social relations are formed, contested, and negotiated. Moreover, it allowed the study to move beyond externally imposed or policy-driven categories of "refugees" and "hosts" to facilitate a comprehensive triadic analysis that captures how individuals themselves interpret ethnic identity, kinship, reciprocity, and conflict in practice. As such, the qualitative phenomenological approach ensured the analytical depth and contextual sensitivity required to address the study's objectives, consistent with established best practice for forced migration research (Jacobsen & Landau, 2003; Crisp, 2001).

Study Sites

The study was conducted in three strategically selected sites, namely the Kule, Tierkidi, and Jewi refugee camps of the Gambella Region (Figure 2), to capture variation in social dynamics across different ecological and institutional contexts. Kule and Tierkidi camps were selected due to their high refugee population density, prolonged presence, and the severe environmental pressure placed on surrounding host communities, conditions that intensify competition over natural resources and heighten the risk of social tension as communities

attempt to navigate daily coexistence under scarcity (Feyissa & Lar, 2021; Moreda, 2018). In contrast, Jewi camp was selected because of its proximity to Gambella town and its relatively higher level of service integration, offering an important comparative perspective on how access to markets, shared services, and administrative structures shapes refugee–host social cohesion.

Crucially, these sites represent the "contact zones" where the interplay between international humanitarian standards and local customary land tenure is most visible, providing a robust empirical landscape for evaluating the friction between policy and practice under conditions of structural resource scarcity (Pratt, 1991; Turner, 2010).

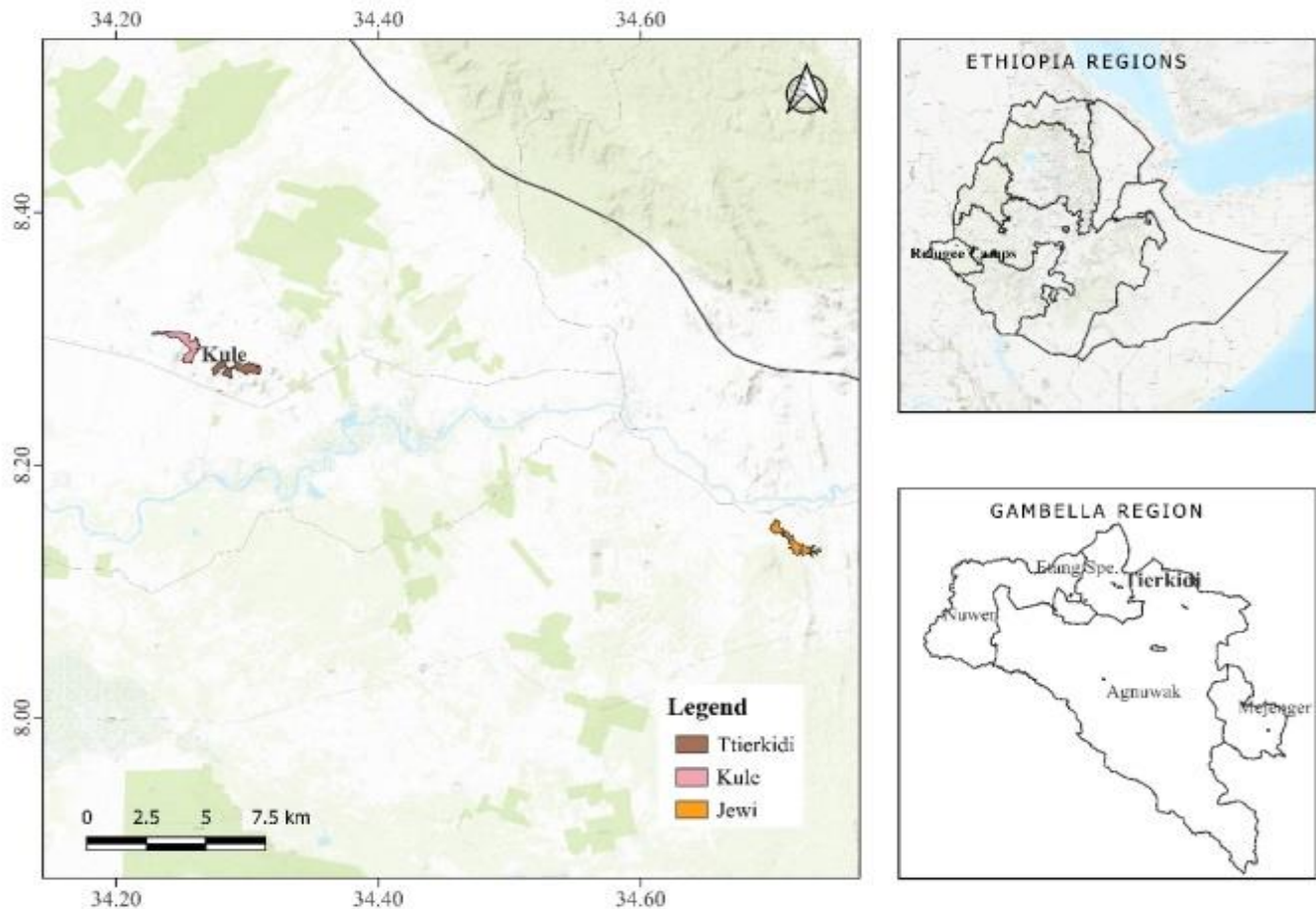


Figure 2: Map of study sites

Participant Selection and Sampling Strategy

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of individuals with direct experience and insight into everyday social interactions and conflict mediation. This approach adopted a maximum variation strategy to account for the diverse socio-political identities within the region (Patton, 2015), specifically targeting the triadic relationship under investigation, comprising South Sudanese

refugees, ethnic-kin hosts, and ethnic-other hosts, to facilitate a robust triadic analysis. The sample comprised Refugee Central Committee (RCC) members, host community elders, Kebele administrators, and women and youth group members. These individuals are often at the forefront of resource collection, informal trade, and daily cross-community interaction, making their lived experiences central to understanding how communities navigate coexistence under

scarcity. This selection strategy ensured broad representation of both formal and informal actors central to refugee–host social cohesion, governance, and livelihood negotiation in the study sites (Ritchie et al., 2013).

Operational Steps in the Selection Process

The participant selection process was carefully structured to capture diverse perspectives on refugee–host social cohesion, governance, and resource negotiation within the camps and adjacent host communities. The following four-stage protocol was implemented to ensure methodological rigor:

- a) **Institutional Mapping and Gatekeeper Engagement:** The authors conducted an institutional mapping exercise to identify both formal and informal governance structures in each camp and Kebele. By consulting with the Refugees and Returnees Service (RRS) and UNHCR field offices, the study secured access to "key gatekeepers" who facilitated entry into the community without compromising the neutrality of the research (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).
- b) **Purposive Targeting of Governance Actors:** Governance actors, including RCC members and Kebele administrators, were selected to provide insights into formal conflict mediation processes and the implementation of the 2019 Refugee Proclamation. Their inclusion was vital for understanding how high-level policy transitions, such as the shift toward integrated settlements, are perceived by those responsible for local security and how these structural changes affect local social cohesion.
- c) **Engagement of Traditional and Frontline Intermediaries:** Traditional intermediaries, such as host community elders, were engaged due to their role in indigenous justice systems and their historical knowledge of land-use rights, which are crucial for understanding contemporary grievances. Simultaneously, women and youth group members were prioritized as "frontline

resource users." As they are the primary actors at water points and forests, their lived experiences provide a "bottom-up" view of the social friction associated with navigating coexistence under scarcity that formal leaders may overlook (Dolan & Hovil, 2006; Ensor, 2010).

- d) **Validation and Bias Mitigation:** All participant profiles were validated prior to data collection to ensure a balanced distribution by gender, age, and length of residency. This step was essential to minimize "elite bias," which represents the tendency for research to reflect only the views of high-status males, and to ensure that the findings reflect the voices of marginalized groups who are often the most impacted by structural resource scarcity (Fujii, 2010; Moret et al., 2006).

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through 30 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and 12 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) across the three study sites to ensure balanced representation while reflecting variations in population size, environmental pressure, and service integration. Of the KIIs, 12 were conducted in Kule, 10 in Tierkidi, and 8 in Jewi. Key informants included RCC members, host community elders, Kebele administrators, and local service or security actors, selected for their roles in governance, conflict mediation, and everyday interaction between refugees and hosts. In addition, 12 FGDs were conducted, five in Kule, four in Tierkidi, and three in Jewi, with separate discussions held for women and youth groups.

To complement interview data, systematic observations were conducted at key social "hotspots," including shared water points and local markets, where everyday negotiations and tensions are most visible (Emerson et al., 2011). All data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), employing a coding-to-theory approach in which inductive codes were progressively refined and synthesized into broader analytical categories

related to refugee–host social cohesion, trust, ethnic relations, and informal conflict resolution mechanisms. This approach aligns with the interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) tradition, which emphasizes the meaning-making processes of participants as central analytical units (Smith et al., 2009), making it highly suited for executing a comprehensive triadic analysis of these micro-level interactions.

Data Quality Assurance

To ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings, the study employed a rigorous multi-stage quality protocol (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The process commenced with a pilot phase, where the semi-structured interview guides and focus group protocols were pre-tested in a non-sampled section of the Jewi camp. Data collectors, recruited based on their linguistic proficiency in Anuak, Nuer, and Amharic, underwent intensive training. Data triangulation was achieved by cross-referencing insights from KIIs, FGDs, and direct field observations to capture how different actors navigate coexistence under scarcity. Furthermore, the study utilized "member checking," where preliminary themes were shared with selected community leaders. To enhance dependability, an audit trail was maintained, documenting every stage from raw transcription to thematic coding (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Finally, peer debriefing among the research team helped to challenge individual biases and maintain analytical objectivity regarding the multi-layered social configurations.

Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitive nature of refugee–host social cohesion and the history of ethnic tension in the Gambella region, this study adhered to the highest ethical standards. Formal ethical clearance was obtained from the College of Development Studies, Addis Ababa University, Institutional Review Board (Approval No.

110/04/2025, dated April 7, 2025), and operational permission was secured from the Refugees and Returnees Service (RRS) and the Gambella Regional Bureau of Peace and Security prior to fieldwork. The core principle of informed consent was strictly followed; all participants were briefed on the study's objectives and their right to withdraw without penalty (Israel & Hay, 2006). Consent was obtained through both written signatures and verbal affirmations in participants' native languages. To protect identities in a high-stakes political environment, strict anonymity was maintained through alphanumeric coding (e.g., "KII-Kule-Host-04"). A "Do No Harm" approach (Anderson, 1999) guided all phases of fieldwork, preventing the research process from inadvertently triggering new communal tensions or traumatizing survivors of previous conflicts as they recounted their experiences of navigating coexistence under scarcity. Data were stored in encrypted digital files, and physical notes were secured in locked facilities accessible only to the primary author.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the study on refugee–host social cohesion in the Kule, Tierkidi, and Jewi camps of Gambella, Ethiopia. Drawing on data from 30 KIIs, 12 FGDs, and direct field observations, the analysis explores how ethnic identity, resource access, and livelihood interdependence shape how communities navigate coexistence under scarcity. The discussion is organized thematically around four core dimensions to address the study's central research questions: (i) the overall character of social relations across the triadic configuration; (ii) shared services and perceived inequities; (iii) resource competition and environmental pressure; and (iv) ethnic kinship, informal governance, and coping under humanitarian retrenchment. Each sub-section executes a rigorous triadic analysis and triangulates study

findings with comparable evidence from Ethiopia and other displacement contexts internationally.

Overview of Social Relations: The Triadic Configuration

Across Kule, Tierkidi, and Jewi camps, the study revealed a highly nuanced social landscape where interactions between refugees and host communities are shaped by ethnic identity, economic interdependence, and resource scarcity. Social relations were neither uniformly harmonious nor uniformly conflictual; instead, they varied according to ethnic proximity, livelihood overlap, and the distribution of shared services.

Ethnic-kin relations, specifically between Nuer refugees and Nuer host community members, were generally more cooperative. A Nuer host elder in Tierkidi remarked:

We know each other's families. When the refugees need help in the fields, we help, and when we need labor, they assist. It is part of our kinship duty. If a neighbor's child falls sick, we check in and provide support, just as we expect them to do for us. It is not only about farming; it is about looking after each other, sharing what little we have, and making sure no one is left behind. These ties give us a sense of security, even in the camps, and make daily life more bearable despite all the hardships." (KII-Tierkidi-04).

Similarly, a female youth participant in an FGD in Kule explained:

We trade vegetables and firewood with Nuer refugees from our own community. It is easy because we understand each other and share the same customs. When I bring my firewood to the market, they know how to bargain fairly, and I know their families will help me if my crops fail or my children get sick. It is not just trade, it is trust." (FGD-Kule-Youth-F-02).

To capture the depth of these intra-ethnic networks, a Nuer refugee leader in Tierkidi added during a key informant interview:

When the global food cuts hit us hardest in 2024, our host brothers allowed us to graze our small livestock on their lands without demanding upfront payments. We compensated them later with labor during the maize harvest. Without this shared kinship bond, our children would have starved when the rations vanished." (KII-Tierkidi-Refugee-07).

Another KII with a Nuer refugee leader highlighted that shared language and customary norms facilitated joint participation in community labor and market activities, reinforcing what can be described as bonding social capital (Putnam, 2000). A Kule camp women's FGD further prioritized this point, noting that "Working together in communal gardens reduces tension and creates trust that extends to other activities like water collection."

These findings align closely with those of Feyissa and Lar (2021), who document among Nuer communities in Gambella that shared genealogical networks and customary obligations function as primary social safety nets for newly arrived refugees. Comparable patterns of ethnic-kin facilitated integration have been reported in Kenya's Kakuma camp (Betts et al., 2017), where shared ethnic and linguistic identity accelerated market integration and informal credit access among Sudanese communities. In Uganda's Nakivale settlement, Taylor et al. (2016) similarly found that co-ethnic ties generated superior livelihood outcomes and psychological wellbeing relative to ethnically mixed interactions. Importantly, however, Jacobsen (2002) cautions that bonding capital of this kind, while functionally protective for in-group members, may simultaneously generate exclusionary pressures toward non-kin groups, a dynamic directly observed in the Agnuak-Nuer interface in this study.

Ethnic-other relations, particularly between Nuer refugees and Agnuak host community members, were more fraught. An Agnuak host elder in Jewi

noted: "The refugees take some land we used to farm. We have to agree on boundaries every season; otherwise, arguments happen." (KII-Jewi-Host-07). In an FGD with Agnuak women in Tierkidi, participants described the daily negotiation at firewood and water collection points: "Sometimes we let them collect first, sometimes they wait; it depends on who arrives first, but there is always tension." (FGD-Tierkidi-Women-Anuak-01).

An Agnuak youth participant in a Jewi focus group highlighted how demographic shifts create structural friction:

The Nuer refugees come with their political networks and massive numbers into our ancestral areas. We feel like strangers on our own land. The international organizations build massive facilities inside the camps, while our local youth remain unemployed and landless. This is not just about sharing resources; it is about who will control this region in the future." (FGD-Jewi-Youth-Anuak-03).

The interethnic tensions documented at resource hotspots are consistent with Whitaker's (2002) comparative study of Tanzanian refugee-hosting districts, which found that intergroup violence escalated in direct proportion to the intensity of resource competition at shared collection points. Moreda (2018) documents analogous grievances among Anuak host communities in Gambella, where perceived ethnic favoritism in aid allocation was the most frequently cited driver of intergroup distrust. Internationally, Maystadt and Verwimp (2014) demonstrate through household survey data in Rwanda and Burundi that refugee inflows exerted downward pressure on host wages and upward pressure on food prices, intensifying pre-existing intergroup antagonisms. The "ethnic tilting" anxiety expressed by Agnuak participants in this study also resonates with Dereje's (2006) historical analysis of Agnuak identity formation, which has long been organized around the threat of demographic

displacement by numerically larger Nuer and Highlander populations.

From a social capital perspective, bonding ties grounded in ethnic kinship facilitated trust, reciprocity, and informal safety nets, yet these same ties were inward-looking and offered limited protection against broader intergroup tension. At the same time, interactions across ethnic boundaries reflected forms of bridging social capital that were largely pragmatic rather than solidaristic, sustained not by shared identity but by mutual economic necessity and the regulation of access to scarce resources. Consistent with Wimmer's (2013) ethnic boundary-making theory, the findings indicate that ethnicity functioned less as a fixed driver of conflict and more as a flexible boundary that hardened or softened depending on land pressure, service access, and perceptions of distributive justice. The persistence of cooperation under conditions of scarcity aligns with Mac Ginty's (2014) "everyday peace" frameworks, where social order is maintained through informal norms, avoidance strategies, and local mediation rather than formal institutions.

Importantly, the study found that the triadic analysis of this configuration is not static. In Jewi camp, where service integration is higher and proximity to Gambella town facilitates more regular market contact, the boundary between ethnic-kin and ethnic-other relations appeared somewhat more permeable than in Kule and Tierkidi, where higher population densities and more acute environmental stress reinforced ethnic boundary consolidation. This variation across sites is consistent with Lischer's (2005) argument that the spatial and institutional configuration of refugee settlements significantly mediates intergroup dynamics.

Shared Service Use and Perceived Inequities

Health and education services emerged as both unifying and divisive factors across all three study sites. In Jewi, where integration of services was higher due to urban proximity, refugees and hosts reported pragmatic sharing of schools and health centers, but the limited capacity of these facilities often exacerbated perceptions of inequity. Host community members consistently noted that international aid disproportionately prioritized refugees, leading to perceived neglect of local populations. A Kebele administrator in Jewi observed: "The health center was built for both of us, but sometimes the refugees get the medicine and we get empty shelves. It creates bad feeling." (KII-Jewi-Admin-02).

To illustrate the micro-level friction generated by this service asymmetry, a female host community member in Jewi explained during an FGD:

We queue at the clinic for hours under the sun with our sick children. When a refugee arrives, they are often directed to separate, well-stocked humanitarian pharmacies inside the camp boundary that we cannot access. This dual system makes us feel like second-class citizens in our own country, turning a place of healing into a place of anger." (FGD-Jewi-Women-Host-01).

In Kule and Tierkidi, where services were more fragmented and populations more spatially concentrated, competition over schools and clinics intensified social tension. FGD participants in Tierkidi reported that refugee children's enrollment in the same schools created overcrowding and teacher shortages that disproportionately affected host community children's learning outcomes. In Kule, a women's FGD noted that health facility queues had become ethnically charged spaces, with accusations of line-jumping and preferential treatment regularly sparking confrontations (FGD-Kule-Women-Host-03).

These findings are consistent with Alix-Garcia et al. (2018), whose quantitative evaluation of

Ethiopia's 2019 Refugee Proclamation demonstrated that host community members in service-integrated sites reported higher satisfaction with humanitarian presence when they perceived equitable access to services. Conversely, Sanghi et al. (2016) found in Dollo Ado that host community resentment was strongly correlated with perceptions of aid exclusivity, a dynamic replicated in the present study. Internationally, Zetter and Ruadel (2016) document comparable service-sharing tensions in Jordan, Lebanon, and Uganda, where host community grievances around health and education access constituted a major driver of social fragmentation. Kefale's (2020) Ethiopian case study further demonstrates that service delivery asymmetry, even when structurally determined by humanitarian mandates, is experienced by host communities as moral favoritism, a finding that this study's KIIs corroborate consistently.

The findings suggest that shared service use can foster intergroup contact and cooperation but simultaneously highlights structural inequalities that, if unaddressed, harden into grievances. Aid allocation and integration policies must therefore account for host perceptions to avoid exacerbating existing tensions. The contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954), which posits that intergroup contact under conditions of equality reduces prejudice, finds only partial support here: contact at service points did occur, but the structural inequality of service access conditions meant that much of this contact was experienced as competitive and zero-sum rather than cooperative, undermining broader refugee–host social cohesion.

In general, the empirical findings across the Kule, Tierkidi, and Jewi refugee camps reveal that shared spaces of service delivery, such as health clinics and schools, act as highly volatile socio-political spaces. Rather than naturally fostering intergroup harmony as classical contact theories

suggest, the shared use of infrastructure under conditions of structural asymmetry often accelerates host community alienation. The qualitative data demonstrates that the transition from traditional encampment toward integrated settlements is structurally undermined by a noticeable "deprivation gap." Host communities consistently perceive a moral favoritism in humanitarian aid frameworks, where the cohabitation of public facilities functions as a zero-sum competition over finite supplies, turning spaces of public welfare into primary flashpoints for intergroup friction.

Resource Competition and Environmental Pressure

Natural resource scarcity, particularly firewood, water, and arable land, was the most consistently cited driver of conflict across all three study sites, providing empirical data for sub-question (ii) regarding how host communities and refugees negotiate the usage of dwindling natural resources in the absence of state-led environmental protection. Kule and Tierkidi camps exhibited significant environmental degradation, with participants describing the progressive deforestation of areas that were forested within living memory. Women and youth were identified as frontline actors in resource collection, balancing domestic needs with cross-community interaction at contested points. A Nuer refugee woman in Kule described the daily negotiation:

"Every morning, we go to collect firewood. Sometimes the Anuak women are already there and they tell us to go back. We have to wait or walk further. It is dangerous to walk far, and we come back with very little. My children need food and fire, but the forest is far now." (FGD-Kule-Women-Refugee-04).

An Agnuak woman from a host community Kebele adjacent to Kule provided the counter-narrative, revealing the depth of material scarcity:

The trees are completely gone because thousands of people chop them down daily for firewood and charcoal. When we confront the refugees in the bushes, it is not because we hate them, but because if these last trees die, our own livelihoods die too. The government is silent, the NGOs give them plastic tarps but no energy alternatives, leaving us to fight over branches. (FGD-Kule-Women-Anuak-04).

In Tierkidi, participants reported that the depletion of accessible firewood had increased the average daily firewood collection time from under one hour to more than three hours, forcing women and girls into increasingly remote areas where they were exposed to protection risks. Land boundary disputes were most acute in Kule and Tierkidi, where refugee settlement boundaries were contested and seasonal farming agreements between Nuer refugees and Anuak hosts were subject to recurring violations. In Jewi, water scheduling at shared boreholes had been partially formalized by elders' committees, reducing but not eliminating point-of-collection conflicts.

These findings align with Maystadt and Verwimp's (2014) econometric analysis demonstrating that environmental pressure is a stronger predictor of refugee-host conflict than ethnic identity per se. Whitaker (2002) documents near-identical firewood collection dynamics in Tanzania's Kagera region, where deforestation around Rwandan refugee camps intensified host community hostility and contributed to localized violence. In Kenya, UNHCR data cited in Betts et al. (2017) indicate that firewood and water access disputes account for the largest single category of refugee-host incidents in Kakuma camp. Within Ethiopia, Moreda (2018) documents land boundary tensions between South Sudanese Nuer refugees and Anuak hosts in Gambella that parallel those observed in this study, with seasonal farming agreement violations serving as a recurring flashpoint. Importantly, the gendered dimension

of resource collection burden documented here reinforces Dolan and Hovil's (2006) finding that women and girls bear a disproportionate share of the environmental costs of protracted displacement, a pattern with significant humanitarian protection implications.

Environmental pressure thus mediates social interaction by raising the stakes of intergroup negotiation and magnifying historical grievances, especially where ethnic boundaries coincide with livelihood differences. These dynamics also point to the under-studied intersection of environmental governance and refugee–host social cohesion in humanitarian settings. The absence of formal environmental management frameworks in the camp peripheries of Kule and Tierkidi created a governance vacuum those informal mechanisms only partially filled, consistent with Pantuliano's (2009) finding that resource governance gaps are systematically exploited in conflict-affected settings.

Ethnic Kinship, Informal Governance, and Coping under Humanitarian Retrenchment

Kinship networks influenced refugee integration but operated as a double-edged sword. Nuer refugees with Nuer hosts had access to labor exchange, land-use agreements, and social safety nets, improving livelihoods and mitigating conflict. Conversely, Agnuak hosts often viewed this preferential integration as marginalization, heightening inter-ethnic tensions. A Nuer refugee leader in Kule explained: "We share everything with our Nuer brothers here. We farm together, we share cattle sometimes. But the Anuak see this and feel left out, and then problems start." (KII-Kule-RCC-01).

A regional security officer interviewed in Gambella town explained how this co-ethnic integration shifts local power dynamics:

The kinship pipeline between the South Sudanese Nuer and the local Ethiopian Nuer changes the local demographic and political balance. When refugees integrate smoothly into host areas via

kinship, the indigenous Agnuak perceive it as a coordinated expansion. This institutional anxiety turns private land transactions into highly politicized community confrontations." (KII-Gambella-Security-02).

Informal conflict-resolution mechanisms, including elders' councils and negotiated resource-sharing agreements, proved vital in maintaining a fragile social equilibrium as these groups navigated coexistence under scarcity, especially where formal governance structures were absent or overstretched. In Tierkidi, a traditional elder's council that included both Nuer and Anuak representatives had established a seasonal land-use protocol that, while imperfect, significantly reduced the incidence of physical altercations. In Jewi, a mixed Nuer-Anuak market committee had developed pricing and conduct norms that facilitated cross-ethnic trade. A Kebele administrator in Kule acknowledged the limitations of formal structures: "We cannot be everywhere. When there is a problem at the water point at 5 AM, it is the elders who solve it, not us." (KII-Kule-Admin-03).

The 2024–2025 humanitarian funding contraction intensified pre-existing tensions. Participants across all three sites reported that the reduction of food rations, the suspension of cash-based interventions, and the scaling back of livelihood support programs had pushed both refugees and host communities deeper into competition over the same shrinking resource base. In response, participants reported: (i) increased reliance on informal markets and barter systems, with cross-ethnic market exchange increasing even as social trust declined; (ii) diversification of livelihoods into petty trade, casual labor, or joint host-refugee farming initiatives; and (iii) intensified community-based conflict resolution, where elders mediated disputes over both resources and perceived aid inequities.

The adaptive role of informal governance documented here is consistent with Cheeseman's

(2019) comparative analysis of indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms in East Africa, which found that customary institutions consistently outperformed formal judicial mechanisms in speed, legitimacy, and compliance in rural areas with weak state presence. In the Ethiopian context, Kefale (2020) similarly documents that kebele-level formal governance structures in Gambella are chronically under-resourced and that elders' councils serve as the de facto primary arbiters of refugee-host disputes. The activation of informal social mechanisms under humanitarian retrenchment aligns with Betts et al.'s (2017) findings from Uganda, where the reduction of aid flows corresponded with increased refugee entrepreneurialism and community self-organization, though also with heightened competition for host community resources. Internationally, Zetter (2021) argues that prolonged funding contraction structurally reconfigures refugee livelihoods away from aid dependency toward informal economy participation, generating both risks (intensified resource competition) and opportunities (cross-ethnic market integration) for refugee–host social cohesion, a dual dynamic well illustrated in this study's findings.

The role of women and youth as both conflict mediators and primary targets of resource-based tension deserves particular emphasis. FGD data across all three camps revealed that women's groups had developed their own informal protocols for managing water queue disputes, often independently of male elder council processes. This gendered dimension of informal governance is consistent with Ensor's (2010) findings from South Sudan, where women's social networks were shown to sustain community stability during periods of acute institutional breakdown. Youth, by contrast, were more frequently cited as potential vectors of conflict escalation when employment and livelihood opportunities contracted, a pattern observed in

both Kule and Tierkidi during the period of funding retrenchment.

Conclusions

This study set out to examine how economic interdependence and ethnic identity shape refugee–host social cohesion in the Kule, Tierkidi, and Jewi refugee camps of Gambella, Ethiopia. A particular focus was placed on the micro-level dynamics that unfold during a period of acute humanitarian funding contraction, revealing how these populations navigate coexistence under scarcity. Through a rigorous triadic analysis that disaggregates host communities into ethnic-kin and ethnic-other subgroups, the research reveals a social landscape of considerable nuance. This empirical reality defies both the idealized narrative of unbounding humanitarian solidarity and the alarmist framing of inevitable ethnic conflict.

Four principal conclusions emerge from the study:

First, refugee–host social cohesion is neither inherently harmonious nor inherently conflictual. It is continuously produced and renegotiated through everyday interaction, shaped primarily by resource availability, ethnic proximity, and perceptions of distributive justice. The triadic analysis advanced here captures these dynamics more accurately than conventional binary host-refugee models.

Second, shared ethnicity facilitates cooperation but does not guarantee broad social cohesion. Bonding social capital among co-ethnic Nuer groups accelerated refugee integration and generated functional safety nets, but it simultaneously generated exclusionary pressures and heightened institutional anxieties among Agnuak host communities, illustrating the dual face of in-group solidarity (Portes, 1998). The findings confirm that ethnic boundary-making is context-sensitive and responsive to structural

resource scarcity rather than fixed (Wimmer, 2013).

Third, structural resource scarcity, rather than ethnic identity per se, constituted the primary driver of social tension. Environmental degradation, service delivery asymmetry, and the contraction of humanitarian assistance all functioned to raise the stakes of intergroup negotiation and to compress the space for cooperative arrangements, forcing frontline users to navigate daily coexistence under extreme material pressure. These dynamics are structurally produced and therefore structurally 1) addressable through environmental governance, equitable service provisioning, and sustained livelihood programming.

Fourth, informal governance mechanisms, including elders' councils, customary land agreements, and community market committees, proved more adaptive and locally legitimate than formal governance structures in managing refugee–host social cohesion. These informal institutions functioned as the primary social infrastructure of everyday peace (Mac Ginty, 2014) and their role intensified as formal humanitarian assistance contracted. This finding 2) carries significant practical implications. The systematic under-investment in informal governance capacity by humanitarian and development actors represents a missed opportunity for sustainable refugee–host social cohesion programming.

Taken together, these conclusions contribute to an emerging body of evidence challenging the assumption that refugee presence is inherently destabilizing for host communities. The findings are highly consistent with the refugee economies paradigm, which emphasizes the capacity of refugees and hosts to generate mutually 3) beneficial arrangements even under conditions of scarcity (Betts et al., 2017). However, this potential is strictly mediated by governance quality, resource availability, and the degree of

ethnic boundary permeability. The Gambella case demonstrates that the conditions for cooperative coexistence exist but remain fragile, and their maintenance requires deliberate, sustained, and ethnically nuanced institutional support.

Recommendations

Based on the study findings, the following evidence-grounded recommendations are offered to humanitarian actors, development agencies, and regional authorities operating in refugee-hosting areas of Gambella:

1) Adopt ethnically nuanced programming through a triadic framework. The study demonstrates that the host community in Gambella is not homogeneous. Ethnic-kin and ethnic-other host populations have different resource needs, integration capacities, and trust relationships with refugee groups. Humanitarian programs should conduct participatory social mapping to identify ethnic subgroup dynamics before designing community engagement strategies, and they should resist one-size-fits-all approaches that conflate Anuak and Nuer host experiences within the broader triadic configuration.

2) Invest systematically in informal governance capacity. Elders' councils, community market committees, and customary land-use agreements proved to be the primary mechanisms sustaining social order in all three study sites, acting as vital institutional shock absorbers during funding retrenchments. Humanitarian and development actors should formally recognize, resource, and support these institutions rather than treating them as supplementary to formal governance. Training in conflict-sensitive mediation and the formal documentation of customary agreements could significantly enhance their durability.

3) Implement conflict-sensitive and equitable aid targeting to eliminate service asymmetries. Perceived service delivery asymmetry at health centers and schools was a consistent driver of host community resentment across all three sites,

often turning public infrastructure into zero-sum spaces. Aid allocation frameworks should incorporate host community access as a core design parameter, not an afterthought. Joint planning mechanisms involving both refugee and host community representatives in service delivery governance would reduce the perception of exclusivity and build bridging social capital across ethnic boundaries.

- 4) Establish participatory environmental resource management to alleviate material pressure. The depletion of firewood and the contestation of water access and arable land constitute the most operationally immediate threats to refugee–host social cohesion. Community-based natural resource management programs, co-designed with both Nuer and Anuak community leaders, should be implemented around all three camps to mitigate the friction of navigating coexistence under scarcity. Such programs should address firewood alternatives, including fuel-efficient stoves and community woodlots, alongside formalized water scheduling and seasonal land-use protocols.
- 5) Support joint and adaptive livelihood initiatives that build bridging capital. Cross-ethnic farming partnerships, labor-sharing arrangements, and market committees that include both refugee and host community members were observed as significant generators of bridging social capital. These arrangements intensified rather than collapsed under humanitarian retrenchment, suggesting they are more resilient than aid-dependent programming. Livelihood programs should deliberately incentivize, formalize, and scale such arrangements.
- 6) Center women and youth as core actors in social cohesion programming. Women were documented as both primary victims of resource competition and the most active informal mediators of inter-community water and firewood disputes. Youth represented a critical tension point during funding contractions, where reduced livelihood opportunities correlated

directly with increased conflict propensity and heightened anxieties over demographic shifts. Dedicated programming for women-led community mediation and youth livelihood diversification should be treated as integral refugee–host social cohesion investments rather than minor sectoral add-ons.

Limitations of the Study

This study has four principal limitations that should inform the interpretation of findings:

First, as a qualitative inquiry, the findings provide deep contextual insight into social dynamics but are not statistically generalizable to all Gambella refugee-hosting communities or to other displacement contexts.

Second, data collection occurred during a period of acute humanitarian retrenchment from 2024 to 2025. Conditions may shift as aid flows stabilize or contract further, altering the social dynamics documented here.

Third, despite rigorous sampling and triangulation, some elite or dominant voices may still disproportionately shape narratives. This is particularly true around land rights and governance, where the most marginalized actors may be least willing to speak.

Fourth, the cross-sectional design captures a snapshot in time, limiting inference on long-term trends in social cohesion and integration. A longitudinal design would be required to track how the social equilibrium documented here evolve under changing humanitarian, environmental, and political conditions.

Areas for Future Research

The following research priorities emerge from the gaps identified in this study:

Quantitative triangulation: Conducting survey-based research to measure levels of social trust, intergroup contact frequency, and conflict incidence across multiple camps would complement the qualitative insights produced

here, representing a high-priority methodological next step.

- Longitudinal tracking: Tracking refugee-host social dynamics over a minimum five-year horizon would illuminate how social capital configurations respond to ongoing changes in humanitarian funding, environmental conditions, and political stability.
- Evaluation of informal governance interventions: Systematic evaluation of informal governance interventions, including elder council support programs, customary mediation formalization, and joint market governance initiatives, is needed to generate an evidence base for scaling effective approaches.
- The environmental-social cohesion nexus: Investigating this nexus through integrated social-ecological systems analysis would clarify the causal pathways between environmental degradation and intergroup tension, helping to identify entry points for environmental governance as a social cohesion instrument.
- Demographic and gender-focused analyses: Dedicated gender and youth-specific analyses of mediation roles, conflict participation, and livelihood adaptation are highly warranted given the centrality of these actors to the everyday social dynamics documented in this study.

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