



South Sudan/Mercy Corps/D Nahr

# THE CURRENCY OF CONNECTIONS

*The evolution of pre-displacement connections in Bentiu, South Sudan*

SEPTEMBER 2019



FRIEDMAN SCHOOL OF NUTRITION SCIENCE AND POLICY  
Feinstein International Center



**USAID**  
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to Mercy Corps' South Sudanese research team who tirelessly and masterfully led interviews and focus group discussions to make this report possible. They are: Gatjang Gabriel Kai, Gateah Pakita Nyasunday, Nyuon Moses Gathuoy, Thompson Kulong, and Kuerdiil Maziaw Chuol. We are also thankful to Jeeyon Kim, Alison Hemberger and Alison Kim for their detailed feedback on earlier drafts of this paper. We are further grateful to Leah Crenson for providing thoughtful research assistance, and to Anne Radday for her support with dissemination of the findings. Finally, and most importantly, we thank the many South Sudanese respondents who willingly sacrificed their valuable time to tell us their stories.

This report is made possible by the support of the American People through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), with support from the Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA). The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.

## Citation

Krystalli, R., Maxwell, D., Stites, E., Humphrey, A., Krishnan, V. (2019). *The Currency of Connections: The evolution of pre-displacement connections in Bentiu, South Sudan*. Washington, DC: Mercy Corps.

Authors' affiliations:

Roxani Krystalli, Tufts University

Daniel Maxwell, Tufts University

Elizabeth Stites, Tufts University

Alex Humphrey, Mercy Corps

Vaidehi Krishnan, Mercy Corps

# Introduction and Overview

## Rationale for study

This briefing paper examines changes in social connectedness in the Bentiu Protection of Civilians site (PoC) and adjacent areas of Rubkona and Bentiu towns in South Sudan. We draw from interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted between December 2018 and March 2019 with displaced residents to highlight the changes these people have observed in their social networks, as well as sources and forms of material and non-material support, since their displacement. We pay particular attention to the evolution of pre-displacement connections, as well as people's strategies for establishing new bonds with neighbors, friends, and those pursuing similar livelihood activities.

These issues are significant for humanitarian practitioners, decision-makers, and researchers. First, our analysis sheds light on people's own strategies of forming, preserving, and shifting their types and sources of social connectedness. It thus fits within a growing body of work on collective self-help during conflict and in its aftermath, offering a different lens on the localization of humanitarian response.<sup>1</sup> Second, it is essential for humanitarians to understand those strategies in order to ensure that interventions do not undermine them and, instead, serve to reinforce existing coping strategies.<sup>2</sup> Third, this discussion highlights the need to understand humanitarian crises not only at the level of individual harms suffered or household activities, but also at multiple levels of local systems. In this case, we focus on social connections within and across kinship networks, ethnicity or clan, gender, age, or livelihood activity.

This briefing paper is part of an [OFDA-funded partnership between Mercy Corps and the Feinstein International Center](#) (FIC) at Tufts University to examine changes to social connectedness for conflict-affected South Sudanese in South Sudan and Uganda and how these connections are linked to their coping and recovery. Other outputs in this Bentiu-focused three-part series include briefing papers on (a) changes to weddings and marriages in the PoC and (b) the significance of informal livelihood groups and associations as forms of social connectedness in the PoC and beyond. Collectively, these three papers expand on key themes that emerged from research on social

---

<sup>1</sup> Maxwell, Daniel G., and Nisar Majid. "Famine in Somalia: competing imperatives, collective failures," 2011-12. Oxford University Press, 2016; Baines, Erin, and Emily Paddon. "'This is how we survived': Civilian agency and humanitarian protection." *Security Dialogue* 43, no. 3 (2012): 231-247. Santschi, Martina, Rango Gworo and Elizabeth White. "Caught Between Two Cultures: When Aid in South Sudan is Pulled Between Local Norms and Western Systems," *Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility*, November 15, 2018; Mo, Ali, Lona Loduro, Victor Lowilla, Lydia Poole, and Barnaby Willitts-King. "Funding to Local Humanitarian Actors: South Sudan Case Study," *Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility*. November 29, 2018; Mégret, Frédéric. "Beyond the 'Salvation' Paradigm: Responsibility to Protect (others) vs the Power of Protecting Oneself." *Security Dialogue*, 30, no. 6 (2009): 575-595

<sup>2</sup> South, Ashley and Simon Harrigan with Justin Corbett, Richard Horsey, Susanne Kempel, Henrik Fröjmark, and Nils Castensen. "Local to Global Protection in Myanmar (Burma), Sudan, South Sudan, and Zimbabwe." *Humanitarian Practice Network*, February 2012. Ibreck, Rachel and Naomi Pendle. "Customary Protection? Chiefs' Courts as Public Authority in UN Protection of Civilian Sites in South Sudan." *The Justice and Security Research Programme*. September 2016; Maxwell, Daniel, Rachel Gordon, Leben Moro, Martina Santschi, and Phillip Dau. "Trajectories of International Engagement with Local and State Actors: Evidence from South Sudan." *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 12, no 1: 98-119; Roberts, David. "Surveying South Sudan: The Liberal, the Local, and the Legitimate." *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 7, no. 1 (2013): 65-86.

connectedness in Panyijar County, South Sudan<sup>3</sup> captured in [a paper released in January 2019](#) which highlighted the significance of social support networks for survival and coping during conflict and in its aftermath.<sup>4</sup>

## Context

In December 2013, conflict broke out in South Sudan between forces loyal to President Salva Kiir Mayardit and Vice President Riek Machar. Soon, the fighting, which began in Juba's army barracks, had spread to much of Greater Upper Nile region. Within days of the outbreak of the conflict, thousands of civilians had poured into UNMISS (United Nations Mission in South Sudan) bases in Juba and other major towns seeking safety and protection within their confines. The informal encampments that subsequently grew inside the fenced enclosures were termed Protection of Civilian (PoC) sites. The UN initially viewed the PoCs as short-term

responses to the dire need for civilian protection upon the eruption of a conflict that observers hoped would be short-lived. However, in the six years since the outbreak of this crisis in South Sudan, the PoCs have become semi-permanent communities, home to tens of thousands of civilians and vast, complex and unique economies. While assessments conducted by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) suggest that civilians have begun to leave the PoCs, the Bentiu site remains home to approximately 100,000 residents, making it by far the largest of South Sudan's six PoCs.<sup>5</sup>

The Bentiu PoC is populated by numerous Nuer clans and sub-clans, often living in direct proximity to one another for the first time. Ongoing violence, and the effects of displacement to PoCs, have both disrupted and reconfigured bases of social organization and connectedness. People have developed new livelihood strategies and systems of economic exchange. Novel forms of governance and authority have emerged, in which traditional 'customary' forms of authority and UNMISS, and UNMISS-appointed governance structures both co-operate and clash.

## Methods

The findings in this report are based on qualitative research conducted by three South Sudanese researchers and four expatriate researchers from Mercy Corps and FIC.<sup>6</sup> Researchers spoke with a total of 133 people in 33 semi-



<sup>3</sup> Panyijar County, in southern Unity State, is a rural, opposition-controlled region. The county has remained relatively stable throughout South Sudan's civil war, in large part because of its geographic isolation and the natural barrier provided by the Sudd, a vast swamp that encompasses the area.

<sup>4</sup> Humphrey, Alex, Vaidehi Krishnan, and Roxani Krystalli. (2019). "The Currency of Connections: Why local support systems are integral to helping people recover in South Sudan." Washington, DC: Mercy Corps.

<sup>5</sup> "PoC Update" United Nations Missions in South Sudan (UNMISS), August 30, 2019, [https://unmiss.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/poc\\_update\\_30\\_august\\_-\\_05\\_september\\_2019.pdf](https://unmiss.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/poc_update_30_august_-_05_september_2019.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Tufts University received permission to collaborate on this research with Mercy Corps through the Tufts University Institutional Review Board. Research participants were recruited based on snowball sampling. While the researchers attempted to ensure that diverse

structured in-depth interviews (IDIs) and 14 focus group discussions (FGDs). Research was conducted both inside the Bentiu PoC and in Bentiu Town and Rubkona Town. Research participants included men and women of diverse ages and livelihoods in an effort to document varying perspectives and experiences of life in the Bentiu PoC. Interviews were both led in Nuer by South Sudanese researchers, and in English by expatriates with translation by South Sudanese researchers. With participants' consent, most interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed and analyzed in English.<sup>7</sup> Transcripts were analyzed using Dedoose through an iterative process of inductive coding, paying attention to patterns that emerge from the research, rather than assigning pre-determined analytic categories. In all cases in the write-up, the names of research participants have been changed in order to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

It should be noted that this research was conducted in communities that are predominantly ethnically Nuer, and many of the narratives presented in this series are deeply rooted in this unique context. This paper also draws on narratives from our previous research conducted in Juba and Panyijar County between June 2018 and December 2018. While the implications of the findings in this report are relevant to audiences interested in diverse contexts in South Sudan and beyond, it is important to note that the specific narratives presented in this report may manifest differently in different contexts.



Mercy Corps/South Sudan/D Nahr

---

participants were included within the sample, including men and women of diverse ages and socioeconomic standing, the finding in this write-up are not necessarily representative of the entire population within the POC. Researchers were careful to assure participants that their responses would be kept confidential and would have no bearing on the receipt of assistance from Mercy Corps or any other humanitarian agencies.

<sup>7</sup> When participants preferred not to have a recording, researchers took notes by hand.



South Sudan/Mercy Corps/J Zoeherman

## Key Findings and Analysis

### Pre-displacement connections

In the Bentiu PoC, individuals try to preserve pre-displacement connections, but they are hampered by distance, violent conflict, and the dynamics of separation that emerged when families and neighbors split up when fleeing.<sup>8</sup> Prior to displacement, kinship was the key vector of social connectedness. Forms of support varied from material, such as loaning relatives a cow, to emotional. One respondent explains: “I was separated from many of my relatives. I have relatives in the bush as soldiers and others who have run to places I do not know. [...] These people were instrumental in my life. They could support me with [...] a lactating cow to be milked for my children during the lean seasons. They also supported me in many other ways, like cutting trees to build houses for my children.”<sup>9</sup>

Where possible, people preserve pre-displacement connections through speaking on the phone. As one respondent stated, “my family and I are in touch because we have telephone communication 24/7.”<sup>10</sup> This communication is more challenging for those who lost their mobile phones while fleeing. Where there is no phone network, or where people have lost their phones, family members report being particularly worried, as they have no way of maintaining contact: “What worried me most is we don’t have access to talk to each other ... I don’t know who is dead and who is alive. The support I get from [my relatives] is no longer there now,” said one respondent.<sup>11</sup> People with no access to phones (or phone numbers) resort to attempting to exchange news with their relatives far away through others who move between the PoC and outside areas: “We don’t have any communication with

---

<sup>8</sup> Decisions regarding where to flee (i.e. to the PoC or elsewhere), as well as factors motivating these decisions, will be discussed in other project outputs.

<sup>9</sup> In-depth interview with female research participant, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

<sup>10</sup> In-depth interview with male research participant, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

<sup>11</sup> In-depth interview with male research participant, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

relatives because we don't have phones. They only hear we are alive from people who move to where they are and pass the information to our family who are there."<sup>12</sup> The importance of regular phone or in-person communication in accessing support was also highlighted during formative research with key informants in June 2018. As one respondent noted, 'If they don't hear from you, they forget about you'.<sup>13</sup>

***“What worried me most is we don't have access to talk to each other... I don't know who is dead and who is alive. The support I get from them [relatives] is no longer there now”***

— Male research participant, Bentiu PoC

A few respondents added that they deliberately severed pre-displacement connections with certain friends and family members as a coping strategy against potential violence. “We don't communicate with those guys in the areas controlled by the SPLA-IG. You will be a victim here [in the PoC] once people learn about it. They will refer to you as a spy for talking to them.”<sup>14</sup> As this narrative highlights, the perceived threat of violence indefinitely suspends social connections between those inside the PoC and their relatives elsewhere. Importantly,

researchers found that this narrative was echoed by key informants in Panyijar County. Respondents noted that as a result of this conflict, they now outright refuse any [monetary] support from relatives living in government held areas (and vice versa) for fear of being treated as spies in their community.<sup>15</sup>

Some respondents indicated that they occasionally travel in and out of the PoC, which enables them to visit family members from whom they are separated but who live nearby.<sup>16</sup> “The young children and women are the ones who go outside the PoC because they can go without being targeted,” said one male respondent, echoing many others who stated that movement is more restricted for adult men and male youth.<sup>17</sup> Other narratives suggest that women's mobility does come with risks including sexual assault which female respondents deemed as a somewhat more 'acceptable' risk in this context. As one female key informant explained, when women travel outside the PoC, “you will *only* be raped, you will not be killed.”<sup>18</sup>

***“We don't communicate with those guys in the areas controlled by the SPLA-IG. You will be a victim here [in the PoC] once people learn about it. They will refer to you as a spy for talking to them.”***

— Male research participant, Bentiu PoC

When people visit their relatives outside the PoC, they report bringing in-kind remittances as a form of support: “When I go to Koch to visit family, I take for them about five sacks of sorghum and some peanuts. All these are things I buy from the market. I only take them things; they have nothing to offer me when I go there to them. It is only me who takes things to them.”<sup>19</sup> One respondent added that he uses a money transfer service to send money to family members outside the PoC.<sup>20</sup> A different respondent reported that he sends money to relatives in West

<sup>12</sup> Focus group discussion with female elders, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Design workshop notes, Juba, July 2018.

<sup>14</sup> In-depth interview with male research participant, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Field notes, Panyijar, March 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Some respondents also indicated that they come and go from the PoC as part of their livelihood, such as collecting firewood or trading. These movements are discussed in greater length in *The Currency of Connections: The establishment and reconfiguration of informal livelihood groups in Bentiu, South Sudan*, another paper in this series.

<sup>17</sup> In-depth interview with male research participant, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Female workshop participant, design workshop, Juba, July 2018

<sup>19</sup> In-depth interview with male youth, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.

<sup>20</sup> In-depth interview with male research participant, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

Nile in Uganda, “but they cannot send money to us [in the PoC] because they do not have money.”<sup>21</sup> That said, a male respondent in Panyijar County reported sending money to his [female] relative within the PoC so that she could leave and make her way home. She had to make this trip by canoe, and the journey cost more than she could afford with resources she was able to gather within the PoC. Her family entrusted friends and acquaintances to hand-carry the money from Panyijar to Bentiu<sup>22</sup> underlining the trust on which kinship networks operate.

## Forging new connections and building trust

Separation from relatives outside the PoC, or being housed far from relatives within the PoC, motivated people to establish new connections while displaced.<sup>23</sup> In particular, people relied on either those they met while fleeing to the PoC, or those next to whom they were housed within the PoC. As one respondent pointed out, “my neighbor is the first person who can see my suffering more than those whom I am related to. If I am in need, they can help me because they won’t let their neighbor to go through such difficulties.”<sup>24</sup>



*“We always meet at the tea shop, where we start telling stories about the past. In our tradition, the person you share the same table with while eating is the most trustworthy friend of ours.”*

— Male research participant, Bentiu PoC

A further key source of new connections was people’s livelihood activity. Traders, fisherfolk, cattle herders, firewood collectors, NGO staff and people who serve tea at the market all reported that they met new people through those activities. Indeed, informal livelihood-based associations are governed by rules and norms that ensure the provision of support between members and are critical sources of social connectedness in the PoC.<sup>25</sup> Regardless of livelihood activity, the market was a key site for meeting people, as were water points and church.

People also emphasized the importance of getting to know their neighbors in the PoC. For parents, their children’s connections to other children were an important avenue for meeting other adults and forging relationships with them.<sup>26</sup> For a few young men, leisure activities, such as playing cards, enabled new connections.<sup>27</sup>

When asked how people established trust with these new connections, from neighbors to livelihood-based relationships, storytelling emerged as crucial to the forging of bonds. “We always meet at the tea shop, where we start telling stories about the past,” said a fisherman. “In our tradition, the person you share the same table with while eating is the most trustworthy friend of ours.”<sup>28</sup> A different fisherman added: “There are guys who used to come and converse with me in tea places. At first, we started by sharing tea with them. The second step is we have lunch together in the market. Third, we extended it to our shelters inside the PoC, where you ask your wife to prepare nice meals for them.”<sup>29</sup> Repeated interaction and the sharing of meals or tea were key vectors of cementing these new bonds.

---

<sup>21</sup> In-depth interview with male businessperson, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

<sup>22</sup> Field notes, Panyijar, March 2018.

<sup>23</sup> In-depth interview with female research participant, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

<sup>24</sup> Focus group discussion with female elders, Bentiu PoC, March 2018.

<sup>25</sup> The importance of livelihood associations and informal livelihood-based groups is discussed in greater length in *The Currency of Connections: The establishment and reconfiguration of informal livelihood groups in Bentiu, South Sudan*, another report in this series.

<sup>26</sup> Focus group discussion with male fisherfolk, Bentiu town, March 2019.

<sup>27</sup> In-depth interview with male research participant, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

<sup>28</sup> In-depth interview with male fisherperson, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

<sup>29</sup> In-depth interview with male fisherperson, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

**“We are all from different counties. What has brought us together is the crisis. This has also made us live together as one family.”**

— Fisherwoman, Bentiu PoC

Through the storytelling that unfolded during these encounters, an understanding that people had shared histories of suffering formed the foundation of many new relationships. “We came to know each other as a result of war,” one FGD participant said.<sup>30</sup> Other FGD participants echoed: “We are all from different counties. What has brought us together is the crisis. This has also made us live together as one family.”<sup>31</sup> Participants in an all-female FGD elaborated: “Some of us met in the blocks, but mostly, we met outside the PoC because most of us go to collect firewood and elephant grass. When we know each other’s names, we tell stories together. What has brought us there is our suffering. This way, we will be together as a family. Sometimes when one of us asks to visit, we will be able to go to her house and pay her a visit.”<sup>32</sup> People further indicated that the discovery of shared connections from before displacement facilitated relationships with new connections within the PoC. “In the sub-clans we come from, we are one people from the same village. So we keep asking one another where one was born and raised and if we knew each other from the villages,” one FGD participant said.<sup>33</sup> That said, as we discuss below, many new connections had no prior points of contact and still flourished on a basis of trust and mutual support. Together, these narratives counter the assumption that displacement and conflict inevitably *only* break down connections.<sup>34</sup> Instead, they indicate that social connections can be forged under these conditions, albeit often with different motivations and between different groups.

Through the storytelling that unfolded during these encounters, an understanding that people had shared histories of suffering formed the foundation of many new relationships. “We came to know each other as a result of war,” one FGD participant said.<sup>30</sup> Other FGD participants echoed: “We are all from different counties. What has brought us together is the crisis. This has also made us live together as one family.”<sup>31</sup> Participants in an all-female FGD elaborated: “Some of us met in the



South Sudan/Mercy Corps/D Nahr

<sup>30</sup> Focus group discussion with male elders, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.

<sup>31</sup> Focus group discussion with female fisherfolk, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.

<sup>32</sup> Focus group discussion with female fisherfolk, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.

<sup>33</sup> Focus group discussion with men, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.

<sup>34</sup> Goodhand, J., Hulme, D., and Lewer, N. “Social capital and the political economy of violence: a case study of Sri Lanka,” *Disasters* 24 (4): 390-406 (2001).

## Forms of support among new connections

These new connections provided support to each other in a number of forms. We focus specifically on horizontal support shared among displaced people, as opposed to vertical support people receive from aid agencies, governance bodies, or other actors.<sup>35</sup> Note that the specific dynamics of support within livelihood groups (e.g. the support that traders or fisherfolk provide each other) are discussed in a separate paper of this series.<sup>36</sup>



***“Every day you see so many people admitted to the hospital. It is not because they are sick, but because they are starving and have no one to rely on... now people don’t support each other because they have fewer resources.”***

— FGD participants, Bentiu Town

Households rely on new social connections formed within the PoC for various types of support. According to numerous respondents, buying goods on credit or receiving small loans from new connections, borrowing and lending cash, and sharing fuel, food and water (particularly until one completed their registration with WFP) are very common forms of material support in the PoC. In terms of non-material—but still significant—support, people reported (a) relying on social visits from their new friends; (b) offering caregiving support (such as cooking for others when ill or looking after others’ children, both of which have material implications); (c) participating in informal savings groups together; (d)

forming informal groups for collecting firewood or harvesting reeds, as both an emotional support strategy and a self-protection strategy against insecurity; (e) assisting one another with the construction of shelters; and (f) offering advice when asked, including about livelihoods. As discussed in a separate paper in this series, people also supported one another materially and emotionally during crucial life events, such as weddings and funerals.<sup>37</sup>

Other respondents, including men and women of diverse ages, explained that resource scarcity in the PoC has affected social connectedness and the forms and extent of support shared between households. Such respondents noted that they had no sources of material support, other than aid distributed within the POC, and any support they received from others was only emotional. This was not necessarily due to others’ lack of willingness to support, but due to lack of sufficient resources for one’s own household. “Every day you see so many people admitted to the hospital. It is not because they are sick, but because they are starving and have no one to rely on [to mobilize resources]. Right now people don’t support each other because they have fewer resources,” FGD participants said.<sup>38</sup>

Many attributed the resource constraints to the shift from a cattle-based economy to a cash-based one. Previously, people would loan one another a lactating cow or share milk as a form of supporting relatives.<sup>39</sup> This preserved an ongoing relationship, given that the cow would eventually be transferred back to its owner. Given that people

---

<sup>35</sup> Daniel Aldrich uses the terms “horizontal” and “vertical” to distinguish between categories of social connectedness which are critical sources of community resilience in the aftermath of disaster. According to Aldrich, “Bonding and bridging social capital typically describe horizontal relationships among equals, whereas linking capital describes vertical relationships of respect and trust between persons and officials or ranking community members who exercise authority over them.” See: Aldrich, D “A Janus-Faced Resource: Social Capital and Resilience Trade-Offs.” *IRGC resource guide on resilience* (2018).

<sup>36</sup> See *The Currency of Connections: The establishment and reconfiguration of informal livelihood groups in Bentiu, South Sudan*, another report in this series.

<sup>37</sup> See *The Currency of Connections: The impact of weddings and rituals on social connections in Bentiu, South Sudan*, another report in this series.

<sup>38</sup> Focus group discussion with traders of all genders, Bentiu town, March 2019.

<sup>39</sup> In-depth interview with male businessperson, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

cannot keep cattle in the PoC (and many lost their cattle in raids), the nature and terms of sharing resources have changed. Additionally, as a result of the transition to a cash-based economy in the PoC, the visibility of individuals' wealth has decreased. According to respondents, cash, unlike cattle, is easily concealed, and as a result, some people in the PoC intentionally hide their wealth in order to avoid sharing with others. One female respondent stated, "Those who have cash are kind of putting distance from those who don't have cash. They have become so greedy that they don't even recognize their friends or relatives who have always been there. So those with no cash don't want anything to do with those who have cash because when you ask for help from them, they will say that they have no cash and since cash is something that can't be seen from the pocket, you just walk away to get help by some other friends."<sup>40</sup>



Mercy Corps/South Sudan/D Nahr

*“Those who have cash are kind of putting distance from those who don't have cash. They have become so greedy that they don't even recognize their friends or relatives who have always been there... when you ask for help from them, they will say that they have no cash...[cash] can't be seen from the pocket, you just walk away to get help by some other friends.”*

— Female research participant, Bentiu PoC

<sup>40</sup> In-depth interview with female research participant, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

## Comparison to pre-displacement sources and forms of support

Many of the above sources and forms of support mark a departure from pre-displacement dynamics. Respondents broadly agree that, due to displacement, separation, and resource constraints, there has been a weakening of the importance of kinship. “Right now, even if you live in the same block or sector with your relative and you have a problem, they look at you as if you don’t have any connection at all. [...] Right now, relatives are more distanced from supporting you than those whom you’re not related to,” said FGD participants.<sup>41</sup>



***“Right now, even if you live in the same block or sector with your relative and you have a problem, they look at you as if you don’t have any connection at all. [...] Right now relatives are more distanced from supporting you than those whom you’re not related to.”***

— Female FGD participant, Bentiu PoC

Widows and female-headed households particularly struggle in navigating new relationships in the PoC, especially if their natal kin are not close by.<sup>42</sup> As one woman said, “my husband’s side of the family is also here in the POC and work in the market, but they refused to support me. After the death of my husband, I am not able to get support from anyone.”<sup>43</sup> Caregivers for newborns echo these concerns. A woman whose daughter passed away after giving birth stated: “I tried several times asking for help from neighbors and relatives, but nothing worked out because they don’t have the resources to support the little baby. If it was like before, they could give us a

lactating cow so I can feed the baby with the milk, but now it is hopeless.”<sup>44</sup> These narratives underscore that, while the PoC can be a site of forging new relationships, the disruption of pre-displacement social connections can leave many isolated and facing dire outcomes in terms of their livelihoods and well-being. Women may have strong kinship relations with certain relatives, but, when cut-off from this network, often struggle more than men to make new supportive connections.<sup>45</sup>

While kinship bonds are reportedly weakening, the majority of respondents assign importance to new relationships they formed within the PoC. “The connection I have now with friends is much stronger than the one with relatives because they [friends] know our daily problems, as opposed to the relatives who are located in another sector. If my kids went to bed without food, my neighbors are the ones who know it because they are near me and I can get support easily from them.”<sup>46</sup>



***“The PoC has brought many people together. [...] It has mixed up people, but in a good way, which has brought people to love one another and help one another.”***

— Female FGD participant, Bentiu PoC

<sup>41</sup> Focus group discussion with female elders, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.

<sup>42</sup> In-depth interview with female research participant, Thannum, Panyijar County, March 2018.

<sup>43</sup> In-depth interview with female research participant, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.

<sup>44</sup> Focus group discussion with female elders, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.

<sup>45</sup> This is also consistent with findings around the gendered nature of men’s and women’s connections and resulting impact on the types and value of resources they can draw on. See: Campos, F. et al. (2019). “Profiting from Parity: Unlocking the potential of women’s businesses in Africa.” Washington, DC: The World Bank.

<sup>46</sup> In-depth interview with female research participant, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

Another significant difference in social connections within the PoC compared to prior to displacement is that relationships extend beyond connections with people from the same county. “The PoC has brought many people together. [...] It has mixed up people, but in a good way, which has brought people to love one another and help one another,” participants in a female-only FGD group commented.<sup>47</sup> One businessperson echoed: “Before I started my business in the PoC, I only had a connection with people from my county, Koch. When I started my business, I was socially connected to many people from different counties, like Guit, Leer, Panyijar, and others.”<sup>48</sup> A different respondent added: “I almost have stronger connections nowadays in the PoC than pre-displacement. These new connections are people from different counties of Unity State, not only from my county, Rubkona.”<sup>49</sup>

At the same time, it is important to note that many respondents felt that support had decreased in the PoC, meaning that people could only rely on humanitarian organizations and not on horizontal social connections. As discussed, this was partly due to the scarcity of resources, meaning there were not enough to share: “Whatever small thing people get, they can’t share with others because it is not enough. Even for those who fetch firewood, the amount is not enough to support the whole family. Lack of jobs and resources have led to less support.”<sup>50</sup>

Conversely, according to other respondents, resource scarcity, as discussed previously, has negatively affected the perceived tone of relationships in the PoC. “Before the crisis, people were good-hearted because they had enough. For example, your neighbor could share food with you, but now it’s not possible. Now people hate each other because of the crisis. People have that pain in their heart because of the things they lost or their loved ones who died in the fighting. Now there’s mistrust between people,” FGD participants stated.<sup>51</sup> Concerns about resource scarcity also affect how people make calculations about whether, whom, and how to help. “The reason why people don’t trust one another is because of hunger,” FGD participants said. “If your neighbor asks for food, you would not give it to them because you don’t trust that they don’t really have food. Another thing is, even if you know they don’t have food, you will not share with them because you would be afraid that the food might end and you would go hungry.”<sup>52</sup> These narratives suggest that material constraints are intrinsically linked to the changes to social connectedness within the PoC.



*“Before the crisis, people were good-hearted because they had enough. For example, your neighbor could share food with you, but now it’s not possible. Now people hate each other because of the crisis. People have that pain in their heart because of the things they lost or their loved ones who died in the fighting. Now there’s mistrust between people.”*

— Female returnee, Bentiu Town

Additionally, respondents claimed that the limits to movement outside the PoC adversely affected their social connections. This was particularly the case for those whose previous livelihoods were predicated on the ability to

<sup>47</sup> Focus group with women conducting small-scale informal livelihoods such as firewood, elephant grass or reed collection, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.

<sup>48</sup> In-depth interview with male businessperson, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

<sup>49</sup> In-depth interview with male research participant, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

<sup>50</sup> Focus group with female elders, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.

<sup>51</sup> Focus group with returnees of all genders, Bentiu town, March 2019.

<sup>52</sup> Focus group with returnees of all genders, Bentiu town, March 2019.

be mobile across large areas, such as traders or cattle herders. “Before the crisis, I could move to different countries and meet with different people, which is no longer happening in the PoC. In the PoC, there is no movement. The same people you were with yesterday are the same you will be with the next day,” said a male businessperson.<sup>53</sup> This comment highlights that, while within the PoC, people are exposed to others from different counties (as described earlier), the limits to mobility outside the PoC impede peoples’ abilities to forge and maintain relationships outside the PoC.

## Challenges in forming new connections in the PoC

Despite the importance of forging new connections in the PoC, these relationships are not equally easy for all to make. Given that county and clan affiliations have been highly politicized in the course of the conflict, respondents commented that county and *payam*<sup>54</sup> affiliation may occasionally subvert possible relationships. “Before you could visit anywhere in Nuer territory and be treated as a visitor. Nobody would ask you ‘where are you from?’ or ‘who are you?’ But this was before the current *payams* were formed. [...] The introduction of these new counties and *payams* really introduced conflict,” said one key informant.<sup>55</sup>

While people offer support to members of their clan or sub-clan, trust issues remain with those who do not belong to these groups. According to a key informant, people began to decide which tea shop to visit depending on which clan the woman running the

tea shop belonged to.<sup>56</sup> Interviewees also added that certain communities only support people from their own county.<sup>57</sup> Respondents further reported tensions within the same ethnic group, such as intra-Nuer<sup>58</sup> or intra-Dinka tensions. Male cattle keepers elaborated in an FGD: “Before the crisis, it [conflict] was between Nuer and the Dinka. But now you can find Nuer people raided other Nuer cattle. It is no longer just between Nuer and Dinka. Counties go and raid other counties, regardless of Nuer or Dinka.”<sup>59</sup> These dynamics complicate social relationships and forms of support within the PoC, and mirror these larger divides stated above.



***“Before the crisis, it [conflict] was between Nuer and the Dinka. But now you can find Nuer people raided other Nuer cattle. It is no longer just between Nuer and Dinka. Counties go and raid other counties, regardless of Nuer or Dinka.”***

— Male cattle keeper, Bentiu Town

However, other respondents countered that prior connection, clan, or political affiliation do not matter as much as a shared livelihood activity, neighbor relationships, or other bonds within the PoC. “Right now, we are close like real family because we support each other,” one woman said. “Where people come from doesn’t matter at all. What is most important is the understanding that people have between them.”<sup>60</sup> According to these respondents,

---

<sup>53</sup> In-depth interview with male businessperson, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

<sup>54</sup> Payams are administrative sub-units immediately below counties.

<sup>55</sup> Key informant interview with NGO staff, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.

<sup>56</sup> Key informant interview with NGO staff, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.

<sup>57</sup> In-depth interview with female research participant, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

<sup>58</sup> When the conflict initially broke out, several sub-clans of the Bul-Nuer sided with the SPLA, while most of the rest of the Nuer supported with SPLA-IO. After the 2016 peace accords fell apart, Taban Deng’s group stayed in the government of national unity, whereas Riek Machar’s group remained the core of the I-O. These divisions have split the Nuer community.

<sup>59</sup> Focus group discussion with male cattle-keepers, Bentiu town, March 2019.

<sup>60</sup> In-depth interview with female research participant, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

the common challenges that people in the PoC face are more important than any other potential dividing factors and enable people to share support across different lines in ways that they would not necessarily have before. “We are all black people and one blood here. Whatever has brought us together wasn’t anyone’s choice. We all came together because we fled for our safety. There is no way that we can look down on one another since we are all equal now,” one FGD participant said.<sup>61</sup> These narratives are also consistent with findings around increased in-group social cohesion in the face of exogenous conflict or threats.<sup>62</sup>



*“Right now, we are close like real family because we support each other. Where people come from doesn’t matter at all. What is most important is the understanding that people have between them.”*

— Female research participant, Bentiu PoC

That said, this research also found instances of economic cooperation and collaboration between the Dinka and Nuer populations after the start of the conflict. Respondents in Panyijar highlighted the role and importance of a locally negotiated agreement between Nuer traders from Panyijar and the Dinka traders from neighboring Bor County to bring goods via the river from Juba.<sup>63</sup> Other narratives demonstrate that economic and social connections between the Dinka and Nuer are intertwined in complex ways, but may have an underlying effect on reducing potential conflict between these communities. For example, according to key informants from Panyijar County, collaborative, pre-crisis cattle-keeping between Dinka from Liap County and Nuer from Panyijar, which started as a primarily economic relationship, eventually led to intermarriage between the two communities. These pre-crisis ties helped these communities continue to peacefully co-exist even after the start of the current conflict.<sup>64</sup> Economic and social relationships between the Dinka and the Nuer in the form of barter, shared grazing lands, or intermarriage are not a new phenomenon.<sup>65</sup> New or continuing instances of collaboration between the two groups *during* conflict should be investigated as part of further research on the potential for people-to-people contact to facilitate localized peace and stability in South Sudan.

Respondents also commented on the gender dimensions of social connections. As discussed, some participants suggested that widows and female heads of household face particular challenges in navigating kinship-based relationships in the PoC. However, respondents also suggested that women and girls were better at forming bonds than men and boys.<sup>67</sup> Specifically, women commented that there were informal women’s groups in which they provide each other with advice and support. FGD participants explained how these women’s groups function: “They gather always when one of the members of the group is stressed, is struggling, or has a particular problem that’s disturbing her. They will come together to stay with their friend and calm her down. [...] They also give

<sup>61</sup> Focus group discussion with traders of all genders, Bentiu town, March 2019.

<sup>62</sup> For example, according to Luka Deng, “Households exposed to exogenous counter-insurgency tend to have higher levels of social capital stock than do those households exposed to endogenous counter-insurgency warfare.” See: Deng, Luka. “Social Capital And Civil War: The Dinka Communities In Sudan’s Civil War.” *African Affairs* 109, no. 435 (2010): 231-250.

<sup>63</sup> Humphrey, Alex et al (2019). *The Currency of Connections*

<sup>64</sup> Inception workshop notes, June 2018.

<sup>65</sup> This is also consistent with Mercy Corps’ impact evaluation of a peacebuilding program in Nigeria. The research found that contact and collaboration among farmers and pastoralists (two groups that frequently clashed over resources) to achieve shared goals helped communities to maintain or improve relationships despite a broader escalation of violence. Dawop, D.S., Grady, C., Inks, L., and Wolfe, R.J. (2019). “Does Peacebuilding Work in the Midst of Conflict?: Impact Evaluation of a Peacebuilding Program in Nigeria.” Mercy Corps.

<sup>66</sup> Field notes, Panyijar, March 2018; Design workshop notes, Juba, July 2018

<sup>67</sup> Key informant interview with NGO staff, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.

each other advice and emotional support. That’s what they always do.”<sup>68</sup> Many female respondents suggested that men struggle to form bonds of this type, thus relying on their wives or daughters to make bonds, hoping the new connections then extend to the rest of the family.

That said, while informal support mechanisms exist between new connections, some suggested that time was a constraining factor in participating in these types of groups. This quickly became a dilemma: Respondents recognized that it was significant to meet others and establish new sources and forms of material and non-material support – but those who had to struggle with caregiving responsibilities and many livelihood activities, especially women, had little time to socialize outside those spaces and often felt left out of opportunities to build social connectedness. Women who participate in fishing elaborated on this concern: “Sometimes we are left out of the community because we always go far away to get the fish and we spend the whole day there collecting fish. The block leaders see us and think we are just walking around, doing nothing. Then we are left out when people are being selected, like the women who clean toilets.”<sup>69</sup>



***“A woman is not allowed to go to a man for support. You’re your husband’s property... For us, as a woman, if you go to the market and try to get a loan from a [male] trader, they will say you’re committing adultery.”***

— Female research participant, Bentiu PoC

Gender norms also appear to play an important role in men and women’s respective abilities to mobilize resources through their social networks.<sup>70</sup> Women noted that it is easier for them to directly ask for assistance from other women, often relying on their common identity as mothers. However, female respondents also explained that it is considered inappropriate for women - especially those who are uneducated - to seek help directly from men. According to one female FGD participant, “A woman is not allowed to go to a man for support. You’re your husband’s property. It is better for the man to ask. For us, as a woman, if you go to the market and try to get a loan from a trader, they will say you’re committing adultery.”<sup>71</sup> Men, on the other hand, noted that they considered it “shameful” and “embarrassing” to directly solicit help, and instead preferred that

their connections offer assistance. Men’s breadwinner identities – and related shame surrounding their inability to meet their household’s basic needs (especially given displacement and limited opportunities in the PoC) - seem to be an important factor in their ability to solicit support. One young male who is currently unemployed noted, “I am a father, I have children. But I am jobless. A father who cannot feed his children. How can people expect anything of me?”<sup>72</sup>



***“I am a father, I have children. But I am jobless. A father who cannot feed his children. How can people expect anything of me?”***

— Male research participant, Bentiu PoC

<sup>68</sup> Focus group discussion with female fisherfolk, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.

<sup>69</sup> Focus group discussion with female fisherfolk, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.

<sup>70</sup> Women’s networks command fewer resources than men’s and include more “strong” family and kin relationships that are less valuable than new connections in creating business opportunities. See: Campos, F. et al. (2019). “Profiting from Parity: Unlocking the potential of women’s businesses in Africa.” Washington, DC: The World Bank.

<sup>71</sup> Focus group discussion with women, Bentiu PoC, February 2019.

<sup>72</sup> In-depth interview with male research participant, Bentiu PoC, February 2019.



South Sudan/Mercy Corps/M Rouquette

## Role of male elders and relationship to youth

Respondents also noted that the role of male elders in the community has changed within the PoC and in surrounding areas, and so has the elders' relationship to youth. Specifically, many of the dispute resolution functions that the male elders once performed, such as mediating tensions between different groups, have now shifted to various governance bodies, such as the Community High Committee, the civil court, or the UN.<sup>73</sup> This has resulted in diminished responsibility and authority for the elders, who are, in the words of one respondent, "less important in terms of resolving conflicts and challenges in the PoC than they were before."<sup>74</sup> Elders themselves have not always welcomed these changes, suggesting that the new governance systems are sometimes too lenient and cannot fulfill the same role in dispute resolution as the male elders themselves did.<sup>75</sup> As a different briefing paper in this series elaborates, male elders are also less involved in the decision-making and dispute-resolution surrounding weddings and marriages.<sup>76</sup>

It is important to acknowledge that male elders are not a monolithic group and their pre-displacement influence varied. Factors such as cattle ownership, which has greatly diminished within the PoC, as well as whether the

---

<sup>73</sup> We will discuss the role of these governance bodies in greater length in the final report associated with this project.

<sup>74</sup> In-depth interview with male research participant, Bentiu PoC, December 2018. Further interviews suggest that these roles were already changing before the PoC. In-depth interview, male research participant, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.

<sup>75</sup> Focus group discussion with male elders, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.

<sup>76</sup> See: *The Currency of Connections: The impact of weddings and rituals on social connections in Bentiu, South Sudan*, another report in this series.

male elder was a local chief affected not only elders' relationship with community members, but also with each other.<sup>77</sup> Male elders within the PoC do suggest that they are attempting to maintain these horizontal connections with other male elders, even if their role and influence in the community have shifted.

Male elders described an informal meeting place, known as *Pagak*,<sup>78</sup> located under a large tree within the PoC, as a critical site for maintaining within-elder interactions. An FGD with male elders shed light on the function and importance of *Pagak*: "The elders support themselves in *Pagak* with ideas and get relieved. [...] We hear different touching stories from different elders, some of which are heavier, and this reduces the thoughts that elders have that could be harmful to their health. We the elders here and living today because we go to *Pagak* and chat with the other elders."<sup>79</sup> The same FGD clarified that all male elders are welcome to *Pagak*; "no elder is excluded from this discussion point. All elders, whether blind, cripple, fit, lame, and fit are welcome."<sup>80</sup> This suggests that people still maintain spaces and strategies of social connectedness within the PoC, even when their role in the community or their relationships have changed due to the conflict and resulting displacement.

Some of the male elders' diminished authority is in part related to changes within youth populations in the PoC. "No youth go to the elders for consultation when they have a problem," one FGD suggested. "What happens now in the PoC is that when children have quarreled, the parents go directly to the block leader to report the case to him. He is the one to provide a solution to both sides that have quarreled. Sometimes they go to the CHC for a better solution when the block leaders have failed."<sup>81</sup> Male elders suggest both that youth do not respect them in the PoC in the same way they did pre-displacement and that they cannot enforce their authority with youth. "If they can't listen to the UN that has guns, then how will we [elders] manage them?"<sup>82</sup>



South Sudan/Mercy Corps/D Nahr

<sup>77</sup> In-depth interview with male research participant, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

<sup>78</sup> The name *Pagak* is a reference to a payam of the same name in Maiwut County, Upper Nile State, which served as the general headquarters of the SPLA-IO under the command of Riek Machar, from the outbreak of the war in 2013 until August 2017, when it was re-captured by government forces.

<sup>79</sup> Focus group discussion with male elders, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.

<sup>80</sup> Focus group discussion with male elders, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.

<sup>81</sup> Focus group discussion with male elders, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.

<sup>82</sup> Focus group discussion with male elders, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.

# Conclusions and Implications

The effects of the conflict in South Sudan are being borne out at the local level. Conflicts between (and even within) households are the lived manifestation of South Sudan's political crisis. Households from opposition-controlled areas have been torn apart, and marginalized, for example, by stigmatization resulting from having relatives with actual or perceived allegiances to government loyalists. Within Nuer communities, these households are often referred to as *Dinkas*, even if these are people from their own family, their county, or other Nuer sub-clans. These localized effects of the crisis results in some households from specific counties and/or entire populations from specific counties being marginalized within the PoC.

**Implications for aid actors:** Aid actors that work through participatory community-led structures to identify eligible individuals or groups for aid interventions, such as food aid for new arrivals or cash-for-work within the PoC, should be mindful that these larger political dynamics may result in specific individuals or groups being excluded from participating in/benefiting from aid. Within these groups, aid actors should pay close attention to socio-demographics factors such as new-mothers, widows and women-headed households. These individuals may have additional difficulties in accessing kinship structures for support and may be doubly disadvantaged in this context. Accounting for these dynamics may help aid actors reach extremely vulnerable individuals more effectively.

**New relationships have formed within the PoC which cut across clan and geographical divides. Multiple research respondents, including women, report that these relationships are equally, if not more important than their previous kinship connections.** Proximity and a shared sense of hardship and trauma have helped individuals forge new bonds of based on the provision of both economic and non-material support. While these new relationships are limited to Nuer populations within the PoC, similar narratives between the Dinka and Nuer (outside the PoC) may open potential pathways to explore (and learn from) local-level peacebuilding initiatives within ongoing interventions.

**Implications for aid actors:** Given the extremely divisive nature of this conflict, aid actors should seek to strengthen existing people-to-people contact and collaboration across lines of divisions. Within the PoC this could entail working with specific Nuer clans and sub-clans that are divided by the political conflict. Aid actors may be able to help strengthen these relationships by bringing people from different clans and counties (and in particular women) together for shared food-based events or celebrations (a strategy that the Nuer communities frequently use to build new bonds), and/or by encouraging collaborative livelihood activities. Further research should be conducted to identify the potential for people-to-people contact between diverse populations to decrease prejudice and facilitate forward-looking, local peace initiatives.

**Social connections between people in the PoC and their kinship networks (outside) have been disrupted by displacement which has severe consequences for households' wellbeing.** In some instances, these connections have been lost due to a lack of cell phone networks to facilitate communication. In other cases, PoC residents purposefully sever their relationships for fear of persecution resulting from communicating with relatives in their communities of origin who may be (actual or perceived) government loyalists, or with those living in-government held areas. These loss of connections severely impacts people's access to trusted sources of information on the safety and security conditions outside. It further reduces households' ability to diversify their sources of support with kinship networks outside the PoC, which are critical for their economic and emotional wellbeing.

**Implications for aid actors:** Aid actors should facilitate pathways for people to reconnect with their trusted social networks in their community of origin. Providing people with access to cellphones and/or airtime, and reconnecting them with kinship connections through family reunification programs, may have multiple benefits. It can help households diversify their sources of kinship support outside the PoC, both now and eventually when they return home. Additionally, it can help improve their access to information from sources with whom they have high levels of pre-existing trust and enable them to make informed decisions about returns.

**Implications for donors:** Efforts to reconnect people with their extended family or kinship networks outside the PoC cannot be effective if people continue to fear the potential repercussions that such reconnections may foster. Donors should advocate with the Government of South Sudan for the full implementation of the 2018 Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) and in meeting the concrete steps outlined towards the formation of the transitional government. Donors should also advocate with the Government of South Sudan to support operationalizing the existing telecommunication network and infrastructure – a key communication medium for people’s access to information – especially in opposition-held (SPLA-IO) areas. Finally, as part of such efforts, donor governments and the international community should monitor implementation of the UNMISS mandate and must ensure that any return or relocation of IDPs from the POCs are safe, informed, voluntary, and dignified.



South Sudan/Mercy Corps/D Nahr

## CONTACT

ALEX HUMPHREY  
Research Manager | South Sudan  
[ahumphrey@mercycorps.org](mailto:ahumphrey@mercycorps.org)

JON KURTZ  
Senior Director of Research and Learning  
[jkurtz@mercycorps.org](mailto:jkurtz@mercycorps.org)

JANARDHAN RAO  
Country Director | South Sudan  
[jrao@mercycorps.org](mailto:jrao@mercycorps.org)

### About Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. Now, and for the future.



45 SW Ankeny Street  
Portland, Oregon 97204  
888.842.0842  
[mercycorps.org](http://mercycorps.org)