



South Sudan—Mathieu Rouquette, Mercy Corps

# THE CURRENCY OF CONNECTIONS

*Why Do Social Connections Matter for Household Resilience in South Sudan?*

AUGUST 2020



FRIEDMAN SCHOOL OF NUTRITION SCIENCE AND POLICY  
Feinstein International Center



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## Table of contents

<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>1</b>
Key Findings	2
Key Recommendations	3
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>5</b>
Rationale for Study	5
A Brief Overview of the Humanitarian Crisis in South Sudan	6
Objectives and Research Questions	7
<b>Methods</b>	<b>9</b>
Qualitative Method	13
Quantitative Method	14
Constructing the Social Connectedness Index and Dimensions	15
<b>Research Question #1: How do households rely on their social connections, and build and maintain these relationships during conflict and displacement?</b>	<b>17</b>
Reciprocal sharing during displacement	22
Marriage	24
Early marriage	26
<b>Research Question #2: What household- and community-level factors are important for households' social connectedness?</b>	<b>28</b>
Household-level factors	29
Age of household head	29
Gender of household head	31
Livelihood	34
Wealth	37
Community-level factors	39
Market functionality	39
Access to money sender	41
<b>Research Question #3: To what extent does social connectedness contribute to households' abilities to cope and recover in the face of shocks and stresses?</b>	<b>43</b>
Food Security	46
Subjective resilience	51
<b>Research Question #4: How does humanitarian assistance interact with social connections and local systems of coping and recovery?</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>Conclusions and Recommendations</b>	<b>60</b>



South Sudan— Jennifer Huxta for Mercy Corps

## Executive Summary

In protracted crises in which formal governance structures are weak to nonexistent, people depend heavily on local systems—both social and economic—to get by, often more than they depend on external aid. Communities themselves are often the first responders in a crisis, reacting long before the arrival of humanitarian actors. Research on resilience across a range of contexts demonstrates the importance of social connections, particularly in times of crisis, in enabling populations to manage shocks and stresses.

Social connectedness manifests in many forms: Communities may rely on their immediate neighbors, extended family or clan chieftains for food, access to economic opportunities, and psychosocial support, or to negotiate safe passage when fleeing from a conflict or when later returning to their communities of origin. It is thus critical that aid actors understand how social connections and external assistance interact to better help conflict-affected populations cope and recover.

However, social connectedness is not always a source of household resilience. Social connectedness is inherently linked to social hierarchies and power dynamics. “Connectedness” for some households may imply marginalization or exclusion for others. By considering social connectedness throughout program cycles, including in design, implementation, and evaluation phases, aid actors can more holistically understand bases of household vulnerability as well as sources of resilience during crises. These nuanced insights can be used to ensure that formal assistance reaches households in most need, including ones that may be excluded from local support systems, to better achieve recovery and resilience outcomes. Equally, by understanding social connectedness, aid actors may be able to strengthen, or at the very least not undermine local support systems.

This report is the last in a series from the [Currency of Connections](#) research initiative between Mercy Corps and the Feinstein International Center at the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy, at Tufts University with support from the Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA). The series is based on mixed methods research conducted among resident, internally displaced, and refugee communities in South Sudan and Uganda. This report employs a sequential exploratory mixed method design to:

- 1 Investigate the ways in which households rely on their social connections in the context of protracted conflict and instability, highlighting the ways in which external interventions influence these local systems of coping and support;
- 2 Explore the linkages between households’ social connectedness and resilience by constructing and testing a contextualized quantitative measure of social connectedness.

## Key findings

### **How do households rely on their social connections, and build and maintain these relationships during conflict and displacement?**

- › In contexts of protracted conflict and displacement, socially connected households share important forms of material and intangible support with each other. Households often rely more on support shared within their social networks than they do on assistance from external aid actors.
- › Households maintain and build their social networks during crises using two key strategies: by proactively sharing material support and through marriage. While these strategies allow households to access important sources of support, they can entail protection risks, including early marriage.

### **What household- and community-level factors are important for households' social connectedness?**

- › Socio-economic characteristics including age, gender, livelihood, and wealth determine the relationships that households are able to form, and the types of support they can share with and receive from one another.
- › Community-level factors, including access to functioning markets and money senders facilitate households' abilities to maintain and grow their social networks.

### **To what extent does social connectedness contribute to households' abilities to cope and recover in the face of shocks and stresses?**

- › Households provide each other with material and intangible support. This support is a key source of coping and recovery in the context of protracted crises. Socially connected households are better able to diversify their diets and are more optimistic that they can cope and recover in face of future shocks and stresses.
- › Social connectedness is governed by obligatory sharing norms and can be a source of household vulnerability. In some cases, households may be forced to make difficult choices: allocate limited resources to meet immediate basic needs while risking exclusion from reciprocal support systems, or share beyond their means and potentially go hungry in order to maintain and build social connections for future support.

### **How does humanitarian assistance interact with social connections and local systems of coping and recovery?**

- › As productive livelihoods have collapsed during South Sudan's humanitarian crisis, households have turned to sharing humanitarian aid—in particular, food assistance—as a means of maintaining and expanding their social networks.
- › Household cash recipients often face significant pressure to share cash with non-recipients, and opaque targeting and vulnerability criteria can cause tension and weaken people's social connections. In some cases, cash transfer recipients risk being excluded from reciprocal support systems based on the perception that they have received their “fair share” and are no longer in need of support from their social connections.

## Key Recommendations

### **Social connectedness can be a source of household resilience, but it may also imply vulnerability.**

Households rely on their social networks for critical material and intangible support during difficult times. They take strategic steps to strengthen existing relationships and build new connections, sometimes sharing beyond their means in hopes of securing future reciprocal support. Moreover, strong informal rules and norms may also mandate that households provide support to others in their social networks, and a failure to abide by these norms can result in a household's systematic exclusion from reciprocal support networks.

- › **When considering program impact and intervention logic, aid actors must account for local support systems.** Aid actors should work to better understand the obligations households may face to share limited resources, including humanitarian assistance. This can be done by adapting assessments and evaluations to include qualitative and quantitative questions about the types of resources that households are able to mobilize through their social networks, the norms and obligations that underpin resource sharing, and decisions about household resource allocations. The resulting data should be used to contextualize measurements of program impact and to design interventions that support, or at least do not undermine local support systems.

### **In South Sudan, households are not equally socially connected; various factors, at both the household- and community-level, may influence key aspects of a household's social network.**

Quantitative analysis, for example, demonstrates that factors such as age, gender, wealth, livelihood, market functionality and the ability to access a money sender are all important to a household's social connectedness. Certain household characteristics are also associated with especially low levels of social connectedness, and qualitative analysis demonstrates that female headed households often face particular obstacles to forming new social connections and mobilizing material support from their social networks.

- › **Aid actors should take concrete steps to understand who is included and excluded from social networks and related support structures in order to obtain holistic, context-specific understandings of vulnerability.** Aid interventions should build on a strong understanding of the bases for inclusion and exclusion from social networks. These interventions should seek to improve the capacity of excluded individuals to share and access resources and information through diverse social support networks, while ensuring that support for excluded individuals is part of a wider program intervention that also addresses the needs of the broader community. Providing excluded groups with vocational trainings, linkages to more experienced groups, and vouchers to access inputs from the market may help increase their capacities to share resources, form new connections, and diversify their social networks.

**Households share humanitarian aid—both food and cash—to maintain, expand and diversify their social connections and to create safety nets of reciprocal support.** The crisis in South Sudan has significantly reduced local agricultural and livestock production capacities. As a result, households' abilities to support each other have eroded significantly. However, they continue to strategically share resources with others in their communities. These shared resources often include humanitarian aid, such as food and cash. In accordance with long-standing norms and traditions, households share aid to maintain, expand and diversify their social connections and to ensure access to critical reciprocal support systems.

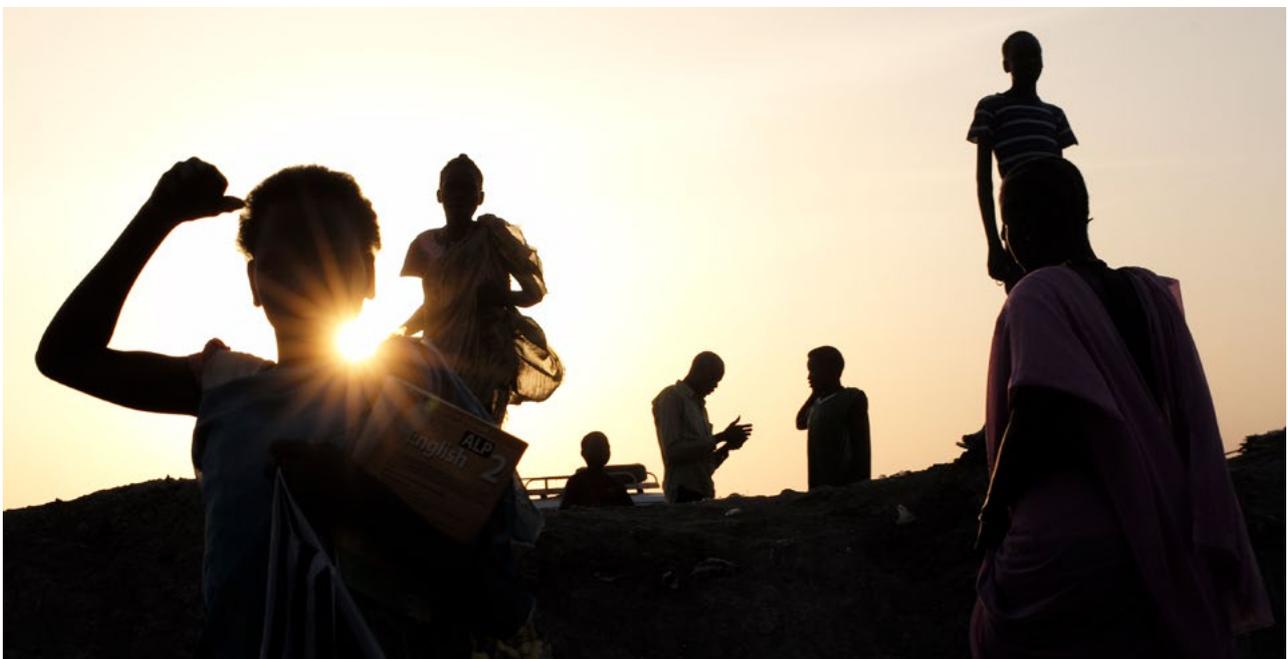
- › **Aid actors should build in overlap between emergency relief and early recovery interventions to ensure that households can continue to meet their sharing obligations.** Food, often distributed by humanitarian agencies, remains the main currency of connection in South Sudan. Transitions from the

provision of direct emergency assistance to early recovery interventions should be accompanied by efforts to monitor impact on households' social connectedness, including their ability to receive and provide support to others in their communities.

**External assistance, especially cash transfers, may disrupt social connections and support networks.** While cash facilitates greater choice and flexibility in meeting household expenses, cash assistance may also give rise to social tensions and recipients may risk being excluded from local support systems. Importantly, participants understood these tensions and the resulting exclusion of some cash recipients from reciprocal support networks to be a function of opaque or disputed targeting practices rather than an inherent inevitability of cash-based programming. Tensions associated with the provision of humanitarian assistance are often related to a lack of transparency or knowledge about the basis by which households are selected to receive cash transfers. When local authorities explain these criteria to the community, tensions may dissipate.

**› In order to preempt and mitigate social tensions, aid actors should take concrete steps to improve communities' perceptions of cash transfer targeting criteria.**

In co-design activities, aid workers can engage community members to develop contextualized targeting criteria which explicitly account for households' social connectedness. Doing so may not always entail developing new targeting criteria, but rather adapting the framing of traditional bases of vulnerability to account for households' abilities to mobilize material resources from local support systems. This may also require aid actors to reassess assumptions about bases household vulnerability (e.g. female headed, internally displaced households), as community members may not see these characteristics as being inherently synonymous with vulnerability. It is also important that aid actors' efforts to clarify targeting criteria to community members continues throughout a program's implementations, and not only at its inception. This may entail relying on trusted community leaders to iteratively communicate the co-designed targeting criteria and process to households and to address any social tensions that arise around targeting in the course of program implementation.



South Sudan—Dominic Nahr For Mercy Corps



South Sudan—Cassandra Nelson, Mercy Corps

# Introduction

## Rationale for Study

In protracted crises in which formal governance structures are weak to nonexistent, people depend heavily on local systems—both social and economic—to get by, often more than they depend on external aid. Communities themselves are often the first responders in a crisis, reacting long before the arrival of humanitarian actors. Research on resilience across a range of contexts demonstrates the importance of social connections, particularly in times of crisis, in enabling populations to manage shocks and stresses.<sup>1</sup> Social connectedness is therefore a key aspect of resilience, recovery and relief interventions in complex humanitarian emergencies. However, to date, aid actors have paid little attention to the ways in which humanitarian assistance may either strengthen local support systems, or potentially undermine them. This topic is at the crux of a central challenge faced by humanitarian actors: how can assistance best support people’s existing strategies for coping and recovery in crises?

Social connectedness encompasses the sum of people’s social linkages, including the social networks on which they can draw; the extent and strength of those networks and the resources available within them; the nature of obligation that such networks carry; and the reciprocity presumed in terms of collective risk and mutual support.<sup>2</sup> While social connectedness sounds like a “positive” thing—that is, the greater the connectedness, the better—it is inherently linked to social hierarchy, power dynamics, and inequity. Accounting for social connectedness as a central component of resilience can help aid actors identify sources of households’ vulnerability, while also highlighting their coping strategies and sources of agency.<sup>3,4</sup>

1 Aldrich, Daniel P. 2012. *Building Resilience: Social Capital in Post-Disaster Recovery*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.; Coyle, Diane, and Patrick Meier. 2009. “New Technologies in Emergencies and Conflicts: The Role of Information and Social Networks.” Washington, D.C.: United Nations Foundation.; Maxwell, Daniel, Elizabeth Stites, Sabina C Robillard, and Michael Wagner. 2017. “Conflict and Resilience: A Synthesis of Feinstein International Center Work on Building Resilience and Protecting Livelihoods in Conflict-Related Crises.” Boston: Feinstein International Center.; “What Really Matters for Resilience? Exploratory Evidence on the Determinants of Resilience to Food Security Shocks in Southern Somalia.” 2013. Portland: Mercy Corps.

2 Maxwell, Daniel, Nisar Majid, Guhad Adan, Khalif Abdirahman, and Jeeyon Janet Kim. 2016. “Facing Famine: Somali Experiences in the Famine of 2011.” *Food Policy* 65: 63–73.

3 Aldrich, 2012.

4 Kurtz, Jon, and Kate McMahon. 2015. “Pathways from Peace to Resilience: Evidence from the Greater Horn of Africa on the Links between Conflict Management and Resilience to Food Security Shocks.” Washington, D.C.: Mercy Corps; Stites, Elizabeth, and Kristin Bushby. 2017. “Livelihood Strategies and Interventions in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Areas Assessing Trends and Changes from 2012 to 2016.” Working Paper. London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium.

In Syria, Mercy Corps' research found that households relied on their friends and family to adapt their livelihoods in a context of deteriorating security conditions. Those with social connections residing outside of their communities also had significantly better food security, higher expenditures, and better housing conditions. On the other hand, displacement fractured social ties especially for internally displaced households, and prolonged economic hardships frayed reciprocity in communities.<sup>5</sup> Further, research shows that in the context of the 2010-2011 famine in Somalia, when a variety of factors delayed the arrival of humanitarian assistance, households were exclusively dependent on their own social networks to cope.<sup>6</sup> Households with stronger networks that included people living outside the affected area, or who were not subject to the same hazards, were best able to survive. On the other hand, households without such connections, including those who were intentionally excluded from support systems, were more likely to fall into famine conditions. These findings also showed that social connectedness may reveal as much about exclusion and vulnerability as it does about inclusion and mutual coping.

Aid actors can use nuanced insights about social connectedness to better achieve recovery and resilience outcomes and to ensure that formal assistance reaches households in most need, including ones that may be excluded from local support systems. Equally, by understanding social connectedness, aid actors may be able to design interventions that strengthen, or at the very least do not undermine local support systems.

## A Brief Overview of the Humanitarian Crisis in South Sudan

In December 2013, only two years after South Sudanese voters overwhelmingly cast their ballots in favor of independence, conflict broke out between forces loyal to President Salva Kiir Mayardit and Vice President Riek Machar. Fighting started in the capital, Juba, and spread throughout the countryside. Some estimates suggest that nearly 400,000 people have been killed during the civil war.<sup>7</sup> Further, over 2.2 million people remain displaced as refugees in neighboring countries, and over 1.6 million are internally displaced as a result of the conflict.<sup>8</sup> While the conflict has disrupted and destroyed social networks, households have also proactively and strategically built new connections and systems of informal support in the context of violence and displacement. Displaced households rely on their social connections for material and intangible support, including critical information about safe passage.

Conflict-related violence has decreased significantly since the signature of the 2018 Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) and the long-awaited formation of a transitional government in February 2020. Nonetheless, key aspects of the agreement have not been implemented and localized incidents of violence and insecurity continue unabated in parts of the country. As a result, many displaced households are reluctant to return to their communities of origin, and remain separated from their pre-crisis social networks and support systems. Further, humanitarian needs in South Sudan remain dire, with the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimating that 64% (7.3 million) of South Sudanese are in urgent need of assistance.<sup>9</sup> In the context of South Sudan's ongoing humanitarian emergency, support shared between socially connected households remains a key source of coping, recovery and resilience.

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5 Howe, Kimberly, Roxani Krystalli, Vaidehi Krishnan, Jon Kurtz, and Reimar Macaranas. 2018. *The Wages of War: Learning from How Syrians Have Adapted Their Livelihoods through Seven Years of Conflict*. Portland, OR: Mercy Corps.

6 Maxwell, Daniel G and Nisar Majid 2016. *Famine in Somalia: Competing Imperatives, Collective Failures*, 2011-12. New York: Oxford University Press.

7 Checchi, Francesco, Adrienne Testa, Abdihamid Warsame, Le Quach, and Rachel Burns. 2018. *Estimates of Crisis-Attributable Mortality in South Sudan, December 2013-April 2018: A Statistical Analysis*. London: London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

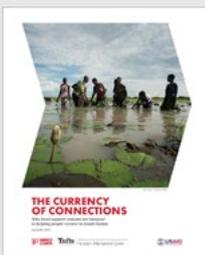
8 UNHCR. 2020. "Refugees and Asylum-Seekers from South Sudan." April 2020; IOM. 2019. "South Sudan Displacement Tracking Matrix." November 2019.

9 OCHA. 2019. "South Sudan Humanitarian Response Plan (2020)." Juba.

## Objectives and Research Questions

This report is the last in a series from the Currency of Connections research initiative between Mercy Corps and the Feinstein International Center at the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy, at Tufts University. The initiative explored the bases of social connectedness among resident, internally displaced, and refugee populations in South Sudan and Uganda, the nature of the support households receive from their social networks to cope and recover during crises, and ways in which humanitarian assistance interacts with local support systems.

### Other Publications from the Currency of Connections Research Program



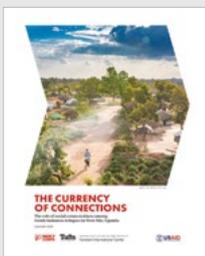
#### *Why Local Support Systems are Integral to Helping People Recover in South Sudan*

This report, based on qualitative research conducted in Panyijar County, offers aid actors insights into localized social protection and support systems in South Sudan and the ways in which humanitarian aid, including cash transfer programming, can both complement and disrupt these systems.



#### *The reconfiguration of social connections in Bentiu, South Sudan*

This three-part sub-series examines how communities in the Bentiu Protection of Civilian (PoC) site are socially connected; how they rely on their social connections during crises; and how these social connections are changing in the context of protracted displacement. Specifically, the sub-series addresses themes including the role of marriage as the foundation of kinship networks and related social support systems in South Sudan; the establishment of informal livelihood associations as a form of socioeconomic connectedness in the PoC; and the evolution of pre-displacement connections in the PoC, and the strategies by which people establish new bonds with neighbors, friends, and those pursuing similar livelihoods.



#### *The role of social connectedness among South Sudanese refugees in West Nile, Uganda*

This report examines how South Sudanese refugees in West Nile, Uganda establish and leverage social connections throughout the process of displacement and settlement. It also considers the effect of violent conflict and associated displacement on the nature, characteristics, and evolution of people's social connectedness and describes the development and importance of refugees' new relationships in Uganda, changes to their pre-displacement relationships, and the consequences of these changes for refugees' perceptions of their own wellbeing.

The research presented in this final report was motivated by two overarching objectives. The first objective builds on the body of research generated through the Currency of Connections program. It synthesizes the ways in which households rely on their social connections in a context affected by protracted conflict and instability, and highlights how external interventions influence these local systems of coping and support. The second objective is to explore the linkages between households' social connectedness and resilience through the construction and testing of a contextualized quantitative measure of household-level social connectedness.

With these overarching objectives in mind, the report examines the following research questions (**Figure 1**):

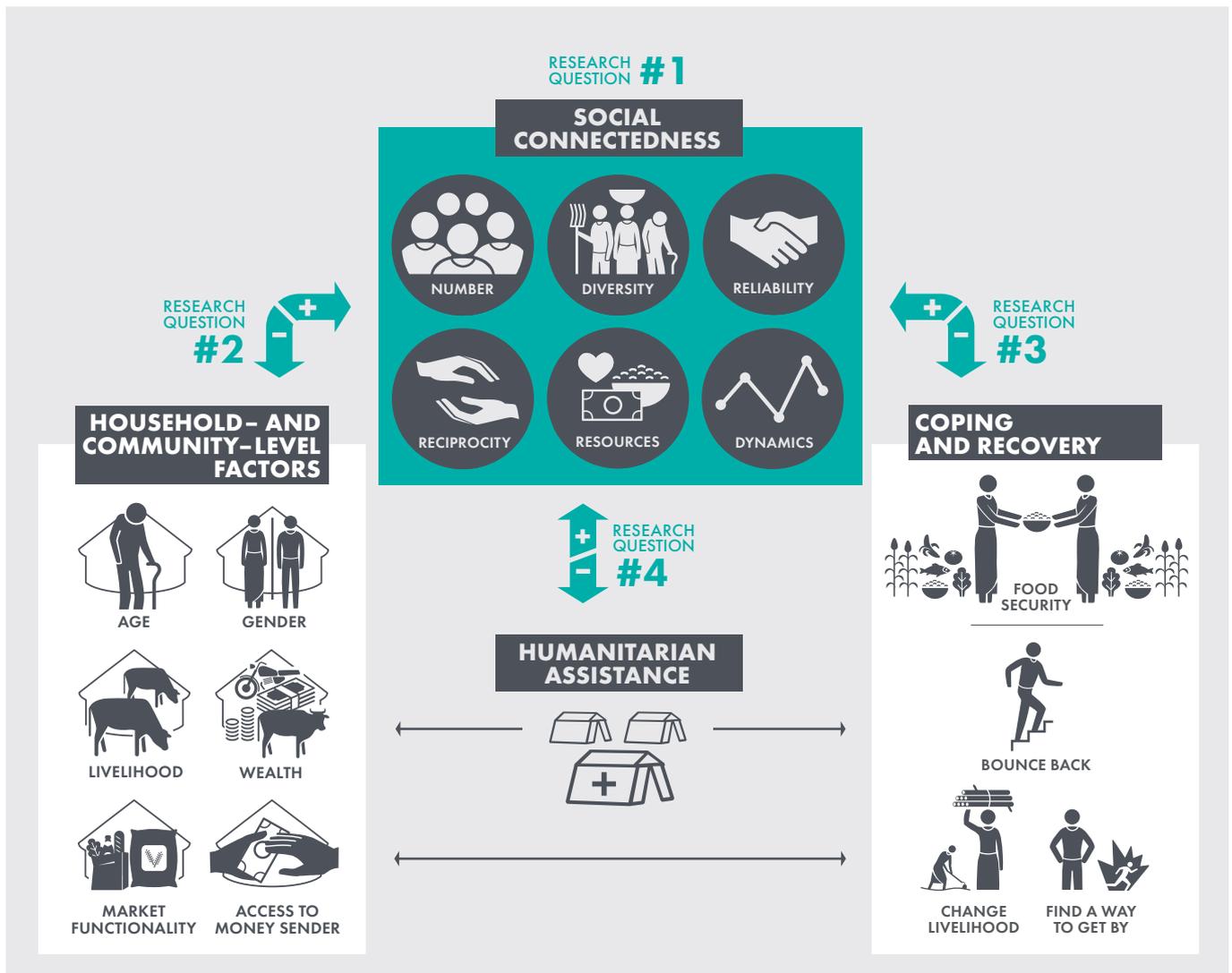


FIGURE 1: Study Conceptual Framework and Research Questions

**RESEARCH QUESTION #1:**

**How are households relying on their social connections, and building and maintaining these relationships during conflict and displacement?**

**RESEARCH QUESTION #2:**

**What household- and community-level factors are important for households’ social connectedness?**

**RESEARCH QUESTION #3:**

**To what extent is social connectedness contributing to households’ resilience, or their ability to cope and recover in the face of shocks and stresses?**

**RESEARCH QUESTION #4:**

**How does humanitarian assistance interact with social connections and local systems of coping and recovery?**

This report and the body of research generated through the Currency of Connections series are intended to provide insights into local support systems in South Sudan and to enable donors and aid actors to design and deliver programs to strengthen existing social connections and, at the very least, avoid undermining them. To that end, this report concludes by highlighting the programming implications of the findings.



South Sudan—Jennifer Huxta for Mercy Corps

## Methods

Between September 2018 and January 2020, the study employed a *sequential exploratory mixed method* design to examine the research questions in South Sudan’s Unity State and Uganda’s West Nile sub-region.<sup>10</sup> In the design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation phases, the study brought together qualitative and quantitative methods in order to explore the complex phenomena of households’ social connectedness and their resilience in a protracted crisis (**Figure 2**).

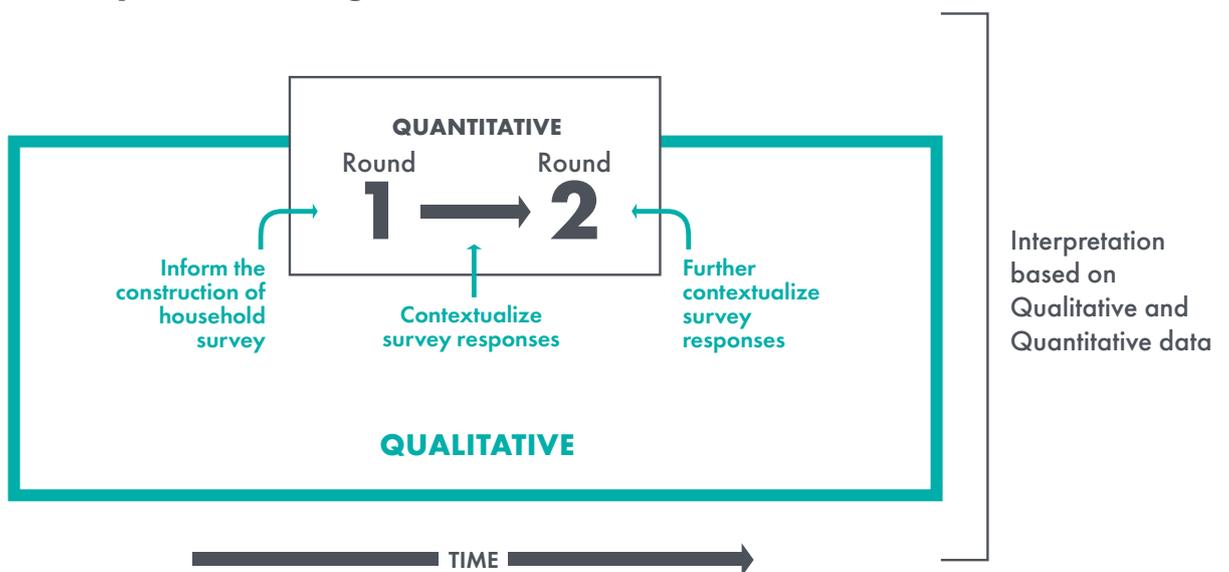


FIGURE 2: Study Mixed Method Design

<sup>10</sup> Creswell, John W., and Vicki L. Plano Clark. 2007. *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: SAGE Publications.

An in-depth qualitative phase helped to identify contextually relevant dimensions of social connectedness and inform the design of the household survey. Following household survey data collection rounds, the study conducted follow-up interviews with select survey respondents to contextualize the survey responses and quantitative findings.<sup>11</sup> Qualitatively, the study also investigated social connectedness and the ways in which these connections inform individual-, household-, and community-level coping and recovery. It explored themes including, but not limited to, the ways in which social relationships change during protracted crisis, the forms and perceived importance of the support that is shared within social networks, the ways in which social connectedness contributes to coping and recovery, and ways in which the presence of humanitarian assistance affects social connectedness.

The findings in this report bring together select qualitative and quantitative findings from South Sudan's Unity State.<sup>12</sup> While the report presents logical and statistically significant quantitative associations which are triangulated by rich qualitative data, the study design cannot establish direct causality. The report includes direct quotes from qualitative respondents and authors have made every effort to preserve their voices, however in certain instances, the authors have lightly edited quotes to facilitate comprehension. As interviews and focus group discussions were conducted on the basis of anonymity, the report does not identify sources. Below, the report briefly describes the study's qualitative and quantitative methods. Additional information on the methods is provided as an online appendix to this report.



South Sudan—Cassandra Nelson, Mercy Corps

11 Given the dynamic nature of social connectedness and resilience, the research team employed a panel design for the household surveys. The same households were surveyed twice in order to capture changes over time. Quantitative sampling and overall approach are discussed in greater detail below and in the online appendix.  
12 In the presentation of these mixed methods findings, the report refers to qualitative *participants or informants* and quantitative *respondents* in order to distinguish the different modes of engagement in the study.

## Research Sites

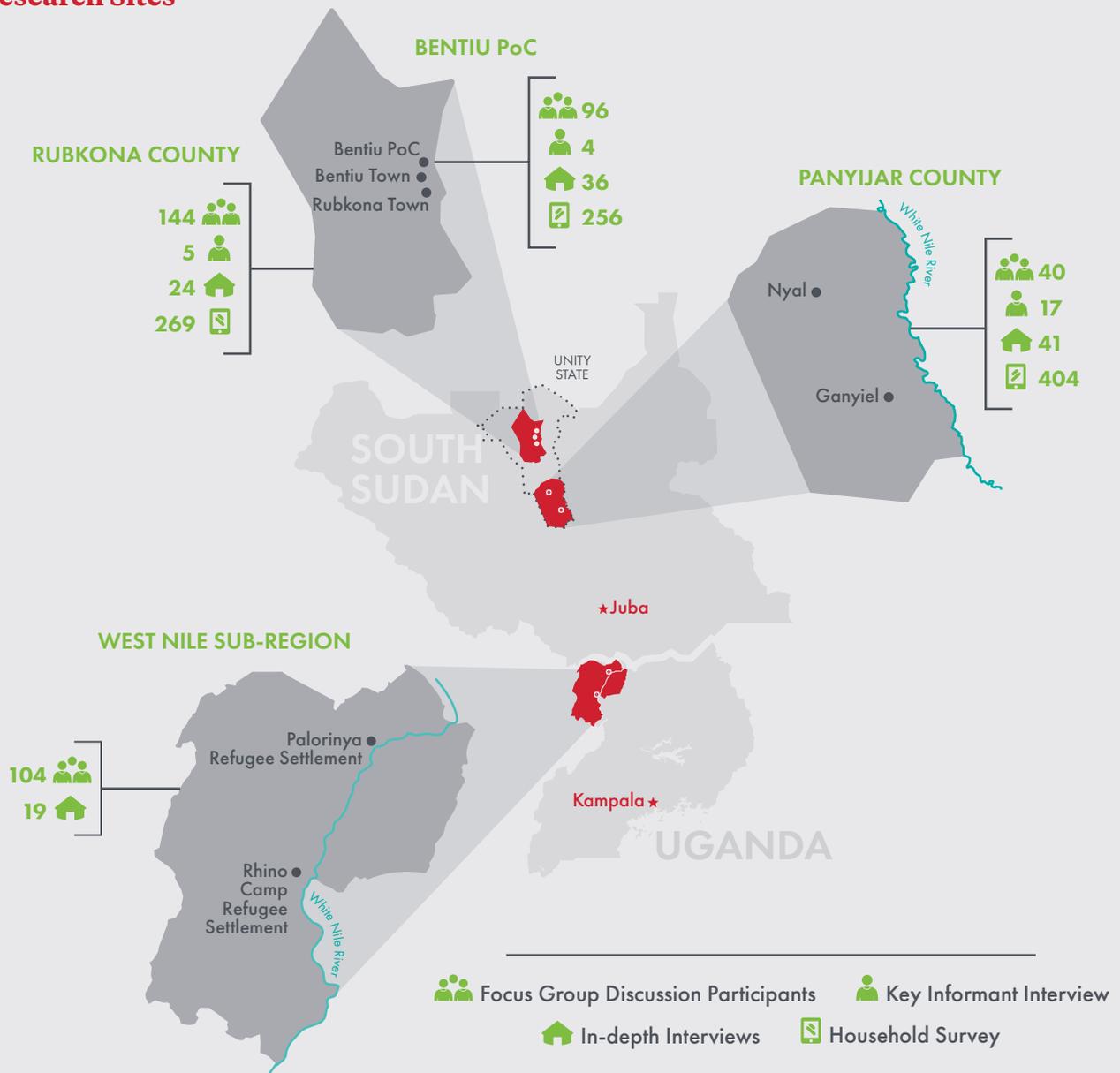


FIGURE 3: Currency of Connections Research Program Research Sites

Study sites were selected in order to capture variations in the nature of social connectedness and its linkages to resilience in diverse conflict and displacement contexts (Figure 3). In South Sudan, this included rural communities home to significant resident and displaced populations, as well as densely-populated displacement camp settings. Though this report exclusively discusses findings from South Sudan, research was also conducted in refugee settlements in West Nile, Uganda in order to consider social connectedness in cross-border contexts as part of the broader Currency of Connections research program.<sup>13</sup>

13 See: Stites, Elizabeth, and Alex Humphrey. 2020. "The Currency of Connections: The Role of Social Connectedness among South Sudanese Refugees in West Nile, Uganda." Washington, D.C.: Mercy Corps.

**Panyijar County**, in southern Unity State, is in an area that remained under the control of opposition forces for the duration of the conflict in South Sudan. The region, which is home to an almost exclusively Nuer population, 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. As a result, the county hosts a large number of internally displaced people, estimated at 74,888 individuals in August 2018.<sup>14</sup> Most internally displaced people in Panyijar are thought to be displaced from neighboring Leer and Mayendit counties, which have been home to some of the conflict's most intense fighting. The vast majority of internally displaced people in Panyijar report having strong social connections in the county that predate their arrival and informed their decisions to relocate to the region. Although Panyijar may provide a degree of refuge to those fleeing violence, displaced and resident populations still face several other shocks and stresses, including drought, food insecurity, revenge killings, and cholera.

### **Rubkona County**

#### **Bentiu and Rubkona Town**

Rubkona County, located in northern Unity State, experienced heavy fighting and egregious violence during the current crisis in South Sudan. Over the course of the conflict, Rubkona and Bentiu towns, the largest in the county, shifted between government and opposition control numerous times, and while government forces currently have a firm control of much of the county, select pockets remain under opposition control. Rubkona County is home to an overwhelmingly Nuer population, and unlike other parts of South Sudan where political conflict has taken on inter-ethnic dimensions, the majority of the violence in Rubkona county has been fought between Nuer populations and splinter groups.<sup>15</sup>

#### **Bentiu Protection of Civilian site**

The Bentiu Protection of Civilian site in Rubkona County was established in December 2013, when conflict broke out in South Sudan between forces loyal to President Salva Kiir Mayardit and Vice President Riek Machar. Within days of the outbreak of the conflict, thousands of civilians had poured into United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) 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. The Bentiu site remains home to approximately 118,000 residents, making it by far the largest of South Sudan's six PoCs.<sup>16</sup>



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14 IOM. 2018. "Panyijar Biometric Registration."

15 Danish Demining Group. 2017. "Dynamics of Youth and Violence: Findings from Rubkona County, Unity State."

16 UNMISS. 2020. "UNMISS Protection of Civilian (PoC) Sites Update No. 273."

## Qualitative Method

In order to examine the diverse perspectives and lived experiences of social connectedness as well as to inform the development of the household survey and the contextualization of its results, the research team<sup>17</sup> conducted in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). Members of the research team also conducted key informant interviews with various community leaders, including religious, traditional, and government authorities, to complement household interviews and FGDs and to identify additional areas for qualitative inquiry. Interviews were conducted in Nuer and Juba Arabic 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. When participants preferred not to be recorded, researchers took notes by hand. Transcripts were analyzed using Dedoose through an iterative process of inductive coding, paying attention to patterns that emerged from the research, rather than assigning predetermined analytic categories.

### Sampling

Between September 2018 and January 2020, the research team conducted 101 in-depth interviews, 35 FGDs, and 26 key informant interviews. Interview and FGD participants were recruited by purposive sampling. A diverse cross section of participants were sampled in order to obtain an understanding of the varied ways in which households experience the crisis, and the ways in which social connectedness affects coping and recovery. Participants included male and female residents, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and returnees of diverse ages and various livelihoods. Key informant interviews were conducted with chiefs and other traditional authorities, religious and political leaders, and NGO staff.



South Sudan—Jennifer Huxta for Mercy Corps

<sup>17</sup> The research team was composed of South Sudanese researchers employed by Mercy Corps (Nyuon Moses Gathuoy, Gatjang Gabriel Kai, Kuerdiil Maziaw Chuol, Thompson Kulong, and Gatleah Pakita Nyasunday), expatriate researchers from Mercy Corps (Alex Humphrey, Jeeyon Kim, Vaidehi Krishnan) and expatriate researchers from the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University (Anastasia Marshak, Elizabeth Stites, Daniel Maxwell).

## Quantitative Method

There is little consensus about how quantitative tools can be used to effectively measure social connectedness. Previous efforts to quantify social connectedness, including those in the resilience field, have tended to cast attention on the *economic* resources which can be mobilized in times of hardship through households' networks, narrowly defined by geographic proximity or other pre-selected socioeconomic characteristics. These approaches are, in turn, not fully reflective of the context and do not adequately account for the nuances and dynamics of peoples' social connections, especially in terms of how they relate to coping and recovery during crises.

With these gaps in mind, the research team adopted a more holistic conceptualization and in turn, developed a culturally-contextualized survey module to quantitatively measure households' social connectedness. Informed by the study's qualitative data, rich literature, and consultations with key experts, members of the research team constructed a household survey to examine the linkages between social connectedness and resilience in a manner which reflected the lived experiences of the study population. The social connectedness module was composed of 24 survey questions designed to measure six dimensions of social connectedness:



### **Number**

The number of people a household can call in times of need



### **Diversity**

The different types of social connections a household can call or be called upon in times of need



### **Reliability**

Confidence in a household's ability to call upon its social connections to mobilize resources in times of need



### **Reciprocity**

A household's ability to provide help to its social connections in times of need



### **Resources**

The different types of economic and non-economic resources a household receives and/or provides to its social connections in times of need



### **Dynamics**

Changes to a household's ability to receive and provide economic and/or non-economic resources to its social connections in times of need

The social connectedness module was then integrated within a broader household survey which included questions about a host of other household- and community-level factors which were conceptually and contextually relevant to an investigation of the linkages between households' social connectedness and their resilience. All survey questions were translated into Nuer, the primary language spoken in the research sites. The research team then carefully and iteratively back-translated and piloted survey questions in order to ensure that the survey was culturally appropriate and that the translation honored the intended purpose of each question.

## Sampling

Recognizing that both social connectedness and resilience—and their linkages—are dynamic, the same households were surveyed twice using a panel design to capture changes over time. During the first round of data collection (April to May 2019), 929 households were surveyed; approximately six months later (October to November 2019), nearly 90% of the households (n 828) were surveyed again.<sup>18</sup>



South Sudan—Chris Rooks, Mercy Corps

The research team calculated the sample size by displacement status (e.g. resident, IDP living inside the Bentiu PoC, IDP living in host communities in Rubkona and Panyijar counties<sup>19</sup>). For the Bentiu PoC, the International Organization for Migration provided a population list from January 2019. For Rubkona and Panyijar counties, respondents were randomly selected from Mercy Corps’ Resilient Communities through Viable Economic Recovery (RECOVER) program’s beneficiary target list. This likely meant that respondents disproportionately included households with specific characteristics identified as RECOVER program vulnerability and targeting criteria, which were based on household food security, level of poverty, living conditions, gender and displacement status. For logistical reasons including insecurity, impassibility of roads during rainy seasons, and distance between research sites, several bomas in Panyijar (Gabrek, Maluok, Borjani, and Paliey) were removed from the population list.<sup>20</sup> In turn, the final sampling list for Rubkona and Panyijar counties was representative of areas that were secure and accessible during the data collection and of households on the RECOVER program’s beneficiary target list.

## Constructing the Social Connectedness Index and Dimensions



The research team used 24 different variables to measure six dimensions of social connectedness. Prior to their construction into the six dimension-specific indices and the overarching Social Connectedness Index, the 24 variables were standardized so that all variables and in turn the constructed indices can have a common interpretation: *a higher score implies higher social connectedness, and a lower score, lower social connectedness*. For each of the six dimensions of social connectedness, constituent standardized variables were summed into dimension-specific indices. An overarching Social Connectedness Index was constructed using Principal Component Analysis (PCA).

18 The research team aimed to survey the same respondent from the household for both rounds of data collection. However, this was not always possible given operational constraints and the displaced nature of these households; 81% of the surveys in the second round of data collection were conducted with the same respondent.

19 As described above, the internally displaced population residing in the Bentiu PoC site in Rubkona County face unique protection, living, and livelihood conditions which are distinct from the experiences of IDP households living amongst the host community. Based on these contextual considerations and qualitative insights, the survey sampled IDP households living *inside* and *outside* the Bentiu PoC as separate groups. As study findings highlight, substantial differences emerge in terms of household social connectedness and their resilience between these two groups.

20 A boma is a South Sudanese administrative subunit, which falls under a “payam,” which falls under a county, and is comparable to a neighborhood.

Between the two rounds of data collection, there was a significant improvement in the Social Connectedness Index and all six dimensions—highlighting these contextualized indicators’ ability to pick up changes over a relatively short period of time (e.g. ~six months). The magnitude of the improvement across the different dimensions differed. The largest improvement over time was for the Diversity, Dynamics, and Resources dimensions, while there was a comparatively smaller change across the two rounds for the Number, Reliability, and Reciprocity dimensions. These improvements were likely due in part to the fact that the second round of data collection occurred during the harvest season while the first round took place during the hunger gap.<sup>21</sup>

The research team analyzed associations using both the Social Connectedness Index and dimension-specific indices to examine relationships between individual dimensions and outcomes of interest (e.g. household- and community-level factors, household food security, subjective resilience). This report describes the direction and strength of the associations but does not include their magnitude, given the process of standardization across all the variables, summation for each dimension, and the use of weights to construct the PCA-generated Social Connectedness Index.

### ***Analysis***

Depending on the research question at hand, the research team considers the Social Connectedness Index and the six dimension-specific indices as outcome or explanatory variables of interest. Given the panel nature of the data set, the research team used fixed effects and random effects models. As illustrated in the conceptual framework, the relationships examined in this study are complex and likely bidirectional. In the study’s exploration of the research questions, the assumed directionality of the relationships are noted at the outset of the discussion. Where appropriate, the report also describes plausible reverse associations to add further nuance to the study’s exploration of local systems of coping and support in South Sudan.

Due to their confounding nature, variables capturing households’ experiences of shocks and their perceived impact are excluded from these analyses. While the experience of shocks is never positive, households that are better off might report experiencing more shocks because they have more to lose in the first place. For example, those with more land are also more likely to report a poor harvest, while those with more livestock are more likely to experience livestock disease. In both rounds of data collection, a majority of respondents reported experiencing climatic, economic, and conflict-related shocks. The study’s panel design and use of fixed effects models allow the analyses to control the biases that may arise due to the omitted time-invariant shock and impact variables.<sup>22</sup>

For each model, regressions were run for the overall sample and sub-samples, stratified by households’ self-reported displacement status: 1) resident, 2) IDP living inside the Bentiu PoC, and 3) IDP living outside the PoC. In this report, only associations from the full model with a p-value less than 0.10 are described as significant. Additional details on the household survey, the construction of the Social Connectedness Index, quantitative sampling strategy, and analyses are provided in the online appendix.

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21 The quantitative analyses control for data collection round in all associations.

22 Kohler, Ulrich. 2012. *Data Analysis Using Stata*. 3rd ed. College Station, Tex: Stata Press.



South Sudan—Cassandra Nelson, Mercy Corps

## Research Question #1: How do households rely on their social connections during conflict and displacement?

Socially connected households in South Sudan have a long history of providing one another with various forms of material and intangible support. While the bases of social connectedness and the strength of certain types of connections have changed during South Sudan's protracted crisis, the support shared between social connections has become especially critical to households' abilities to cope and recover in the context of conflict and its related insecurity, shocks and stresses. However, households' social connectedness varies significantly by their displacement status, and in particular, whether or not households live inside the PoC.

Quantitatively, IDPs living *inside* the PoC score significantly lower on the Social Connectedness Index and all dimensions compared to residents—even when a variety of household- and community-level factors are accounted for in the analysis. They are more likely to report that they have fewer social connections and that their networks are less diverse and reliable. Households living in the PoC are also less likely to reciprocate and are unable to mobilize as many resources through their networks.

On the other hand, IDPs living *outside* of the PoC score comparably to residents on the Social Connectedness Index and the six social connectedness dimensions. While they have fewer social connections and are less likely to report an improvement in their ability to get help between data collection rounds than residents, internally displaced households living outside of the PoC are also able to mobilize more types of resources through their connections than residents.

### ***Types of support***

Households share various types of material and intangible support with one another, which are critically important to their abilities to cope and recover during crises. In both rounds of data collection, nearly all households reported receiving some form of support from their social connections in the past six to 12 months.<sup>23</sup> The types of support that households share with one another are diverse and vary in some cases based on the household's displacement status (**Figure 4**).

23 In Round 1 (conducted between April - May 2019), 98% of households reported receiving at least one type of material and non-material support through their social connections in their place of residence in the past 12 months. In Round 2 (n 828, conducted between October-November 2019), all households reported receiving at least one type of material and non-material support through their social connections in their place of residence in the past six months.

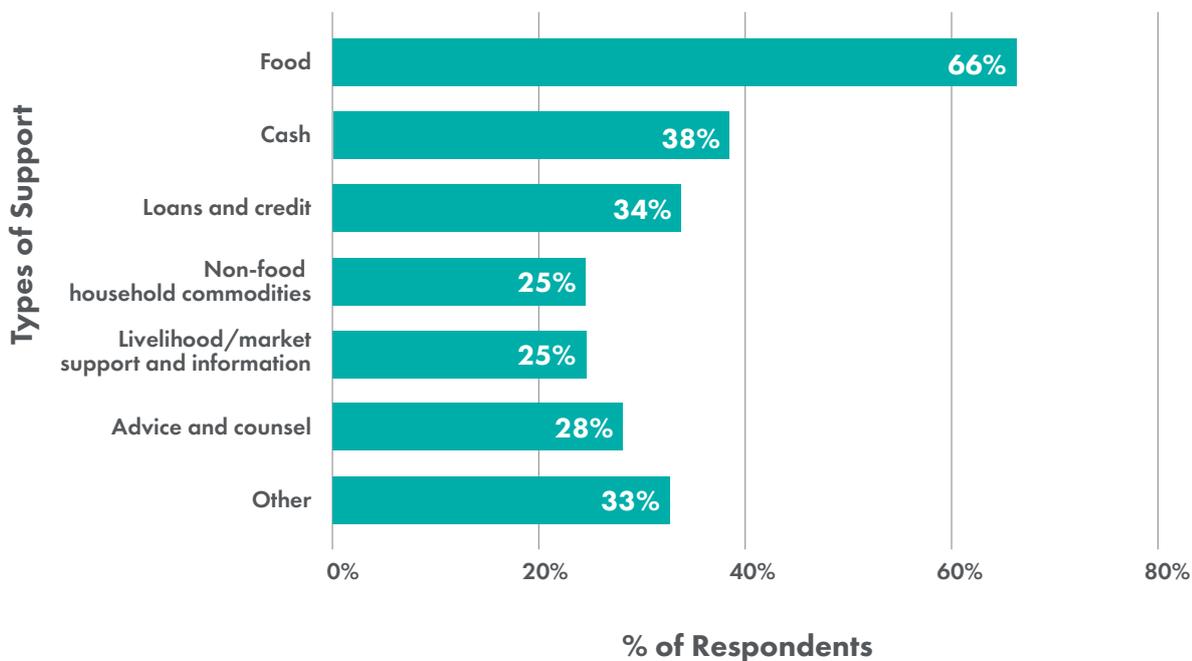


FIGURE 4: Types of Support Received from Social Connections (n 929)<sup>24</sup>

Food is the primary currency of social connection. In Round 1, 66% of respondents reported receiving food through their networks in the past 12 months. Many households also rely on their connections for cash, loans and credit, and non-food commodities in times of need. Households also share livelihood and market support and information, advice and counsel, transportation, and social function support.

The extent and types of support that are shared between households of all kinds, has changed over the course of South Sudan’s crisis. Resource scarcity during the crisis has led to a depletion in the amount of material support that is shared, particularly in the Bentiu PoC. IDPs in the PoC are often separated from, or have lost assets, especially cattle in the course of their displacement. As one man in the Bentiu PoC explained, “The life we live in the camp is different from the life we lived outside. When we were outside, our relationships were kept strong by the resources we had. The cows we had kept us together because we could support each other with them...But now in the camp, we have no cows for support.”<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, households continue to provide and receive relatively small, but still critically important amounts of support to one another.

› *The life we live in the camp is different from the life we lived outside. When we were outside, our relationships were kept strong by the resources we had. The cows we had kept us together because we could support each other with them...But now in the camp, we have no cows for support.*

—Male research participant, Bentiu PoC

<sup>24</sup> Figure 4 summarizes the types of support households reported that they received from their social connections in the past 12 months at their current place of residence. The ‘other’ category includes livestock gift and sharing, labor exchange, transportation, and social function support.

<sup>25</sup> Focus Group Discussion with men, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.

## Types of Connections

Broadly, households' social connections fall into three categories: kin, non-kin, and livelihood-based relationships. The ways in which these relationships are established and maintained, the forms of support that are shared between connections, and the rules and norms that underpin the provision of such support differ in important ways according to each 'category' of connection.

### *Kin connections*

Kinship-based support between households related by blood or marriage is a critical component of coping and social protection in South Sudan. Kinship networks, which are built and expanded by marriage and cemented by the exchange of bridewealth, are extensive and include individuals far beyond the immediate family of the bride and groom. Sharing between kin is reciprocal, governed by a sense of obligation, and enforced by strong cultural norms. The failure to abide by these norms may lead to a household's exclusion and inability to mobilize support in the future. In this sense, kinship based connections may ensure access to important forms of material support, but also may imply obligations to provide support, which in some cases can come at the expense of a household's own wellbeing in the immediate term.

### *Non-kin connections*

Relationships between nonkin—friends, neighbors, age mates and others—represent a second key category of social connections in South Sudan. Nonkin may be especially important social connections for IDPs, including those who reside both inside and outside the Bentiu PoC, who may not have any relatives residing in the area. While sharing and support among nonkin are strongly rooted in Nuer culture, unlike kinship-based sharing, the practice is not regulated by explicit rules and norms. Nonetheless, such sharing is widely practiced, primarily because it allows households to seek and receive reciprocal support in future times of need.

### *Livelihood-based connections*

Relationships based on a shared livelihood activity represent a third category of social connection in South Sudan. Certain livelihoods, including fishing, cattle keeping, and trading are often practiced in informal groups based on bonds of trust between members. Informal rules and norms may dictate that group members provide one another with critical material and non-material support in response to both livelihood-related challenges as well as household needs. For example, norms require that the members of cattle keeping associations redistribute cattle to other members whose herds have been depleted by raiding. In an effort to ensure that the associations are insulated from conflict or social tensions that have the potential to damage the viability of the group's common livelihood, groups may also adopt informal rules and norms that govern the ways in which members interact with the wider community. For example, trade and fishing associations often prohibit their members from drinking excessively, committing adultery, or engaging in intercommunal violence. While informal livelihood groups predate the current crisis in South Sudan, they have become especially important bases of social connectedness and sources of support for their members during the current humanitarian crisis.



South Sudan— Jennifer Huxta for Mercy Corps

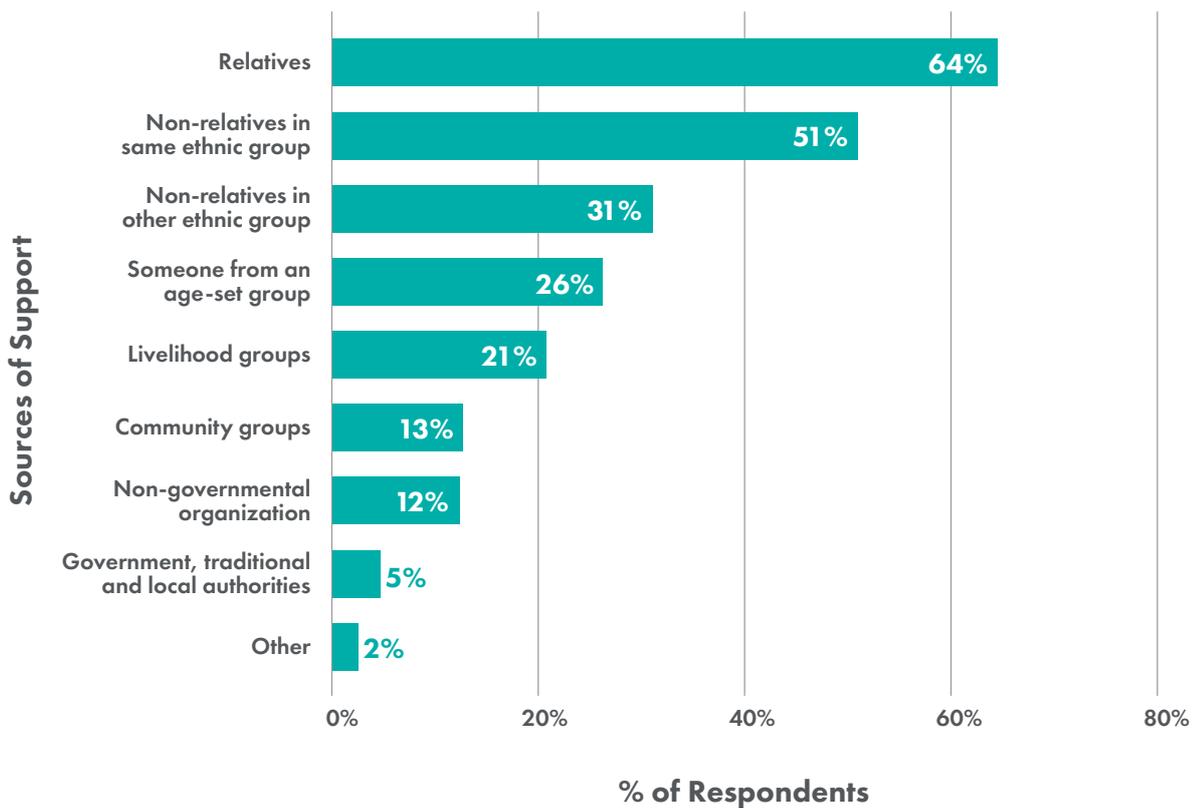


FIGURE 5: Sources of Support (n 929)<sup>26</sup>

In the context of conflict and displacement, households in South Sudan continue to rely on various types of social connections for support - often more than they depend on external aid actors. In both rounds of data collection, households reported relying on a variety of social connections for help in times of need. Kin and non-kin based relationships (e.g. friends, neighbors) account for the vast majority of the sources of support reported by respondents. Comparatively, in times of need, households rely less on their connections with livelihood- and community-based groups (Figure 5). Formal assistance appears to be a relatively limited source of support for the households, with fewer than 12% and 5% of the respondents reporting that they rely on non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and government bodies and local authorities as sources of support, respectively.

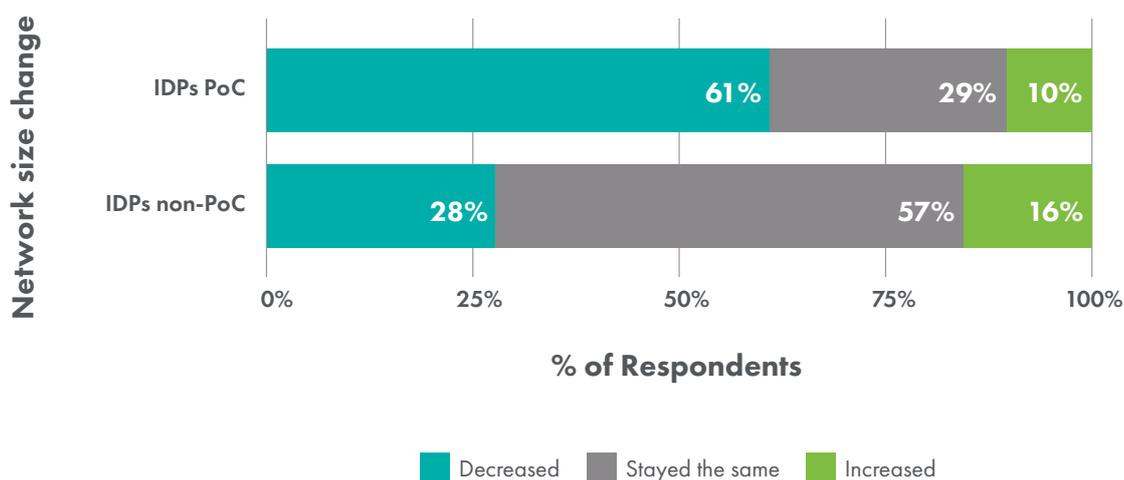


South Sudan—Dominic Nahr for Mercy Corps

<sup>26</sup> Figure 5 summarizes the types of social connections that households reported that they can rely on for help in their current places of residence (Round 1). **Kin relations** include relatives; non-kin relations include **non-relatives** in own ethnic group/clans, non-relatives in other ethnic group/clans, individuals from an age-set group that member(s) of the household may belong to; **livelihood and community groups** include livelihood groups that the households belong to and do not belong to and community-based groups; and **formal assistance** includes non-governmental organizations, government and local authorities, and traditional authorities.

# How do households maintain and build social connections during conflict and displacement?

It is commonly assumed that conflict and displacement disrupt social relationships and support systems. Indeed, participants in this study explained that violent conflict, displacement, and family separation have disrupted certain social connections, especially ones based on kinship. However, households are also taking intentional steps to forge new connections and strengthen existing networks in this context. In fact, the majority of IDPs living outside of the PoC report that their social network size has either stayed the same or increased since their displacement (**Figure 6**).<sup>27</sup>



**FIGURE 6:** Changes in Network Size in Displacement (n 341)

The majority of the IDPs living *inside* the Bentiu PoC (61%), on the other hand, report that their network size has *decreased* since their displacement. Many participants explained that this was due to households’ separation from their kinship networks as they sought refuge from the outbreak of violence in the PoC. While the conflict and the effects of displacement to PoCs have both disrupted and reconfigured bases of social organization and connectedness, households in the PoC continue to forge new and diverse connections. IDP participants celebrated that the new relationships they have formed since being displaced 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>28</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 connected to many people from different counties, like Guit, Leer, Panyijar, and others.”<sup>29</sup> These narratives and findings suggest that displacement is not inherently detrimental to social connectedness. They also highlight the agency of households who employ particular strategies to establish new social connections and maintain existing ones. This section describes these strategies.

<sup>27</sup> Round 1. For households who identified as being internally displaced, the survey inquired: In general, since your displacement, would you say that the number of people you could turn to when you need help has: increased, stayed the same, or decreased.

<sup>28</sup> Focus group discussion with female research participants, Bentiu POC, March 2019.

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

## Reciprocal Sharing during Displacement

By strategically sharing material support, households are able to maintain their social networks and develop new social connections in the context of conflict and displacement. Building new social connections is particularly strategic for IDPs, especially those residing outside of the Bentiu PoC. In both rounds of data collection, over 60% of IDPs living outside of the PoC reported that they provided help to their social connections.<sup>30</sup> Strategic sharing is an important means of establishing reciprocal and supportive relationships with members of the resident community. As one female member of the resident community in Panyijar explained, “whoever comes to our community is considered a member, if they are willing to cooperate with the people within the community who are already here participating in the sharing obligations.”<sup>31</sup> In fact, quantitative analysis shows that the number of times that a household reports being displaced is significantly associated with how diverse its social connections are.

› *Whoever comes to our community is considered a member, if they are willing to cooperate with the people within the community who are already here participating in the sharing obligations.*

—Female research participant, Panyijar County

Through such relationship-building efforts, IDPs can eventually change their displacement status and become considered residents. This transition has important implications for the types of relationships households can build and relatedly, the types of support on which they can rely. A female resident in Panyijar, for example, explained that becoming a resident changes the extent and sources of support that IDPs can turn to during difficult times. “Once an IDP becomes a [resident],” she explained, “they can get big support from the clan they join.”<sup>32</sup> The amount of time it takes an IDP household to transition to being considered a member of the [resident] community depends largely on the strength of the social connections they are able to form. A male IDP in Panyijar, for example, explained this timing depends on the IDPs’ “cooperation and good will he has with the community he is in,” and a male resident similarly suggested that this timing “depends on IDPs’ connections with the people they have found in the communities that they have moved to.”<sup>33</sup>



South Sudan—Dominic Nahr, Mercy Corps

30 In Rounds 1 and 2, 60% and 64% of households internally displaced outside the PoC reported providing help to their social connections who reside in their boma.

31 In-depth interview with female research participant, Panyijar County, August 2019.

32 In-depth interview with female research participant, Panyijar County, August 2019.

33 In-depth interviews with male research participants, Panyijar County, August 2019.

Residents also described the strategic value of sharing material support with IDPs as a means of establishing new social connections. In both rounds of data collection, nearly 60% of residents reported providing support to their social connections.<sup>34</sup> Participants from both Panyijar and Rubkona counties, for example, explained that members of the resident community actively share material support, especially food aid, with internally displaced people (including those with whom they share no kinship-based relationship) with the intention of diversifying their own networks and building relationships with households from new geographies in South Sudan. Residents said they look forward to these internally displaced people eventually returning to their communities of origin because residents will in turn be able to benefit from access to geographically expansive support networks.

› *When internally displaced people... come to us, we must welcome them and share what little we have. This way, we make new connections. This is important because it means I can expand the number of people I know. Tomorrow I can go to [neighboring counties] and I will know people there. I can travel there without fear and know that when I go there, there will be people with whom I have connections and from whom I can get support.*

—Male research participant, Panyijar County

The same respondents celebrated that their new social connections with internally displaced people residing in Panyijar will later facilitate travel to new communities and create a wider safety net to fall back on during future instability. As one male host in Panyijar explained, “When internally displaced people...come to us, we must welcome them and share what little we have. This way, we make new connections. This is important because it means I can expand the number of people I know. Tomorrow I can go to [neighboring counties] and I will know people there. I can travel there without fear and know that when I go there, there will be people with whom I have connections and from whom I can get support.”<sup>35</sup> These narratives highlight the strategies that underpin household sharing, and emphasize that even in the midst of protracted humanitarian crisis, households employ significant agency in mobilizing reciprocal support.



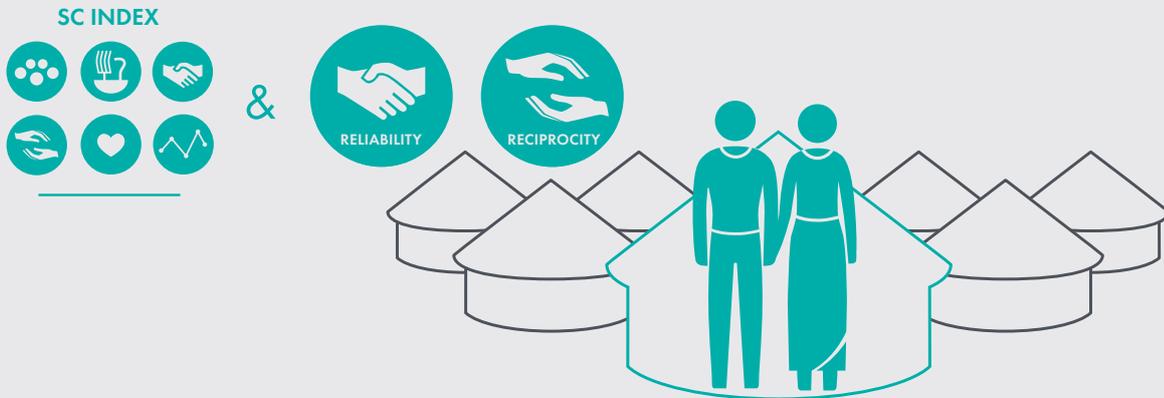
South Sudan—Lindsay Hamsik, Mercy Corps

<sup>34</sup> In Rounds 1 and 2, 59% and 66% of resident households reported providing help to their social connections who reside in their boma.

<sup>35</sup> In-depth interview with male research participant, Panyijar County, November 2018.

## Marriage

Marriage is critical for households' social connectedness. Households who had a member marry score significantly higher on the Social Connectedness Index, as well as Reliability and Reciprocity dimensions.



Marriage is another strategy that households employ as a means of expanding social networks which long predates the conflict. Traditionally, new relationships are established between the giving and receiving parties in the course of the bridewealth exchange which often includes a protracted negotiation process (**Figure 7**). Marriage in turn leads to strong bonds between households and new, diversified and lasting sources of support long after the marriage ceremony has ended. Marriage is cemented in the payment of bridewealth, and various informal rules and norms dictate many aspects of the exchange, which traditionally is conducted using cattle. Norms determine, for example, the particular members of the bride's extended family who are eligible to receive payment, the number of cattle certain individuals receive, and sometimes even the color and type of cattle to which particular relatives are entitled.

During the first round of data collection, nearly 40% of respondents reported that a member of their household had married in the past 12 months.<sup>36</sup> Quantitative analyses show that households who had a member marry in the last six to 12 months scored significantly higher on the Social Connectedness Index.<sup>37</sup> These households are also more likely to have more reliable and reciprocal connections compared to those who did not have any member marry in the past year. While the quantitative analyses examined how marriage contributes to households' social connectedness, it is also likely that those who are more socially connected are better able to marry. Traditionally, households who were more socially connected were better able to navigate the extensive consultations and interactions required for the marriage process. They could rely on extended family and clan members for support and more readily mobilize the necessary cattle and cash from their networks to pay as bridewealth.

36 In Round 2 (n 828), nearly 30% of the households reported that a member was married in the past six months. In Nuer society, marriages are seasonal. Most marriage ceremonies are conducted during the harvest season (September - November) when food stocks are plentiful and to a lesser extent, as rainy seasons begin in April through May when cattle are well-fed and can be presented as a satisfactory bridewealth.

37 In this discussion, households' reports of marriage in the past six or 12 months are treated as the explanatory variable of interest and household social connectedness as the primary outcome variable in fixed and random effects models.

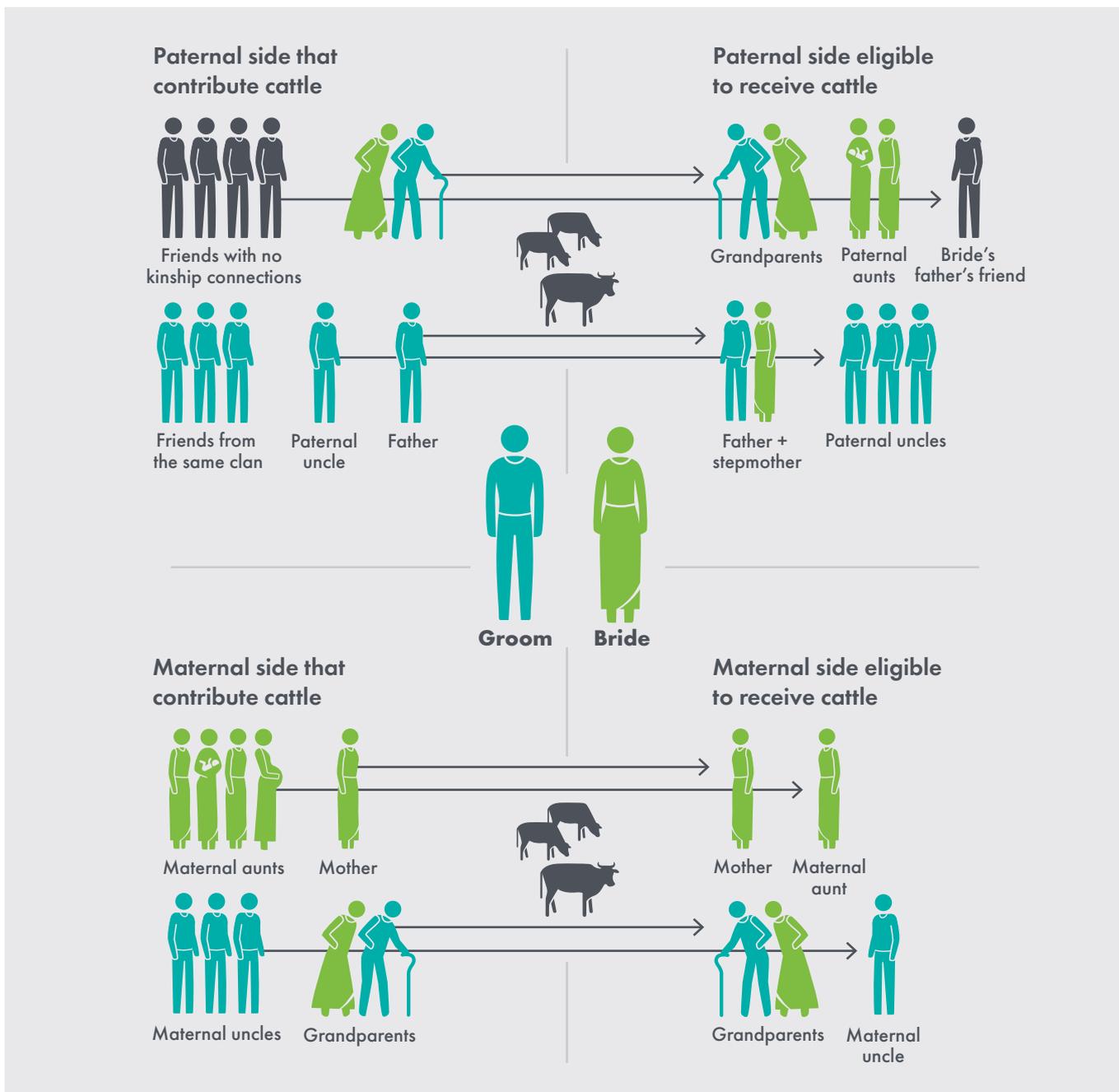


FIGURE 7: Bridewealth Cattle Exchange

However, key characteristics of the marriage and bridewealth exchange process have changed during the crisis in South Sudan, particularly as a result of displacement.<sup>38</sup> These changes have important implications for the ways in which households are socially connected and the extent to which they can rely on their kin for support. In the PoC, for example, bridewealth is now paid primarily in cash, rather than cattle, and some households outside the PoC are also increasingly, though to much lesser degree, using cash as bridewealth.<sup>39</sup>

38 For an in-depth discussion on the changes to wedding rituals and nature of marriages in the Bentiu PoC and neighboring areas of Rubkona and Bentiu towns, refer to Krystalli et al. (2019). Krystalli, Roxani, Elizabeth Stites, Alex Humphrey, and Vaidehi Krishnan. 2019. "The Currency of Connections: The Impact of Weddings and Rituals on Social Connections in Bentiu, South Sudan." Washington, D.C.: Mercy Corps.

39 Cash in lieu of cattle as part of bridewealth existed in Nuer society prior to outbreak of violence in the early 1980s, but it was relatively rare, normally consisted of only a small part of the total transfer, and the bride's family frequently quickly converted the cash into cattle. In the violence and massive displacement that followed, many families did shift to cash for at least part of the bridewealth, although ideally half of the payment was meant to remain in the form of cattle. See: Hutchinson, Sharon Elaine. 1996. *Nuer Dilemmas: Coping with Money, War, and the State*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

This is both because people are not allowed to keep cattle inside the PoC and because many respondents lost their cattle in militarized cattle raids or displacement during the conflict. The shift to cash has affected perceptions regarding who can afford to get married (i.e. who has access to this resource), with one participant noting that “the people that mostly marry with money these days are the ones working in the NGOs.”<sup>40</sup> In addition, this shift changes the nature, duration, and sharing of the bridewealth among relatives and clan members, with impacts upon the nature of social connections across this broader network.

## Early marriage<sup>41</sup>

Households who had a child marry scored significantly higher on the Number, Diversity, and Resources dimensions.



While early marriage is a strategy for IDPs living outside the PoC to build social connections, it also increases girls’ risk of death or complications from pregnancy and childbirth, disrupts their education, and makes them more vulnerable to violence and discrimination.

Participants suggested that during the crisis, the prevalence of early marriage has increased significantly and attributed this in part to the fact that marriage is an important means of mobilizing material support and expanding social support networks. IDPs living outside the PoC are significantly more likely to report early marriage in the last year than either IDPs living inside the PoC or residents.

Of the households that reported having a member under 18 years of age marry in the past year,<sup>42</sup> the vast majority of these marriages were for girls (92%) and a third of these marriages were for household members who were under 16 years of age. During the crisis, parents may be increasingly motivated to marry off their young daughters to wealthy families in order to obtain material benefits and to expand their households’ social network. As a male youth

*During the crisis, parents ignore the desire of their children and they force their children to marry people who are not of their choice. They do that because they believe that when their children marry such families, they will benefit.*

—Male research participant, Panyijar County

<sup>40</sup> Focus group discussion with women, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.

<sup>41</sup> Early marriage is defined as marriage involving a party under the age of eighteen, in accordance with South Sudan’s Child Act of 2008. Early marriage is considered to be a form of forced marriage, a marriage “in which one and/or both parties have not personally expressed their full and free consent to the union” (OHCHR, n.d.).

<sup>42</sup> In Round 1, 53 households reported that a household member under 18 years of age was married in the past year. In Round 2, 33 households reported the same with a six month recall period.

leader in Panyijar explained, “During the crisis, parents ignore the desire of their children and they force their children to marry people who are not of their choice. They do that because they believe that when their children marry such families, they will benefit. For instance, if the [spouse’s] family was known for cultivating a big part of the land or keeping many home assets, they will believe that their sons or daughters will do the same. This is what brings about [early marriage] in the community.”<sup>43</sup> Similarly, a female community leader in Panyijar suggested that forced marriage is conducted as a means of mobilizing material resources. “The reason behind forced marriage is wealth. Parents force their daughters to marry men who are not their age because they want cows. If someone has no cows and even if the girl likes that man, the parents will totally disagree with her and ask her to marry the one she doesn’t love and has cows. This is the reason as to why forced marriage still exists.”<sup>44</sup>

Indeed, quantitative analyses also show that households in which a child married scored significantly higher on the Number, Diversity, and Resources dimensions of social connectedness than did households in which no children were married.<sup>45</sup> In other words, households who had a child marry are more likely to have a greater number of and more diverse social connections, as well as greater ability to mobilize more types of resources through their networks. While early marriage may facilitate the expansion of a household’s kinship network in the short term, one respondent explained that in the longer term, it may cause social tensions and conflicts between households, that can eventually result in the dissolving of the marriage. “Girls who have been forced to marry people who are not their choice don’t stay happy at their homes. They disobey their husbands and this leads to conflict between the families. They fight, and this makes women feel unwell and run away from home. Or if they don’t run away, they will cheat on their husbands with other men whom they love. These are the consequences of [early] marriage.”<sup>46</sup> In addition to these household-level effects, early marriage also increases girls’ risk of death or complications during pregnancy and childbirth, early departure from school, and sexual, physical, and emotional violence.<sup>47</sup>

### **Research Question #1: Key take-away points**

- › In contexts of protracted conflict and displacement, socially connected households share important forms of material and intangible support with each other. Households often rely more on support shared within their social networks than they do on assistance from external aid actors.
- › Conflict and displacement are not inherently detrimental to social connectedness. Households maintain and build their social networks during crises using two key strategies: by proactively sharing material support and through marriage. While these strategies allow households to access important sources of support, they can entail protection risks.

43 Key informant interview with community leader, Panyijar County, July 2019.

44 Key informant interview with community leader, Panyijar County, July 2019.

45 In this discussion, households’ report of early marriage in the past six or 12 months are treated as the explanatory variable of interest and household social connectedness as the primary outcome variable in fixed and random effects models.

46 Key informant interview with community leader, Panyijar County, July 2019.

47 Buchanan, Elysia. 2019. “Born to Be Married: Addressing Early and Forced Marriage in Nyal, South Sudan.” Juba: Oxfam International.



South Sudan—Dominic Nahr, Mercy Corps

## Research Question #2: What household- and community-level factors are important for households' social connectedness?

Not all households are equally socially connected. This section describes key household- and community-level factors that emerged in both qualitative and quantitative investigation as being critical for social connectedness.<sup>48</sup> While these associations offer important insights into potential bases of household vulnerability, they also highlight factors which may facilitate households' ability to rely on their social connections to cope and recover in the face of shocks and stresses. An understanding of how such factors contribute to households' social connectedness, coping, and recovery may help humanitarian aid actors design more effective interventions that strengthen existing local support systems. Equally, these insights may help humanitarian aid actors avoid inadvertently undermining these important sources of household resilience during crises.

<sup>48</sup> For brevity, this section describes select household- and community-level factors and their associations with social connectedness. These emerged as significant explanatory factors in quantitative analyses, which treated household social connectedness as the primary outcome variable. These factors were also selected given their relevance for donors and practitioners in humanitarian assessments, programming, and/or evaluations. As illustrated in the conceptual framework (Figure 1), these household- and community-level factors likely affect and are affected by households' social connectedness. Where relevant, the report briefly explores these reverse associations in the discussion but primarily focuses on these factors' contribution to households' ability to maintain and build their social networks.

## Household-level Factors

### Age of household head

Household head's age is positively associated with the households' scores on the Social Connectedness Index, as well as the Number, Diversity, Reciprocity, and Resources dimensions.



Age of the household head is also positively associated with the number of types of material and non-material support households are able to receive from and provide to their social connections.

Age plays a role in determining important aspects of a households' social connectedness in South Sudan, by influencing the types of relationships that an individual can establish and the people he or she can turn to for support. Quantitatively, age of the household head also emerges as a significant contributor to households' social connectedness. A household head's age is positively associated with the households' Social Connectedness Index score, as well as the Number, Diversity, Reciprocity, and Resources dimensions. In other words, households with older heads are more likely to have larger and more diverse networks, and are more reciprocal with their social connections. Age of the household head is also positively associated with the number of types of material and non-material support households are able to receive from, and provide to their social connections.

Generally, older individuals, especially men, have larger social networks which participants suggest is a function of their traditional status as respected leaders who play important roles in the social organization of communities. Elder community members may have responsibilities related to the resolution and mediation of conflicts between households and sub-clans, the approval of marriages, and the provision of emotional guidance and advice to community members. Through these interactions, male elders become well-known figures in their communities with expansive and diverse social networks that they can turn to for support during difficult times. Relatedly, young men often describe intentionally seeking to forge strong relationships with elder male members of their community based on the belief that elderly people have spiritual authority to grant them good fortune. According to a male respondent in Panyijar, "Elders are believed to be next to

God. When you give to the elderly, they will be happy to tell you that you shall live long and will produce to the maximum. These are the blessings that people who give to the elders get.”<sup>49</sup>

Age is also an important determinant of social connectedness for men who have been initiated together in the Nuer marking tradition, or ‘gaar.’ Male respondents, including young men, explain that age mates—men who participated in the same initiation ceremonies—are often among the social connections they are closest to, and most reliably able to provide and receive support from. In fact, over 36% of the respondents report that a member of their household turned to someone in their age-set during a time of hardship.<sup>50</sup> Age mates’ social connections with one another are often strengthened through the mutual participation in marriage ceremonies and contribution to their sons’ bridewealth. A young man in the Bentiu PoC explained that, “we pay for bridewealth and provide support to our age mates. Sometimes, I buy a cow and put it aside so that when one of my age mates gets married I will easily be able to give him that cow to add to the bridewealth he will pay for his wife.”<sup>51</sup>

› *We pay for bridewealth and provide support to our age mates. Sometimes, I buy a cow and put it aside so that when one of my age mates gets married I will easily be able to give him that cow to add to the bridewealth he will pay for his wife.*

—Male research participant, Panyijar County



South Sudan—Jennifer Huxta for Mercy Corps

49 In-depth interview with male research participant, Panyijar County, July 2019.

50 Response from Round 2, with a six month recall period (n 828). The survey inquired of the different types of connections households turned to for support in their current places of residence. In Round 1 (n 929, with a 12 month recall period), 26% of the respondents reported that a member of their household turned to someone in their age-set during a time of hardship.

51 Focus group discussion with male research participants, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.

## Gender of household head

Having a female head is positively associated with households' score on the Social Connectedness Index.



Male headed households are more likely to provide material help (e.g. cash, loans, non-food commodities, livelihood input etc.) to social connections, compared to female headed households. There is no significant difference in the households' sharing of food by the gender of the heads.

Female headed households face unique obstacles to forging and maintaining social connections. However, gender norms may also *enable* women to establish other social connections, particularly with other women. In fact, quantitative findings show that female headed households score significantly higher on the Social Connectedness Index compared to households headed by men. In South Sudan, gender norms that predate the country's current crisis may determine the relationships that individuals are able to form and the types of support that they share with and receive from one another. As a function of these norms, men and women have different types of social connections and rely on their connections for different purposes. In some respects, violent conflict, displacement, and the separation of households during the crisis have changed the ways in which men and women interact with, and support one another. Many men have left their families to join armed groups and frequently have been killed, leaving women as de facto heads of household. In both rounds of household surveys, nearly 60% of the respondents reported that they lived in households headed by women.<sup>52,53</sup>

Widows and female headed households face challenges in navigating and establishing new relationships, especially if their natal kin are not close by. As one woman in the Bentiu PoC explained, "my husband's side of the family is also here in the PoC and they 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>54</sup> Women's caretaking responsibilities may also preclude them from leaving their homes and participating in social functions or otherwise interacting with members of their communities. Female heads of household may therefore become isolated and marginalized because, as one woman in Panyijar explained, "mothers must provide security and care for their children at all times, and this makes it difficult for those that are household heads to leave their

52 This is likely in part due to the study's use of beneficiaries list from Mercy Corps' RECOVER program which disproportionately targeted its interventions to female headed households. Additional information on the sampling strategy and size is described in the Methods Section and the online appendix.

53 Notably, numerous participants explained that female headed households can also include ones in which the husband is physically present, but is failing to uphold traditional male gender norms such as demonstrating decisiveness about the use of household assets, or is "lazy" and fails to help provide for his family. In such circumstances, female participants explained that they considered themselves to be the head of their household, despite the presence of a husband.

54 In-depth interview with female research participant, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.

» *There are several types of connections that male headed households can find more easily than female headed households because they share money, cows and other things which is very difficult to be found by the female headed household in this community.*

—Female research participant, Panyijar County

connections that male headed households can find more easily than female headed households because they share money, cows and other things which is very difficult to be found by the female headed household in this community.”<sup>56</sup> Women’s limited decision making authority over material resources likely impedes their ability to grow and/or maintain social connections. Quantitative analysis shows that male headed households share cash, loans, non-food commodities, livelihood inputs, information, livestock gifts, and social function support with their social connections significantly more often than households headed by women.<sup>57</sup> As one woman in Panyijar recalled, “one of the challenges that women face is that they cannot give out cows without a man’s permission...Women must ask permission to share [from men] even if they are the ones heading the households.”<sup>58</sup> Women’s exclusion from decisions related to cattle sharing may be especially isolating given the critical role that the exchange of cattle-based bridewealth plays in social connectedness in South Sudan.

On the other hand, respondents suggested that in some circumstances, women and girls who are nonkin find it easier than men and boys to establish new bonds and share intangible support, including emotional council with each other. Women in the Bentiu PoC, for example, explained that they were members of informal women’s groups in which they provide each other 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 each other advice and emotional support.”<sup>59</sup> Indeed, quantitative analyses also show that female headed households are significantly more likely to turn to community groups for support compared to households headed by men.

homes.”<sup>55</sup> Indeed, quantitative analyses also show that female headed households are significantly less likely than male headed households, to ask for or provide help to non-relatives.

Gender norms that dictate which assets men and women control may also affect household social connectedness. In South Sudan, men traditionally hold authority over decisions related to cash, cattle, and other valuable property, including whether and with whom to share these resources. As one woman in Panyijar explained, “there are several types of



South Sudan—Cassandra Nelson, Mercy Corps

55 In-depth interview with female research participant, Panyijar County, December 2019.

56 In-depth interview with female research participant, Panyijar County, July 2019.

57 Controlling for displacement status, data collection round, and research site. There was no significant difference across gender of household headship related to the following types of support: food, transportation, and advice or counseling.

58 In-depth interview with female research participant, Panyijar County, July 2019.

59 Focus group discussion with female research participants, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.

Additionally, while men control decisions related to household assets, women have authority over decisions related to a household's food, including whether, and with whom to share small amounts. In both rounds of data collection, nearly 50% of the female headed households reported sharing food with their social connections. There was also no significant difference in the households' sharing of food by the gender of the heads. According to a focus group participant in Panyijar, "women primarily control decisions related to food including purchasing food from the market. Men give them money and they go buy whatever is needed for the household's food needs. When it comes to sharing food, if it is a small quantity of food like 1 or 2 gau-gaus [approximately 3.5-7.0 kgs] women can independently make that decision, but if it's larger this decision would be turned over to men."<sup>60</sup> This is especially significant given that food, even when shared in small amounts, remains the main currency of social connectedness in South Sudan. That women retain decision making authority over food ensures that they are able to participate in building and maintaining some inter-household relationships.

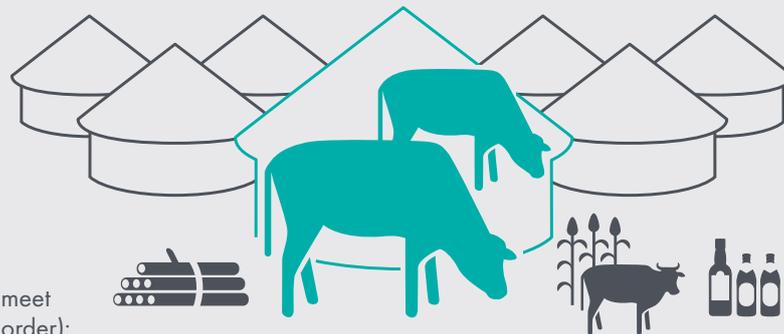


South Sudan—Cassandra Nelson, Mercy Corps

60 Focus group discussion with female research participants, Panyijar County, March 2018.

## Livelihood

Households that practice agriculture as their primary livelihood activity score higher on the Social Connectedness Index.



Top 3 livelihood activities that meet most of households' needs (in order):  
1. Sale of firewood/charcoal; 2. Agriculture; 3. Sale of alcohol

A household's primary livelihood is another important factor for its social connectedness. Quantitative findings demonstrate that agricultural livelihoods, practiced by nearly 24% of the households,<sup>61</sup> are associated with especially high scores on the Social Connectedness Index. Participants explain that households with agricultural livelihoods are able to increase their food stocks and in turn are able to more reliably share food with their social connections. According to a male key informant in Panyijar County, "If you do not have anything to give to your friends when they come to visit you, they lose interest in staying around you. But if there is enough food to give them when they come to you, they will be around you all the time...Farmers are able to stock enough food to serve their large social networks who visit them frequently."<sup>62</sup> Households that practice livelihoods that qualitative participants identified as being preferred, such as livestock related work, trade, skilled labor and salaried work, also scored significantly higher on the Social Connectedness Index.

Conversely, other livelihood activities are associated with especially low levels of social connectedness. For example, households that reported casual labor or the sale of food aid as their primary livelihood scored significantly lower on the Social Connectedness Index compared to households that practiced agriculture, as did households that reported having no livelihood. Households that reported the sale of food aid as a primary livelihood scored especially low on the Numbers, Diversity, and Resources dimensions: These households had fewer connections which were less diverse; they were also able to mobilize limited types

*› If you do not have anything to give to your friends when they come to visit you, they lose interest in staying around you. But if there is enough food to give them when they come to you, they will be around you all the time...Farmers are able to stock enough food to serve their large social networks who visit them frequently.*

—Male research participant, Panyijar County

61 Round 1. In Round 2, 22% of the respondents reported that agriculture was the livelihood activity that helped to meet most of households' current income and in-kind needs.

62 Key informant interview with South Sudanese NGO employee, Panyijar County, March 2020.



South Sudan—Cassandra Nelson, Mercy Corps

of resources through their connections.<sup>63</sup>

Furthermore, when households transitioned to selling food aid as a primary livelihood activity between data collection rounds, this change was associated with a decrease in the number of social connections they could turn to during times of need. This may be because selling food aid depletes a household's own foodstocks, leaving them with fewer surplus resources to share with other households as a means of maintaining their social connections. Additionally, the loss of social connections may be due to the social stigmatization that can result from a household's decision to sell, rather than share food. As a key informant in Panyijar explained, "if your social connections are in starvation and you have some food aid, you will be expected to just give it to them freely. When you sell food aid while your connections are starving, it harms them, and this may lead to the loss of your connections."<sup>64</sup>

Social connectedness also plays an important role in a household's ability to transition to conducting especially desirable livelihoods. Indeed, quantitative analyses show that households that are more socially connected are more likely to be able to practice a preferred livelihood, even when controlling for a host of household and community-level characteristics.<sup>65</sup> Preferred livelihoods often require start-up capital and other forms of material support, which respondents explain is most often obtained through social networks. When asked about the origin of his business, one trader in the PoC explained, "when my friend's daughter got married here in the PoC, he gave me some of the [bridewealth] and I used the money to start doing my business in 2017."<sup>66</sup> Respondents also described receiving practical information and guidance from their social connections which allowed them to adopt new livelihoods. For example, a woman in Panyijar recounted that, "Recently, when there was shortage of food in the community, one of my father's colleagues in the army advised my mother to leave her tea making business and he took her to Tyer Port, and we worked there in his restaurant."<sup>67</sup> These narratives and findings underscore the critical importance of social connections in determining whether households are able to transition to desirable livelihoods during times of crisis.

Further, in South Sudan, select livelihoods including fishing, cattle keeping, and trading, are often practiced in informal associations, the members of which are united by strong bonds of trust. Membership in these associations may offer households specific, unique social benefits. In both rounds of data

63 These significant associations are from full model analyses which control for households' wealth and other conceptually and contextually relevant demographic factors. See the online appendix for the full list of variables included in the analyses.

64 Key informant interview with South Sudanese NGO employee, Panyijar County, March 2020.

65 In order to explore the reverse association, that is the role households' social connectedness plays in their abilities to practice preferred livelihood (versus the role households' livelihood plays in their social connectedness), quantitative analyses treated households' primary livelihood as the outcome variable of interest and Social Connectedness Index as the explanatory variable and controlled for a host of household- and community-level characteristics.

66 In-depth interview with male research participant, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

67 In-depth interview with female research participant, Panyijar County, December 2019.

collection, nearly 80% of the households reported membership in at least one livelihood-based group in the past year.<sup>68</sup> These groups represent a crucial vector of socioeconomic connectedness, offer extensive material and intangible benefits to their members, and have become increasingly important during the current crisis. This is especially true as a result of the disruptive effect that violence and displacement have had on other traditional bases of social connectedness during the crisis. In the Bentiu PoC, for example, the importance of livelihood-based connections is best understood in the context of eroding kinship networks. As one woman in the PoC explained, “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. [...] Now, relatives are more distant than those whom you are not related to.”<sup>69</sup>

Critically, not all households benefit equally from informal livelihood associations. The socioeconomic benefits of these associations are only accessible to households with members who conduct one of three livelihoods that continue to be practiced in groups: fishing, cattle keeping, or trading. Households whose members practice other livelihoods are unable to join livelihood associations and are therefore excluded from the sharing and support that group members offer one another.<sup>70</sup>



South Sudan—Cassandra Nelson, Mercy Corps

68 These livelihood-based groups include farmer’s groups, cattle keeping groups, fishing groups, and trade unions.

69 In-depth interview with female research participant, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.

70 For a more detailed discussion of the role of informal livelihood associations as a vector of social connectedness in South Sudan, see previous reports in the Currency of Connections series including [The Establishment and Reconfiguration of Informal Livelihood Groups in Bentiu, South Sudan](#); and [Why local support systems are integral to helping people recover in South Sudan](#).

## Wealth

Wealthier households score significantly higher on the Social Connectedness Index. Households' access to land is positively associated with the Number and Reliability dimensions.



&



› Wealth is measured using: access to land, asset wealth, tropical livestock unit (animal ownership count), and expenditure.



### Measure of Household Wealth

In order to better understand household wealth and to account for its evolving definition in South Sudan, the study used four different proxies:

- 1 Access to land
- 2 Asset ownership (using Morris Asset Index)
- 3 Livestock ownership (using Tropical Livestock Units per capital)<sup>71</sup>
- 4 Annual total expenditure

Additional details of these proxies are included in the online appendix.

Wealth is another important factor that influences household social connectedness.<sup>72</sup> For all four measures of wealth, relatively wealthy households score significantly higher on the Social Connectedness Index.<sup>73</sup> In particular, access to land is associated with having a greater number of social connections and more reliable sources of support. Increases in a household's asset ownership as well as its annual expenditure are associated with an increase in its social connectedness; even small improvements in wealth had a positive impact on households' score on the Social Connectedness Index.

71 Households in South Sudan treat the specifics about their cattle, including the number, type, and location with great sensitivity, especially in the context of heightened conflict and related cattle raiding. As such, cattle ownership is likely to be significantly under-reported by survey respondents.

72 As households' wealth may contribute to their abilities to maintain and build social networks, it is likely that households who are more socially connected are able to rely on their networks to accrue wealth (e.g. mobilize gifts and loans for productive investments, gain access to cultivable land, benefit from loans of valuable assets such as cattle, cash, or livelihood inputs). In other words, the reverse association between household social connectedness and household wealth is also likely.

73 As noted in the Methods section, the quantitative sample disproportionately includes households with specific characteristics identified by RECOVER program vulnerability and targeting criteria (e.g. level of poverty, living conditions etc.). In turn, this discussion describes associations related to relative wealth proxies within the quantitative sample. Qualitative participants, on the other hand, are purposively recruited to reflect diverse household and socio-economic characteristics, and experiences of the humanitarian crisis. Therefore, the scope of wealth under discussion may not be wholly comparable. Nevertheless, both quantitative associations for relative wealth and qualitative findings on general wealth highlight the importance of households' income, access to land, cattle ownership etc. in their ability to build and maintain connections.

Wealthier households, especially those with reliable income sources, including traders and NGO workers, may share with their immediate kin, but also with members of the wider community with whom they have even limited social connections. As one participant in Panyijar explained, “the wealthy support people a lot in the community. They support people who are not related to them by blood. As long as they know you and have a small connection with you, they support you.”<sup>74</sup> In some cases, such sharing may not be entirely voluntary. As one man in the Bentiu PoC explained, “those who work with NGOs are pressured to share a lot with others, and you see they have fewer resources than other households after the end of their contracts.”<sup>75,76</sup> In other cases, participants suggested that wealthier households are strategically generous in an attempt to expand and maintain their social networks. Indeed, one man in the Bentiu PoC explained that wealthier people “give more because they want people to be friends to them and to bless their work, and also to help them in future when they need support.”<sup>77</sup>

In South Sudan, the indicators of household wealth are changing, particularly in the context of protracted insecurity. Traditionally, wealth has been measured in terms of cattle ownership, the ability to marry, and the possession of cultivable land from which a household is able to produce and stockpile food. Participants explained that cash is an increasingly common currency of exchange in South Sudan. This is particularly true in the Bentiu PoC, where people cannot keep cattle, and many others lost their cattle to raiders or while fleeing conflict. Similarly, though to a lesser extent, cash is replacing the cattle-based economy in rural contexts, including Panyijar County.

South Sudan’s transition towards a cash-based economy has important implications for household social connectedness and support.<sup>78</sup> Participants explained that traditionally, the act of loaning cattle, allowed households to preserve ongoing relationships, given that the cow is eventually transferred back to its owner. The nature and terms of sharing cash, however, are not as conducive to relationship maintenance.

Participants explained that 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, which may result in heightened social tensions and resentment. One female participant stated, “Those who have cash...have become so greedy that they don’t even recognize their friends or relatives who have always been there. Those with no cash want nothing 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 from some other friends.”<sup>79</sup>

› *Those who have cash...have become so greedy that they don’t even recognize their friends or relatives who have always been there.*

—Female research participant, Bentiu PoC

74 In-depth interview with male research participant, Panyijar County, December 2019.

75 In-depth interview with male research participant, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

76 For a detailed discussion of cash sharing obligations that NGO workers experience in South Sudan, see: Santschi, Martina, Ranga Gworo, and Elizabeth White. 2018. “Caught Between Two Cultures: When Aid in South Sudan Is Pulled between Local Norms and Western Systems.” Juba: Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility.

77 In-depth interview with male research participant, Bentiu PoC, December 2019.

78 For an in-depth discussion of South Sudan’s transition to a cash based economy, see: Thomas, Edward. 2019. “Moving Towards Markets: Cash, Commodification and Conflict in South Sudan.” Rift Valley Institute.

79 In-depth interview with female research participant, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

## Community-level Factors<sup>80</sup>

### Market functionality

Access to a functioning market is positively associated with households' scores on the Social Connectedness Index, as well as all dimensions.



Improvements in market functionality associated with improvements in households' scores on the Index, Number, Diversity, Reliability, Reciprocity, and Resources dimensions.

Nearly 80% of respondents report that there is a market in their community in both rounds of data collection.

Marketplaces are venues where buyers and sellers meet to exchange goods and services, and also serve as community gathering places where households are able to maintain and potentially expand their social networks during crises. Quantitatively, market functionality—measured by the availability of a number of products at the market during the time of data collection<sup>81</sup>—emerged as a critical factor for household social connectedness. Market functionality is consistently positively associated with households' score on the Social Connectedness Index, as well as *all* six dimensions of social connectedness. Households who are able to access more goods at their community market are more likely to have a greater number of social connections that are also more diverse and reliable. These households are also likely to be more reciprocal with their connections. These associations are also true over time. When households experience improvements in their ability to access goods at the marketplace, their scores on the Social Connectedness Index and all but one dimension (Dynamics) also improve, highlighting the critical importance of a functioning marketplace to households' ability to maintain and grow their social networks during crises.<sup>82</sup>

In the course of South Sudan's current crisis, livelihoods have collapsed and productive assets have been lost, leaving households increasingly dependent on marketplaces as sources of food and other material inputs. According to one man in Rubkona County, "Before people did not go to the market that much, because they had their farms to cultivate on, and they had dairy cows that produced milk. Back then, I would only go to

<sup>80</sup> "Communities" are defined as the PoC and bomas.

<sup>81</sup> Using a 30-day recall, the survey specifically inquired about the availability of the following items at the marketplace that the respondent typically goes to: lentils/pulses, cereals (sorghum, millet, rice, maize), meat (beef, chicken, goat etc.), fruits and vegetables, sugar, tea, and cattle (e.g. heifer, bull etc.). For analytical purposes, the market functionality variable summed respondents' responses to these seven item-specific questions.

<sup>82</sup> It is also likely that more socially connected households are able to access more types of goods at the market. Given the study's operationalization of market functionality as *availability* of goods, rather than households' access, analyses do not examine the reverse associations.

the market to buy shoes and salt or to sell my farm products. But now, we are all depending on the market for everything, because all that we had is gone.”<sup>83</sup> As discussed above, households often depend on proactively sharing material support with others as a means of maintaining their social networks during crisis. Thus, as other sources of household inputs become unavailable during crisis, the ability to reliably access goods in marketplaces is likely an important determinant of household social connectedness.

In addition to providing access to material goods, marketplaces often serve as important community gathering points where people socialize, share information, and offer advice and emotional council to one another. Indeed, when asked about why they frequented marketplaces, participants often referenced their social significance and psychosocial benefits in addition to their economic importance. As one woman in the PoC explained, “I always go to the market to buy food and sometimes non-food items, and sometimes I just go to the market to tell stories with my friends who are in the market, so that I can maybe forget some of my stress.”<sup>84</sup> Other participants explained that men go to markets to share information, including about the evolving nature of the conflict outside the PoC. As one man in the Bentiu PoC explained, “Men sometimes go to the market to pass time with their colleagues, in most cases by engaging in conversations about what they heard about fighting in places outside the PoC.”<sup>85</sup> Marketplaces thus offer communities important social as well as economic benefits and are critical venues where social connections are maintained and expanded.



South Sudan—Dominic Nahr For Mercy Corps

83 Focus group discussion with male research participants, Rubkona County, March 2019.

84 In-depth interview with female research participant, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

85 In-depth interview with male research participant, March 2019.

## Access to money sender

Access to a money sender is positively associated with households' scores on the Social Connectedness Index.



**Gaining** access to a money sender is associated with **improvements** on households' scores on the Index, as well as the Diversity, Reliability, Reciprocity, and Resources dimensions.

› 50% of households report that there is a money sender in their community in both rounds of data collection.

Access to money senders is another factor that is consistently associated with household social connectedness. The ability to send and receive cash enables separated households to continue to exchange support over long distances, and in turn to maintain their social connections. Many South Sudanese do not have access to mobile financial services. In much of the country, including Panyijar County, there is no functioning mobile network, and the vast majority of South Sudanese remain unbanked. Nonetheless, households utilize alternative informal services to send cash to one another, most commonly trust-based informal hawala-style systems.<sup>86</sup> This is especially important for displaced households, including those living in the Bentiu PoC, who rely on cash remittances to stay connected to their relatives and other connections residing outside of the PoC. According to one man in the PoC, “My family and I are in touch because...I used to send them money using the money sender inside the PoC, and then sometimes I go outside and see them and sometimes they come inside the PoC to see us.”<sup>87</sup>

Access to money senders is consistently positively associated with households' score on the Social Connectedness Index. These associations are also true over time. When households are able to gain access to a money sender, their score on the Social Connectedness Index as well as the Diversity, Reliability, Reciprocity, and Resources dimensions also improve. In other words, households who

› *My family and I are in touch because...I used to send them money using the money sender inside the PoC, and then sometimes I go outside and see them and sometimes they come inside the PoC to see us.*

—Male research participant, Bentiu PoC

86 Hawala is a generic term to describe a system in which local agents help customers transfer money between two points. The hawala is typically unregulated and is a side-business of traders and merchants.

87 In-depth interview with male research participant, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.

gain access to money senders are more likely to gain more diverse and reliable social networks, be more reciprocal with their connections, and improve their ability to mobilize resources through their networks. On the other hand, quantitative analyses also show that greater scores on the Social Connectedness Index are associated with households' improved access to a money sender (in particular, the Reliability and Diversity dimensions). This indicates that the relationship between households' access to a money sender and its social connectedness is bidirectional. Households that are more socially connected are able to leverage access to money sending resources which in turn, help improve their social connectedness.

Other participants explained that remitting cash using an informal money sender is an important step towards reunifying households that were separated during the crisis. For example, in Panyijar, participants explained that they relied on informal money senders to remit cash to their relatives residing in the Bentiu PoC. Their relatives would in turn use this cash to pay for transportation back to Panyijar, where they would rejoin their families. As one Mercy Corps cash recipient in Panyijar explained, "When we get money from the [Mercy Corps] cash transfer, we send money to our relatives, so that they can come and join us in Panyijar, because some people got separated from their children during the crisis."<sup>88</sup> Other participants residing in the Bentiu PoC echoed the importance of being able to rely on cash sent through money senders in facilitating family reunification. As one man explained, "Many people are willing to go out [of the PoC] but the problem is that they don't have access to go to the places they want to go. Those who are leaving [the PoC]... communicate to their relatives and then sometimes their relatives send them money, and then they will go."<sup>89</sup>

## Research Question #2: Key take-away points

- › Socio-economic characteristics including age, gender, livelihood, and wealth determine the relationships that households are able to form, and the types of support they can share with and receive from one another.
- › Community-level factors, including access to functioning markets and money senders facilitate households' ability to maintain and grow their social networks.



South Sudan—Dominic Nahr For Mercy Corps

88 In-depth interview with male research participant, Panyijar County, March 2018.

89 In-depth interview with male research participant, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.



South Sudan—Dominic Nahr, Mercy Corps

## Research Question #3: To what extent does social connectedness contribute to households' abilities to cope and recover in the face of shocks and stresses?

In South Sudan, households rely heavily on their social connections for food, access to economic opportunities, emotional support and guidance. This support is critical to households' abilities to cope and recover in the face of shocks and stresses. However, social connectedness is not inherently positive for households. In some cases, sharing obligations and strong enforcement norms may cause households, especially ones with large social networks, to share beyond their own means. This section discusses the ways in which social connectedness facilitates household resilience. It also highlights the limitations in the support households can rely on from their networks during crises.<sup>90</sup>

<sup>90</sup> In this section, households' social connectedness (measured using Social Connectedness Index and the six dimension-specific indices) is treated as the primary explanatory variable. Resilience, using food security and the subjective resilience measures, is considered the key outcome variable. The full model is provided in the online appendix.

## Households' Experiences of Shocks

Households report experiencing a wide variety of economic, climate and conflict-related shocks. The most common shocks are illness of a family member (90%), poorer than expected crop output (78%), and crop pests or disease (77%).<sup>91</sup> While there is a tendency to focus on the role of large covariate shocks—experienced by many households in the same geographic area—survey results indicate that idiosyncratic shocks—experienced by individual households—are as harmful.

Over half of the surveyed households reported violence against both male and female members of their households in both rounds. While these figures highlight the continued reach of the conflict, they likely underestimate the proportion of respondents who have directly and/or indirectly experienced the traumas of the conflict given the limited six- and 12-month recall period.

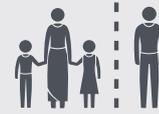


South Sudan—Cassandra Nelson, Mercy Corps

### DISPLACEMENT



**57%**  
of respondents  
were displaced  
at least once



**55%**  
of respondents  
were separated  
from immediate  
family members  
due to conflict

### ASSET LOSS



**64%**  
of respondents  
lost cultivatable  
land due to conflict



**68%**  
of respondents  
lost productive  
livestock due  
to conflict

### VIOLENCE



**54%**  
of respondents  
experienced  
violence against  
a **male**  
family member



**56%**  
of respondents  
experienced  
violence against  
a **female**  
family member

91 Proportion of households who reported experiencing the listed shocks in Round 1 (n 929) with a 12 month recall period.

Given the multidimensional nature of resilience, the research team used various indicators to measure both food security and subjective resilience (**Table 1**). Food security measures externally define resilience using questions that solicit little, if any, judgment on the part of the respondents. Perception-based measures of subjective resilience, on the other hand, remove the external framing of resilience and instead relies on “people’s perception of what resilience means to them, what factors contribute to their own resilience, as well as self-evaluation of their capacities to respond to” future shocks and stresses.<sup>92</sup>

RESILIENCE MEASURE	INDICATORS
Food Security	Food Consumption Score; <sup>93</sup> Household Hunger Scale; <sup>94</sup> and Months of Adequate Household Food Provisioning <sup>95</sup>
Subjective Resilience	Subjectively Evaluated Resilience Scores: <sup>96</sup> Absorptive, adaptive, and transformative capacities

TABLE 1: Resilience Measure and Indicators



South Sudan—Jennifer Huxta for Mercy Corps

- 92 Jones, Lindsey. 2019. “Resilience Isn’t the Same for All: Comparing Subjective and Objective Approaches to Resilience Measurement.” *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews* 10 (1).
- 93 Food Consumption Score (FCS) aggregates the diversity and frequency of food groups consumed over the past seven-days, which are weighted according to the relative nutritional value of the consumed groups. Higher FCS indicates better food consumption status. See: “[Food Consumption Analysis: Calculation and Use of Food Consumption Score in Food Security Analysis](#),” 2008. Rome: World Food Programme.
- 94 Household Hunger Scale (HHS) is an experience-based food security scale and assesses the most severe experiences of food insecurity. Higher HHS indicates greater household hunger. See: Ballard, Terri, Jennifer Coates, Anne Swindale, and Megan Deitchler. 2011. “[Household Hunger Scale: Indicator Definition and Measurement Guide](#).” Washington, D.C.: FANTA.
- 95 The study used Months of Adequate Household Food Provisioning (MAHFP) in the second round of data collection to assess the number of months a household reports being able to meet their food needs in the past 12 months.
- 96 Jones, Lindsey, and Marco D’Errico. 2018. “[Resilient, but from Whose Perspective? Like-for-like Comparison of Objective and Subjective Evaluations of Resilience](#).” Working Paper 336. London School of Economics and Political Science.

## Food security

### Food Consumption Score

Households' scores on the Social Connectedness Index and Reciprocity dimension are positively associated with the diversity and frequency of foods consumed.



### Household Hunger Scale

Social Connectedness Index score is not significantly associated with household hunger. However, the Number dimension is associated with households' experience of **greater** hunger.



Food is a critical form of material support that is shared between socially connected households, and is *the* currency of social connectedness in South Sudan. The widespread practice of food sharing serves a distinct social purpose and is rooted in traditions that predate the current crisis. Food is not only shared out of necessity or exclusively with households that are going hungry. Households readily share food with people with whom they have no pre-existing social relationship, as a means of establishing new relationships including in contexts of displacement. Historically, food sharing has served as an important source of community cohesion and as a means of building trust and strengthening relationships between households in South Sudan. Indeed, participants commonly described their strongest social connections as people who “eat from the same cooking pot.”

## Household Food Insecurity

During Round 2, households were asked to retrospectively report their food security reflecting on the past 12 months (Figure 8).<sup>97</sup> There is little variability among IDPs in the PoC who are almost completely dependent on external support and only in rare cases practice cultivation in the areas immediately surrounding the PoC. On the other hand, residents are much more likely to report being food insecure than IDPs outside of the PoC during the hunger gap months.

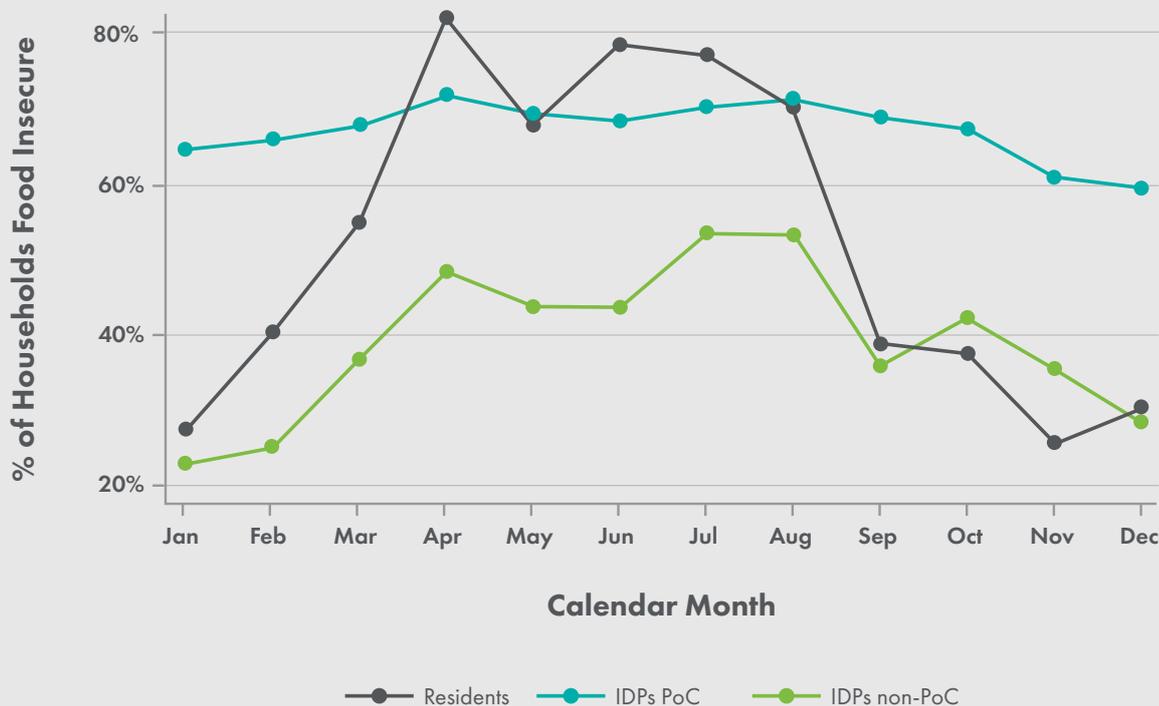


FIGURE 8: Household Food Security by Self-Reported Displacement Status (n 828)

The reliability, amount, and type of food shared within social networks has changed during the crisis. Nonetheless, participants of all displacement statuses described scenarios in which food sharing, even in modest amounts, remained critically important to their households' ability to cope and recover from shocks and stresses. Participants explained that they are particularly dependent on their social connections in times of heightened food insecurity, especially when food distributions are delayed, and household rations become depleted. As one respondent in the PoC explained, "In case I run out of food in my household, I can run to one of my friends or relatives and they will save me."<sup>98</sup>

Participants also indicated that they turn to their social connections to diversify the types of food they consume. In fact, quantitative

*> In case I run out of food in my household, I can run to one of my friends or relatives and they will save me.*

—Female research participant, Bentiu PoC

<sup>97</sup> Using MAHFP, which inquires of the number of months households did not have enough food—from a variety of sources—to meet a households' needs.

<sup>98</sup> In-depth interview with female research participant, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

analyses showcase a robust positive association between households’ social connectedness and their Food Consumption Score (FCS), a measure of the frequency and diversity of foods consumed (**Figure 9**). Households’ Social Connectedness Index scores are consistently associated with higher FCS, indicating better food consumption status, even after analyses accounted for a host of household- and community-level factors. Of the individual social connectedness dimensions, the Reciprocity dimension emerged as the most significant factor for higher FCS.

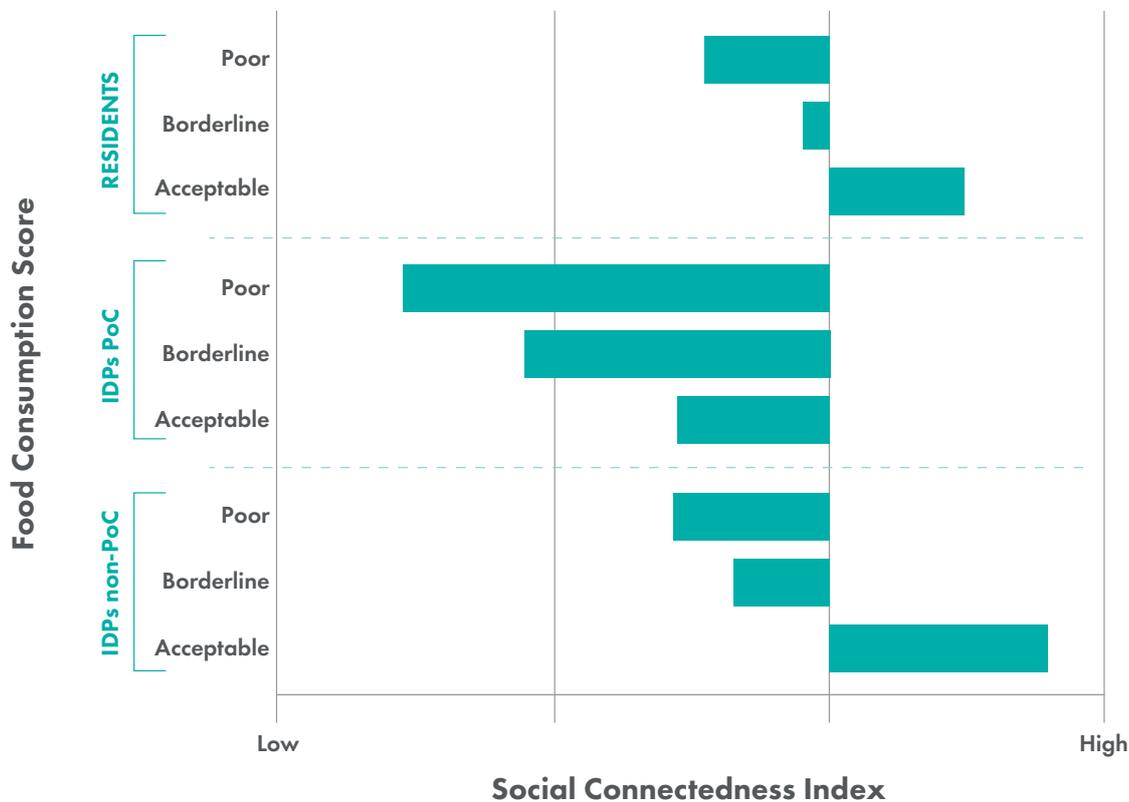


FIGURE 9: Food Consumption Score and Social Connectedness Index (n 1644)

Dietary diversification strategies have become especially critical to households during the crisis. As productive livelihoods have collapsed, many households have become exclusively dependent on food aid. This aid is generally delivered as a single staple, usually sorghum, and households are left to their own devices to obtain additional varieties of food to ensure necessary nutritional support. Numerous participants explained that a lack of dietary diversity was among the most significant challenges they experienced during the crisis, with particular consequences for children. According to one man in the Bentiu PoC, “Food is the greatest challenge that my family is facing right now. My children are feeding on the same food every day, which is not healthy for them. The food that we get doesn’t have all the diets and it ends up making the children unhealthy.”<sup>99</sup>

In order to obtain additional varieties of food to complement food rations, respondents explained that they turn to their social connections, especially people who have continued to practice specific livelihoods during the course of the crisis. As one key informant from Panyijar explained, “When you know a fisherman, he can give fish. When you need sugar, you must have a good connection with a trader who can provide it to you, and when you want milk, it can help you to be connected to someone at the cattle camp.”<sup>100</sup>

99 In-depth interview with male research participant, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

100 Key informant interview with South Sudanese NGO employee, Panyijar County, March 2020.

Households that lack social connections, especially in the Bentiu PoC, may pursue high-risk strategies in order to diversify their diets by purchasing additional food from local marketplaces. As one woman in the PoC explained, “Female headed households are suffering because they have no one supporting them in their daily basic needs. They have few options but go look for firewood in the bush, where there are wild animals and men who gang rape women. They collect firewood to sell in the market and in turn buy milk, dry fish, and for grinding sorghum distributed by WFP.”<sup>101</sup> These narratives demonstrate that a household’s social connectedness may define both the degree to which it is able to diversify its diet, as well as the risks associated with its efforts to do so.

› *When you know a fisherman, he can give fish. When you need sugar, you must have a good connection with a trader who can provide it to you, and when you want milk, it can help you to be connected to someone at the cattle camp.*

—Male research participant, Panyijar County



South Sudan—Cassandra Nelson, Mercy Corps

Households’ social networks may be important sources of dietary diversification, and the provision of small amounts of food between households is a critical coping strategy in the face of shocks and stresses. However, participants explained that generally, the amount of material support shared between households

101 In-depth interview with female research participant, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

has significantly decreased during the crisis, and social networks alone are no longer reliable sources of food security. In this context of limited resources, a household's social connectedness may also entail strong obligations to *provide* support to others, and such sharing obligations may at times negatively affect a household's food security, in the immediate term.

› *People are excluded here if they do not share what they have, for instance food...Culturally, you know very well that as Nuer we are not born to be greedy, and we must share with others. We are people who are born with a heart for helping people. So, anyone who doesn't share what they have is treated like an outcast.*"

—Community leader, Panyijar County

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if they do not share what they have, for instance food...Culturally, you know very well that as Nuer we are not born to be greedy, and we must share with others. We are people who are born with a heart for helping people. So, anyone who doesn't share what they have is treated like an outcast."<sup>103</sup> Critically, such marginalization can also damage a household's long-term ability to rely on support from others in their community. As another man in Panyijar explained, "People accept to help one another in this community because it is an obligation. If you don't give help now, you cannot expect to receive help in the future."<sup>104</sup> In some cases, participants explained that such exclusion from reciprocal support systems can last for years, or even between generations. According to a participant in Rubkona, "Individuals who do not stretch their hands to others...will be left alone. As their own children grow up, the community has bad impressions on them simply because of their parents' actions. Their children are growing up with this subjection, and they cannot get support from people due to their parents' shrunken connections."<sup>105</sup>

Sharing is therefore strategic, and allows households to maintain their social connections and avoid being excluded from reciprocal support systems. In some cases, participants explained that this may lead households to share food with others to the extent that it depletes their own stocks and undermines their own food security. As one female respondent in Panyijar explained, "If you see that people around you are suffering to death because of hunger you are obligated to help them. You will distribute and share with them all of what you have, and then you will just wait for what comes next. I have seen this from many people who are here now in [Panyijar]."<sup>106</sup> Another woman similarly explained that "sometimes someone might come to you needing help,

Quantitatively, analyses did not find consistent associations between households' social connectedness and the Household Hunger Scale (HHS) which assesses the most severe experiences of food insecurity.<sup>102</sup> However, analyses show that the Number dimension of social connectedness is significantly associated with households' experiences of greater hunger. In other words, households with larger social networks are more likely to experience greater hunger, even after analyses controlled for a host of household- and community-level factors.

The obligation to share material support, especially food, is deeply entrenched within Nuer culture. Failures to abide by strict sharing norms can result in a household's systematic marginalization and exclusion from reciprocal support systems. As one man in Panyijar explained, "People are excluded here

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102 Higher Household Hunger Scale scores indicate greater household hunger.

103 Key informant interview with community leader, Panyijar County, December 2019.

104 In-depth interview with male research participant, Panyijar County, December 2019.

105 Key informant interview with a community leader, Rubkona County, December 2019.

106 In-depth interview with female research participant, Panyijar County, November 2019.

and you will feel concern and give out what you have, whether it empties your foodstock or not.”<sup>107</sup>

These contrasting findings illustrate the complex relationship between social connectedness and food security. While analyses based on households’ Food Consumption Score demonstrate the importance of social connections as sources of support during crises, similar analyses for Household Hunger Scale highlight the potentially detrimental ways in which social connectedness can undermine household food security. While households are able to rely on local support systems to diversify their diets, strong norms of reciprocity may also obligate households to share beyond their means. These findings also showcase the trade-offs households contend with in a context of limited resources. In some cases, households may be forced to make difficult choices: allocate limited resources to meet *immediate* basic needs while risking exclusion from reciprocal support systems, or share beyond their means and potentially go hungry in order to maintain and build social connections for *future* support.



South Sudan—Dominic Nahr, Mercy Corps

## Subjective Resilience

### Subjective Resilience Survey Questions

These questions inquire about respondents’ perceptions of their households’ absorptive, transformative, and adaptive resilience-related capacities, respectively. These questions are adapted from the *Subjectively Evaluated Resilience Scores* approach.<sup>108</sup>

Now, I am going to read out a series of statements. Please tell me the extent to which you agree or disagree with them.

- 1 Your household can bounce back from any challenge that life throws at it.
- 2 During times of hardship, your household can change its primary income or source of livelihood if needed.
- 3 If threats to your household became more frequently and intense, you could still find a way to get by.

<sup>107</sup> In-depth interview with female research participant, Panyijar County, December 2019.

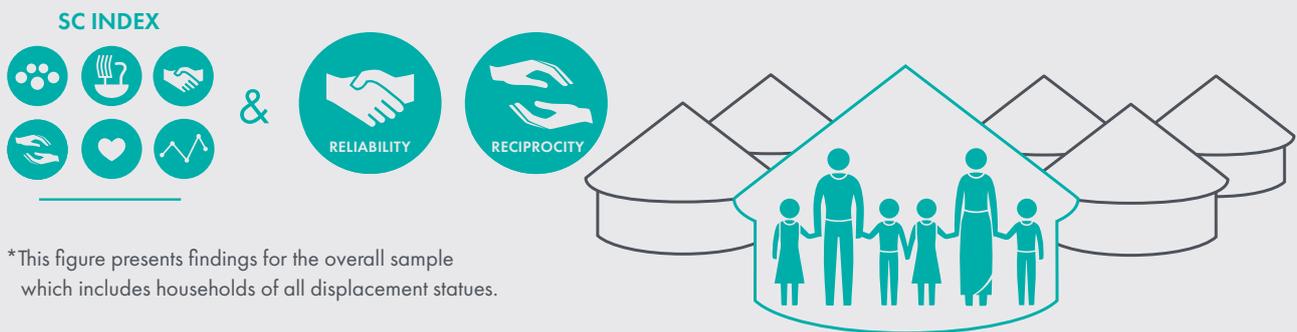
<sup>108</sup> All questions are answered using the same five-item bipolar response scale, ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. For further information on the subjectively evaluated resilience approach and application in different contexts, see: Jones, Lindsey. 2018. “New Methods in Resilience Measurement.” Working Paper. London: Overseas Development Institute; and Jones, Lindsey, Paola Ballon, and Johannes von Engelhardt. 2018. “How Does Resilience Change Over Time?” Working Paper. London: Overseas Development Institute.

## SUBJECTIVE RESILIENCE\*

A majority of respondents report that they could:



Households' scores on the Social Connectedness Index, as well as Reliability and Reciprocity dimensions are positively associated with their subjective resilience.



Despite the numerous shocks and stresses households in South Sudan have experienced during the crisis, including relatively high levels of food insecurity, respondents were consistently optimistic when asked about their abilities to cope and recover from future challenges. In both rounds of data collection, the majority of respondents reported that they agreed that they could bounce back from any challenge, change their primary income if necessary, and find a way to get by even if threats became more frequent and intense (**Figure 10**). However, households' subjective resilience varies significantly by their displacement status, and in particular, whether or not households live inside the PoC. Nevertheless, participants of all displacement statuses highlighted the role their social connectedness played in their optimism about their own resilience.



South Sudan—Mathieu Rouquette, Mercy Corps

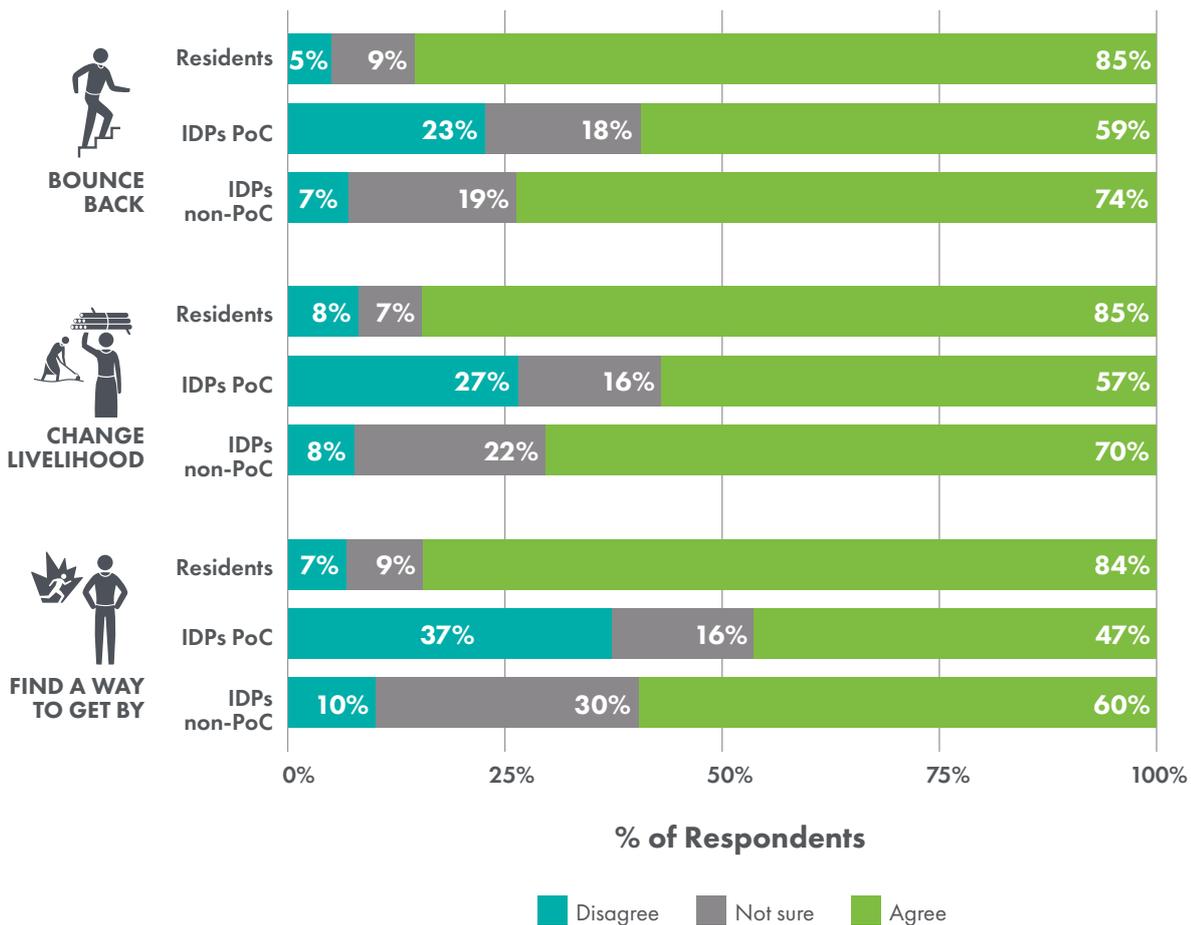


FIGURE 10: Subjective Resilience by Self-reported Displacement Status (n 828)

### Residents

As one member of the resident community in Panyijar explained, “I do feel that my household can recover from challenges that life throws at it. No one lives without [challenges], but there are always ways to deal with them when they happen. Because people live with others in the community, when such problems like death, hunger and others happen, we can rely on those people to support us and recover from the problems that life has thrown to our household.”<sup>109</sup> Another woman in Panyijar explained, “I can change my livelihood if someone is supporting me, but without their support, it is not easy for people to change. People in the community are living because of the support they receive from others that helps them change their livelihood during this crisis.”<sup>110</sup> Quantitative analyses show that residents’ scores on the Social Connectedness

› *Because people live with others in the community, when such problems like death, hunger and others happen, we can rely on those people to support us and recover from the problems that life has thrown to our household.*

—Male research participant, Panyijar County

109 In-depth interview with male research participant, Panyijar County, December 2019.

110 In-depth interview with female research participant, Panyijar County, December 2019.

Index are associated with their subjective resilience, even when controlling for a host of household- and community-level characteristics. The Reliability and Reciprocity dimensions are most consistently and robustly correlated with resident households' subjective resilience.

### ***IDPs living outside of the Bentiu PoC***

IDPs residing outside the Bentiu PoC shared similarly positive framing as residents, sometimes specifically referencing their ability to rely on support from members of the resident community as the basis of their optimism. As one displaced woman residing in Panyijar explained when asked how confident she was in her ability to cope and recover from future shocks, "I am somewhat confident because we came here last year, we were warmly received by the residents, and they support us well. This makes us believe that we could still receive the same help from the people around this Boma [in the future]."<sup>111</sup> Similar to residents, quantitative analyses also show that Social Connectedness Index scores are positively associated with all three subjective resilience measures for IDPs living outside the PoC. The Reliability dimension is also similarly and robustly associated with subjective resilience.

### ***IDPs living in the Bentiu PoC***

Respondents in the Bentiu PoC, on the other hand, were less optimistic about their own resilience. In stark contrast to residents or IDPs who live *outside* of the PoC, IDPs who live *inside* the PoC more frequently reported that they disagreed or were not sure that they would be able to bounce back (41%), change their primary income (31%), or find a way to get by (43%). Qualitatively, some participants explained this as a function of people's inability to provide sufficient levels of support to one another due to resource scarcity. As one man in the Bentiu PoC explained, "I am not very confident that I could get help from people inside the PoC if I needed it, because all people in the PoC have few resources to give help to one another. You know problems vary. There are problems that need big help and those that need small help. Problems that need small help can be easily settled by the people who are around here."<sup>112</sup> Quantitatively, there is no relationship between overall Social Connectedness Index score and subjective resilience for IDPs in the PoC. However, there remains a positive relationship between the Reliability dimension and their subjective resilience for all three questions.

***› I am not very confident that I could get help from people inside the PoC if I needed it, because all people in the PoC have few resources to give help to one another.***

—Male research participant, Bentiu PoC

In this study, nearly all respondents—regardless of their displacement status—have experienced trauma as a result of the conflict. Respondents' generally optimistic responses and outlook may be a result of their post-traumatic growth (PTG), defined as "the positive psychological changes experienced as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life circumstances."<sup>113</sup> PTG has been observed in survivors of various forms of trauma, including war and other armed conflicts.<sup>114</sup> Survivors create new or altered schemas—or fundamental beliefs about the world and their ability to envision future goals—in order to carry on with

<sup>111</sup> In-depth interview with female research participant, Panyijar County, December 2019.

<sup>112</sup> In-depth interview, male research participant, Bentiu PoC, November 2019.

<sup>113</sup> Tedeschi, Richard G., and Lawrence G. Calhoun. 2004. "Posttraumatic Growth: Conceptual Foundations and Empirical Evidence." *Psychological Inquiry* 15 (1): 1–18.

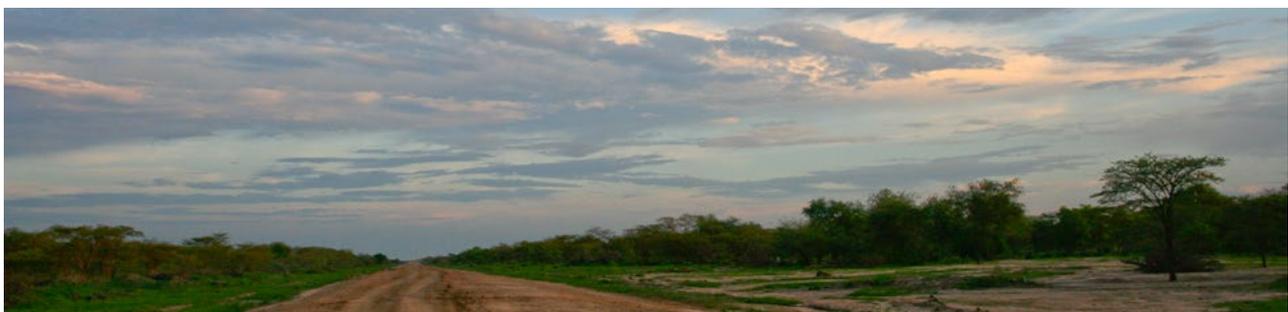
<sup>114</sup> Kroo, Adrienn, and Henriett Nagy. 2011. "Posttraumatic Growth Among Traumatized Somali Refugees in Hungary." *Journal of Loss and Trauma* 16 (5): 440–458.

their lives post-trauma, with a greater appreciation for life and personal strengths, ability to envision new possibilities for one's life, improved interpersonal relationships, and spiritual development.<sup>115</sup> Indeed, in follow-up interviews, participants sometimes explained their answers to the three subjective resilience questions by referencing past experiences of often extreme hardship as evidence of their ability to overcome future such challenges. As one female member of the resident community in Panyijar explained, "Any household can recover from the challenges that life throws at them. Even death, which is the worst problem, is a normal situation here in South Sudan."<sup>116</sup>

Nevertheless, respondents' optimistic perceptions of their absorptive, transformative, and adaptive resilience-related capacities and the related psychosocial factors (e.g. self-esteem, self-confidence, or self-concept) are critical for households' resilience.<sup>117</sup> The study findings also showcase that in crisis and displacement, social connectedness continues to play a critical role in household subjective resilience. For many residents and IDPs living outside of the PoC, the ability to rely on their social connections forms the basis of their optimism about their ability to cope and recover from future shocks. And conversely, for IDPs in the Bentiu PoC, the resource scarcity and in turn, the inability to share sufficient levels of support through their network hamper households' confidence in their own resilience-related capacities.

### Research Question #3: Key take-away points

- › Households provide each other with material and intangible support. This support is a key source of coping and recovery in the context of protracted crises. Socially connected households are better able to diversify their diets and are more optimistic that they can cope and recover in face of future shocks and stresses.
- › Social connectedness is governed by obligatory sharing norms and can be a source of household vulnerability. In some cases, households may be forced to make difficult choices: allocate limited resources to meet immediate basic needs while risking exclusion from reciprocal support systems, or share beyond their means and potentially go hungry in order to maintain and build social connections for future support.



South Sudan—Chris Rooks, Mercy Corps

115 Chan, K. Jacky, Marta Y. Young, and Noor Sharif. 2016. "Well-Being after Trauma: A Review of Posttraumatic Growth among Refugees." *Canadian Psychology/ Psychologie Canadienne* 57 (4): 291–99.

116 In-depth interview, female research participant, Panyijar County, December 2019.

117 In taking stock of the latest evidence on resilience and its implications for policy and programming, a 2018 USAID evidence review finds that a range of psycho-social factors are a strong predictor of whether an individual or household is able to cope with a shock, uses negative coping strategies, their ability to recover from a shock, and ability to escape and remain out of poverty. For additional discussion on subjective resilience and importance of psycho-social factors, see: USAID. 2018. "[Resilience Evidence Forum Report](#)" Washington, DC: Center for Resilience; Béné, Christophe, Timothy Frankenberger, Tiffany Griffin, Mark Langworthy, Monica Mueller, and Stephanie Martin. 2019. "Perception Matters: New Insights into the Subjective Dimension of Resilience in the Context of Humanitarian and Food Security Crises." *Progress in Development Studies* 19 (3).



South Sudan—Dominic Nahr for Mercy Corps

## Research Question #4: How does humanitarian assistance interact with social connections and local systems of coping and recovery?

In South Sudan, humanitarian assistance can have both positive and negative effects on household social connectedness and related coping and recovery capacities. For example, in-kind food assistance is shared between households as a means of maintaining and building social connections. However, aid can also cause tensions and weaken social connections, especially when targeting and vulnerability criteria are opaque. Humanitarian actors stand to benefit from learning more about how social connectedness may be influencing the extent to which aid is advancing desired programmatic outcomes, and equally, the degree to which such programming may be influencing social connectedness.

South Sudan's status as the recipient of large-scale humanitarian assistance pre-dates the current crisis. At least since the commencement of Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) in 1989, households in this study's research communities have relied on various forms of external assistance. At the time that this research was conducted, all households in research communities were eligible to receive in-kind food aid.<sup>118</sup> Additionally in Rubkona and Panyijar County, humanitarian actors including Mercy Corps are increasingly turning to cash transfer programming as a means of supporting household coping during crisis and strengthening marketplace actors' capacity to resupply the essential goods and services that households rely on. There is a growing recognition that cash can also be used to strengthen the underlying markets that support household recovery in the longer term.<sup>119</sup> Cash can also facilitate choice and flexibility in meeting household expenses

118 However, some participants, especially IDP households, reported being unable to collect food aid during distributions as a result of having arrived between beneficiary registration exercises.

119 Hemberger, Alison, Sasha Muench, and Dave Algozo. 2018. "Beyond Cash: Making Markets Work in Crisis." Washington, D.C.: Mercy Corps.

and may be an especially desirable form of assistance in contexts of insecurity and displacement. As one key informant explained, “Money is easier to carry. It may only weigh a few kilograms. Food is hard to carry when you are on the run.”<sup>120</sup>

While aid actors design interventions and measure their impact on households’ abilities to cope with the immediate effects of crises, humanitarian assistance also has important implications for household social connectedness. In the context of the protracted humanitarian crisis in South Sudan, in which households’ production capacities have declined, aid has become an increasingly important (and more available) resource that households share to maintain or diversify their social networks. Sharing aid may be a means

› *[The cash] program has changed social connections between [recipients and non-recipients]. [Non-recipients] do not help the person who is benefiting because they think that the recipients are better off than those who are not benefiting. Some of my relatives are not as friendly as before because they wonder why I was chosen and not them. They think I don’t need their help, and they won’t help me anymore.*

—Female research participant, Panyijar County

of securing reciprocal support, either in the form of material resources such as food or cash, or as nonmaterial support such as information, advice and guidance. Indeed, quantitative analyses show that there are consistent and positive associations between households’ receipt of external assistance and their scores on the overall Social Connectedness Index and as well as the Number, Diversity, Reliability, Reciprocity, and Resources dimensions.<sup>121</sup> In other words, households whose members participated in more types of external programming (e.g. general food distribution, cash transfers, livelihood support, education programming etc.) are more socially connected, with larger networks that are more diverse and reliable. These households are also more likely to be reciprocal with their social connections, and to be able to mobilize additional types of resources through their networks.

Multiple participants described the benefits of aid in terms of recipients’ abilities to use their assistance to maintain or diversify their social connections. While aid is shared strategically, participants explained that

the practice is rooted in strong cultural norms, and a failure to abide by these norms can result in shame and stigma.<sup>122</sup> As one woman in Panyijar explained, “I share any food I buy using [cash aid] willingly with my neighbors [because] culturally it is shameful for you to eat while your neighbor is starving.”<sup>123</sup> In other words, aid may be shared as a means of protecting oneself from potential exclusion from social networks.

A key informant from Panyijar described the way in which such exclusion occurs: “People start getting detached from [recipients] of cash transfers. If someone receives assistance [...] and their neighbor does not, that neighbor may become angry and resentful. However, if the recipient of cash uses that cash to pay others in the community to help with a project like clearing a garden, then there is no resentment.”<sup>124</sup>

120 Key informant interview with South Sudanese NGO employee, Juba, June 2018.

121 In this analysis, the research team treated household social connectedness as the outcome variable and receipt of external support as an explanatory variable in fixed and mixed effects analyses. External support is measured by the sum of the types of programming that at least one member of a household has participated in the past six or 12 months (e.g. general food distribution, cash transfer, livelihood, WASH, education, protection programming etc.)

122 When sharing material support with others, households do not differentiate between resources they obtain on their own terms and those they receive from aid agencies, such as food, cash or non-food commodities. Participants explained that all resources that are available to them, regardless of source, are shared with their social connections.

123 In-depth interview with female research participant, Panyijar County, March 2018.

124 Key informant interview with South Sudanese NGO employee, Juba, June 2018.

Both male and female participants explained that cash aid is less frequently shared between households than food aid.<sup>125</sup> They explained that households often purchase food using cash aid and then share this food with others, though under certain circumstances, cash is shared directly. As one female participant in Panyijar explained, “Food is shared willingly, but cash is only shared if there is a requirement that can be met only using cash.”<sup>126</sup> Despite the fact that cash appears to be less frequently shared, participants, especially in Panyijar, explained that it is nonetheless an especially sought after resource, and recipients of cash aid describe experiencing strong expectations and pressure to share portions of their transfer with non-recipient households.

Participants described scenarios in which resentment and tensions resulting from the targeting of cash assistance had disrupted social connections and support networks. One cash recipient in Panyijar said that if he had refused to share his cash, it would “likely have destroyed [his] relationship with [his] friends.”<sup>127</sup> Others explained that cash recipients may experience difficulty in mobilizing reciprocal support due to inter-household tensions and resentment based on unclear or disputed recipient-targeting criteria. This in turn fuels a perception that cash recipients have received their “fair share” and thus do not need reciprocal support from non-recipient households. As one cash recipient in Panyijar explained, “[The cash] program has changed social connections between [recipients and non-recipients]. [Non-recipients] do not help the person who is benefiting because they think that the recipients are better off than those who are not benefiting. Some of my relatives are not as friendly as before because they wonder why I was chosen and not them. They think I don’t need their help, and they won’t help me anymore.”<sup>128</sup> In South Sudan, where sharing and reciprocal support are an integral part of life, the targeting of assistance, especially cash, appears to have negatively affected aid recipients’ abilities to rely on their social connections for support.<sup>129</sup> Importantly, participants understood these tensions and the resulting exclusion of some cash recipients from reciprocal support networks to be a function of opaque or disputed targeting practices rather than an inherent inevitability of cash-based programming.



South Sudan—Camille Lepage for Mercy Corps

125 As discussed, gender norms inform access to and control over household resources—including humanitarian aid—and their sharing.

126 In-depth interview with female research participant, Panyijar County, March 2018.

127 In-depth interview with male research participant, Panyijar County, September 2018.

128 In-depth interview with female research participant, Panyijar County, October 2018.

129 See also: Bastagli, Francesca, Jessica Hagen-Zanker, Luke Harman, Valentina Barca, Georgina Sturge, and Tanja Schmidt. 2016. “Cash Transfers: What Does the Evidence Say?” London: Overseas Development Institute.

Tensions associated with the provision of humanitarian assistance are often related to a lack of transparency or knowledge about the basis by which households are selected to receive cash transfers. When local authorities explain these criteria to the community, tensions may dissipate. As one man in Panyijar explained, “Sometimes there are misunderstandings [about why] people are not selected... Then the local chief will explain to them the criteria that are used to select [recipients] and definitely that person will [be] convinced.”<sup>130</sup>

However, in other cases, participants described the causes of targeting-related tensions as more insidious, citing cases of perceived corruption by community leaders in aid recipient selection. Numerous participants described situations in which local authorities charged with the selection of recipient households favored their own kin for assistance, at the expense of other community members in need.

As one man in Panyijar explained, “People who are in power are likely to benefit from the services that are being given by the humanitarian agencies. Community chiefs do the selection and identification [of recipients] and they end up registering their relatives and their families in order for them to benefit more than others.”<sup>131</sup> Another participant further elaborated that humanitarian actors’ reliance on community leaders has led to the active ‘exclusion’ of the most vulnerable households from receiving assistance: “Aid has created disputes within the community because most of the times when items are brought by the humanitarians, they choose the community leaders to come and be the one to do the recipient identification and registration. At the end of the day you will find someone registering only his relatives or the people he knows, leaving the vulnerable households. I see this as a violation of the community practices.”<sup>132</sup> These narratives point to a darker side of social connectedness: households that are better connected, particularly to local authorities, may be better able to access external aid and other resources in times of need, potentially at the expense of households who most need the assistance.<sup>133</sup>

› *People who are in power are likely to benefit from the services that are being given by the humanitarian agencies. Community chiefs do the selection and identification [of recipients] and they end up registering their relatives and their families in order for them to benefit more than others.*

—Male research participant, Panyijar County

#### Research Question #4: Key take-away points

- › As productive livelihoods have collapsed during South Sudan’s humanitarian crisis, households have turned to sharing humanitarian aid—in particular, food assistance—as a means of maintaining and expanding their social networks.
- › Household cash recipients often face significant pressure to share cash with non-recipients, and opaque targeting and vulnerability criteria can cause tension and weaken connections. In some cases, recipients of cash transfers risk being excluded from reciprocal support systems based on the perception that they have received their “fair share” and are no longer in need of support from their social connections.

130 In-depth interview with male research participant, Panyijar County, August 2018.

131 In-depth interview with male research participant, Panyijar County, December 2019.

132 Key informant interview with male community leader, Bentiu PoC, November 2019.

133 Other research similarly demonstrates that community engagement is critical to aligning targeting criteria with local understandings of vulnerability. However, community based targeting may risk elite capture and the exclusion of particularly vulnerable households from recipient lists. Various programmatic adaptations have been proposed to mitigate the risks of elite capture, including greater reliance on proxy means tests, such as asset ownership or household expenditures. For an overview of the literature on community based targeting, elite capture, and various mitigation strategies, see: Himmelstine, Carmen Leon, and Anna McCord. 2012. “The Use of Community- Based Targeting in Low- and Middle- Income Countries.” London: Overseas Development Institute.



South Sudan—Dominic Nahr for Mercy Corps

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To cope and recover from crisis, individuals and households rely on their social connections to access local systems of support. While the bases of social connectedness and the strength of certain types of connections have changed during South Sudan’s protracted crisis, support shared between social connections has become an especially critical source of households’ resilience. The qualitative and quantitative findings from this study show that households continue to share a variety of both material and intangible support with one another, relying on existing relationships and new connections forged strategically during conflict and in the context of displacement. The study’s findings also highlight the importance of these systems to households’ food security. They also illustrate the critical role social connectedness plays in households’ perceptions of their own resilience capacities: those who were more socially connected—with more reliable and reciprocal networks—were more likely to report that they could bounce back from any challenge that life threw at them, change their primary income or source of livelihood if necessary; and find a way to get by if threats became more frequent and intense.

However, the research also highlights that not all households are equally socially connected. Gender norms restrict women’s mobility and capacity to navigate and establish new supportive connections, particularly in their displacement. Those who practice certain livelihood activities—such as casual labor, sale of food assistance, or those with no livelihood—are less socially connected, and excluded from informal associations that offer material and other intangible benefits to their members. Wealthier households are also more likely to be more socially connected. Furthermore, strong norms of reciprocity may obligate households to provide support to others—at times beyond their means—in order to avoid becoming marginalized or excluded from reciprocal support systems. These findings all point to a darker side of social connectedness, and highlight that social connectedness is not inherently ‘good.’

In South Sudan, the local support systems described in this report existed well before humanitarian actors’ arrival in the country. However, to date, little attention has been paid to understanding the effects, both positive and negative, that humanitarian assistance of various forms may have on social connectedness and related coping and recovery capacities of the communities where aid is provided. While the implications and recommendations that follow are based on research conducted in the Unity State of South Sudan, they are relevant to other contexts in South Sudan and beyond.

**Social connectedness can be a source of household resilience, but it may also imply vulnerability.**

Households rely on their social networks for critical material and intangible support during difficult times, and take strategic steps to strengthen existing or build new connections—sometimes sharing beyond their means in hopes of securing future reciprocal support. Moreover, strong informal rules and norms may also require households to provide support to others in their social networks, and a failure to abide by these norms can result in a household’s systematic exclusion from reciprocal support networks. For some households, particularly those with extensive kinship networks to whom there is an expectation that they provide material assistance, these sharing obligations may be detrimental to their well-being. In fact, this study’s quantitative analysis shows that households with larger social networks are more likely to report higher levels of hunger. Therefore, social connectedness should be understood as a potential source of household resilience, but also, under certain circumstances a potential source of vulnerability.

**) Implications for aid actors: When considering program impact and intervention logic, aid actors must account for local support systems.**

Humanitarian and development interventions often fail to take into account the informal rules and norms that underpin the ways in which resources flow through social networks. They also infrequently consider the agency of households to make decisions about their finite resources and trade-offs between current and future benefits (e.g. sharing food aid now, to ensure future reciprocal support). There is an opportunity for aid actors to obtain more nuanced understandings of household vulnerability, resilience, and agency with a social connectedness lens. Aid actors should work to better understand the obligations households may face to share limited resources, including humanitarian assistance. This can be done by adapting assessments and evaluations to include qualitative and quantitative questions about the types of resources that households are able to mobilize through their social networks, the norms and obligations that underpin resource sharing, and decisions about household resource allocations. By doing so, they can gain greater insights on the obligations households may face to *share* resources including humanitarian assistance with others. The resulting data should be used to contextualize measurements of program impact and to design programs that support, or at least do not undermine local support systems.

**In South Sudan, households are not equally socially connected; various factors, both at the household- and community-level, may influence key aspects of a household's social network.**

Quantitative analysis, for example, demonstrates that factors such as age, gender, wealth, livelihood, market functionality and the ability to access a money sender are all important to a household's social connectedness. Certain household characteristics are also associated with especially low levels of social connectedness, and qualitative analysis demonstrates that female headed households often face particular obstacles to forming new social connections and mobilizing material support from their social networks.

**) Implication for aid actors: Aid actors should take concrete steps to understand who is included and excluded from social networks and related support structures in order to obtain holistic, context-specific understandings of vulnerability.** Gender and age analysis is an essential component of this exploration. Aid interventions should build on a strong understanding of the bases for inclusion and exclusion in social networks. These interventions should seek to improve the capacity of excluded individuals to share and access resources and information through diverse social support networks. This first requires an understanding of the norms, identities, and other factors that affect individuals' and households' capacities to share resources (including types of shared resources) and/or limit the frequency of such sharing. Providing excluded groups with vocational trainings, linkages to more experienced groups, and vouchers to access inputs from the market may help increase their capacities to share resources, form new connections, and diversify their social networks. However, aid actors must ensure that support for excluded individuals is part of a wider program intervention that also addresses the needs of the larger community. If not, aid interventions risk creating social tensions and further alienating excluded populations from social support structures.

**Households share a variety of both material and intangible support with one another; both types of support are critically important to households' abilities to cope and recover during crises.** While food remains the main currency of connections, households also rely heavily on their social connections for cash, loans, credit, non-food commodities as well as market support. Many others—in particular women—emphasized the importance of being able to turn to their connections for *non-material* support such as emotional support, advice and counsel. The study also highlighted that the psychosocial support, in conjunction with the material support shared between social connections, is central to households' perception of their own resilience capacities.

**) Implication for aid actors: In addition to the provision of material support to address household basic needs, aid actors should seek to support existing community-led initiatives that contribute to psychosocial wellbeing.** In South Sudan, these informal initiatives (e.g. livelihood associations, women's groups) are often self-formed and self-organized. Aid actors must be careful to take measured steps in engaging with these groups to avoid disrupting the underlying rules, norms and support that these group members offer one another. Aid actors should work to better understand how these informal initiatives function, in order to identify the ways in which they may be able to strengthen existing groups and at the very least, not undermine them.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> A growing evidence base indicates that psychosocial capacities can play a significant role in an individual's and household's capacity to cope with and recover from a shock. Yet, compared to the robust evidence base on the contribution of tangible factors (e.g. assets, livelihood strategies, financial capacities etc.) to resilience, there is a limited understanding of the ways in which psychosocial factors can build resilience.

**Households share humanitarian aid—both food and cash—to maintain, expand and diversify their social connections and to create a safety net of reciprocal support.** The crisis in South Sudan has significantly reduced local agricultural and livestock production capacities. As a result, households' abilities to support each other have eroded significantly. However, they continue to strategically share resources with others in their communities. These shared resources often include humanitarian aid, such as food and cash. In accordance with long-standing norms and traditions, households share aid to maintain, expand and diversify their social connections and to ensure access to critical reciprocal support systems.

**› Implication for aid actors: Aid actors should build in overlap between emergency relief and early recovery interventions to ensure that households can continue to meet their sharing obligations.**

As aid actors increasingly prioritize early recovery interventions that support households' productive livelihood capacities, they should remain aware of the critical role that in-kind assistance currently plays in households' abilities to maintain and grow their social networks. Indeed, food, often distributed by humanitarian agencies, remains the main currency of connection in South Sudan. If aid actors reduce in-kind assistance before households are able to rely on their own productive livelihoods, they risk undermining local support systems which are based on reciprocal food sharing. Transitions from the provision of direct emergency assistance to early recovery interventions should be accompanied by efforts to monitor impact on households' social connectedness, including their ability to receive and provide support to others in their communities.

**External assistance, especially cash transfers, may disrupt social connections and support networks.** While cash facilitates greater choice and flexibility in meeting household expenses, cash assistance may also give rise to social tensions and recipients may risk being excluded from local support systems. Importantly, participants understood these tensions and the resulting exclusion of some cash recipients from reciprocal support networks to be a function of opaque or disputed targeting practices rather than an inherent inevitability of cash-based programming. Tensions associated with the provision of humanitarian assistance are often related to a lack of transparency or knowledge about the basis by which households are selected to receive cash transfers. When local authorities explain these criteria to the community, tensions may dissipate.

**› Implication for aid actors: In order to preempt and mitigate social tensions, aid actors should take concrete steps to improve communities' perceptions of cash transfer targeting criteria.**

In co-design activities, aid workers can engage community members to develop contextualized targeting criteria which explicitly account for households' social connectedness. Doing so may not always entail developing new targeting criteria, but rather adapting the framing of traditional bases of vulnerability to account for households' abilities to mobilize material resources from local support systems. This may also require aid actors to reassess assumptions about bases of household vulnerability (e.g. female headed, internally displaced households), as community members may not see these characteristics as being inherently synonymous with vulnerability. It is also important that aid actors' efforts to clarify targeting criteria to community members continue throughout a program's implementation, and not only at its inception. This may entail relying on trusted community leaders to iteratively communicate the co-designed targeting criteria and process to households and to address any social tensions that arise around targeting in the course of program implementation.

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