



South Sudan—Mathieu Rouquette, Mercy Corps

# THE CURRENCY OF CONNECTIONS

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

AUGUST 2020 | BRIEF

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 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?



FRIEDMAN SCHOOL OF NUTRITION SCIENCE AND POLICY  
Feinstein International Center



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. 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.



South Sudan—Dominic Nahr For Mercy Corps

## Objectives

This brief is based on the final report 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 USAID’s Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA). 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 the ways in which humanitarian assistance interacts with local support systems.

The research presented in the 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**):

**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?**

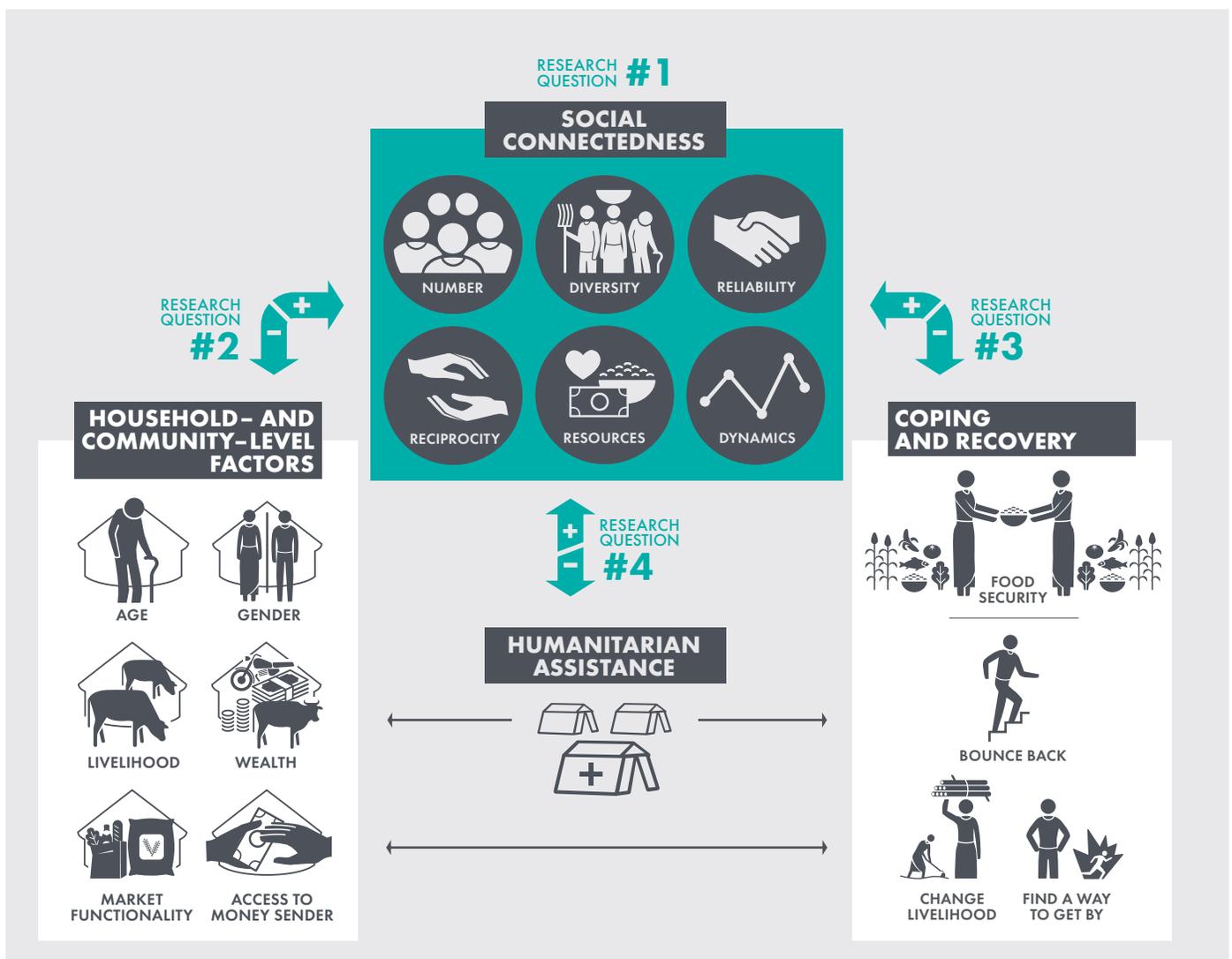
**RESEARCH QUESTION #3:**

**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?**

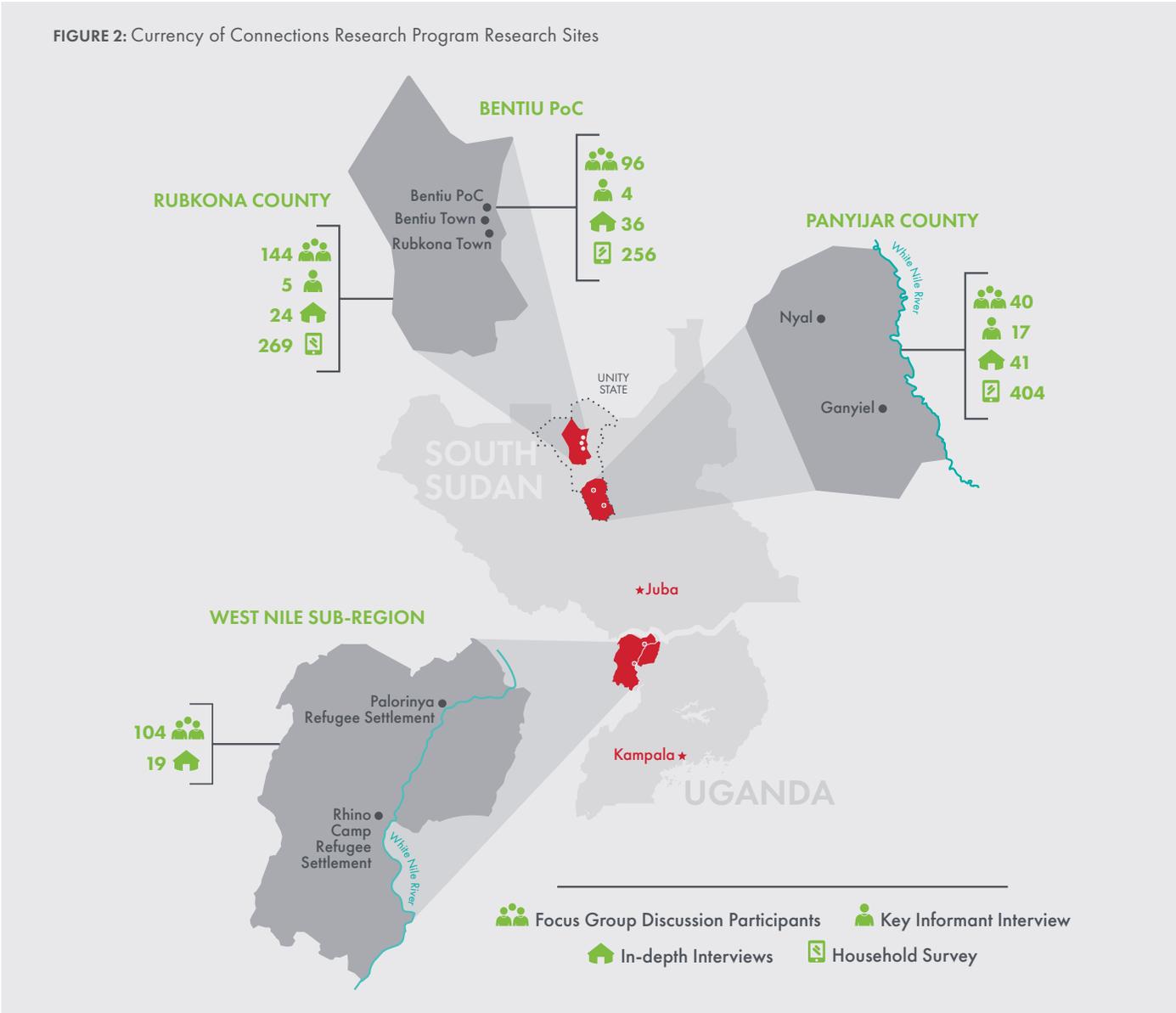
FIGURE 1: Study Conceptual Framework and Research Questions



# Methods

The study employed a *sequential exploratory mixed method* design to examine the research questions. In the design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation phases, the study brought together qualitative and quantitative methods to explore the complex phenomena of households' social connectedness and their resilience in a protracted crisis.

## Study 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 2**). In South Sudan, this included rural communities in Panyijar County, home to significant resident and displaced populations, as well as the

densely-populated Bentiu Protection of Civilian (PoC) site. 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.

### Qualitative Methods

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 conducted in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with a diverse cross section of participants. Members of the research team also conducted key informant interviews with various community leaders, including religious, traditional, and government authorities, to complement in-depth interviews and focus group discussions and to identify additional areas for qualitative inquiry. Between September 2018 and January 2020, the research team conducted 101 in-depth interviews, 35 focus group discussions, and 26 key informant interviews.

### Quantitative Methods

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 the study’s investigation. 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. 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).

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). 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.

The findings in this report bring together select qualitative and quantitative findings from South Sudan’s Unity State. While the report presents logical and statistically significant quantitative associations which are triangulated by rich qualitative data, the study design cannot establish direct causality.

## Research Question #1:

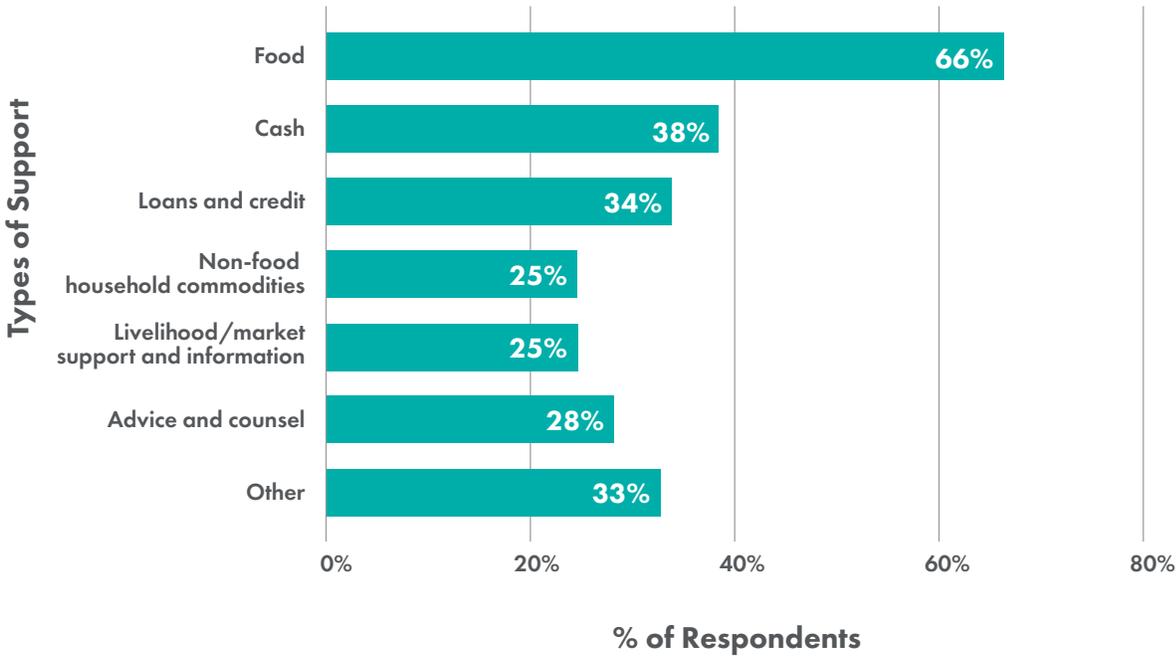
### How do households rely on their social connections during conflict and displacement?

**In contexts of protracted conflict and displacement, socially connected households share important forms of material and intangible support with each other.** Indeed, nearly all households reported receiving some form of support from their social connections in the past six to 12 month (**Figure 3**), and quantitative analysis highlights that many households rely more on support shared within their social networks than they do on assistance received directly from external aid actors. 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.

#### **Households maintain and build their social networks by proactively 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, for whom strategic sharing is an important means of establishing reciprocal and supportive relationships with members of the resident community. Over 60% of IDPs living outside of the PoC reported that they provided help to their social connections. 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.” 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.

FIGURE 3: Types of Support Received from Social Connections (n 929)



**Households expand their social networks through marriage.** 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. Marriage in turn leads to strong bonds between households and new, diversified and lasting sources of support long after the marriage ceremony has ended. 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. 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.

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, 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. 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. 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 households' access to important sources of support, they can entail protection risks.



South Sudan—Cassandra Nelson, Mercy Corps

## Research Question #2:

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

### Household-level Factors

**Not all households are equally socially connected.** Socio-economic characteristics including age, gender, livelihood, and wealth, as well as community-level factors, including access to functioning markets and money senders, determine the relationships that households are able to form, and the types of support they can share with and receive from one another (**Table 1**). These associations offer important insights into potential bases of household vulnerability as well as resilience during crises. 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.

TABLE 1: Summary of Household-level Factors Positively Associated with Social Connectedness Index and Dimensions\*

HOUSEHOLD-LEVEL FACTOR	DIMENSIONS OF SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS					
	SC INDEX	NUMBER	DIVERSITY	RELIABILITY	RECIPROCITY	RESOURCES
Having an older head of household	X		X		X	X
Having a female head of household	X					
Practising agriculture as primary livelihood activity	X					
Having access to land	X	X		X		

\*Excludes the Dynamics dimension which was not significantly associated with the household-level factors presented in Table 1.

## Gender and Social Connections

Gender norms that dictate which assets men and women control may also affect household social connectedness. While women face unique obstacles to forging and maintaining social connections, gender norms may also enable women to establish social connections, particularly with other women. 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. Women’s limited abilities to share certain 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. 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, participants 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. Focus group discussion participants explained how these women’s groups function. 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. 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. 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.

## Community-level Factors

### Market Functionality

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



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

Marketplaces 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—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.

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.” 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.” Marketplaces thus offer communities important social as well as economic benefits and are critical venues where social connections are maintained and expanded.

## Access to a 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 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. 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.”

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.” 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.”

## Research Question #3:

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

### Food Security

#### Food Consumption Score

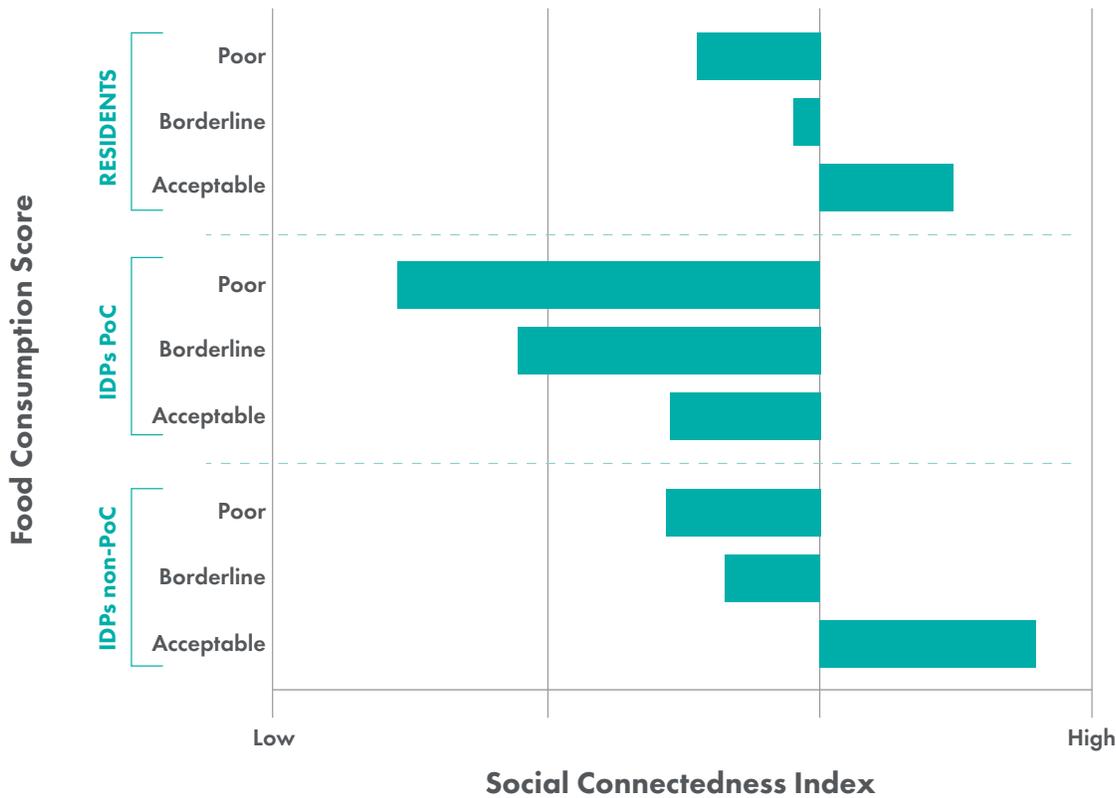
Households' scores on the Social Connectedness Index and Reciprocity dimension are positively associated with the diversity and frequency of foods consumed.



In South Sudan, households rely heavily on their social connections for food, access to economic opportunities, emotional support and guidance. This support is central to households' abilities to cope and recover in the face of shocks and stresses. 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.”

**Socially connected households are better able to diversify their diets.** Quantitative 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. 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 (**Figure 4**). Of the individual social connectedness dimensions, the Reciprocity dimension emerged as the most significant factor for higher FCS.

FIGURE 4: 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. In order to obtain additional varieties of food to complement food rations, participants 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.”

**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. Indeed, quantitative 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.

## 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.

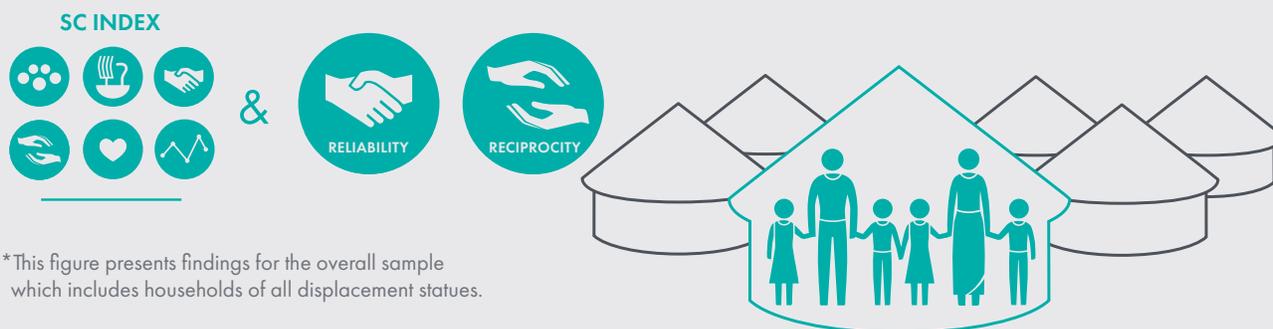


Failures to abide by strict sharing norms can result in a household's systematic marginalization and exclusion from reciprocal support systems. Critically, such marginalization can also damage a household's long-term ability to rely on support from others in their community. As one man in Panyijar explained, "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." In some cases, participants explained that such exclusion from reciprocal support systems can last for years, or even between generations. 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 participant 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]."

## Subjective Resilience

### Subjective Resilience\*

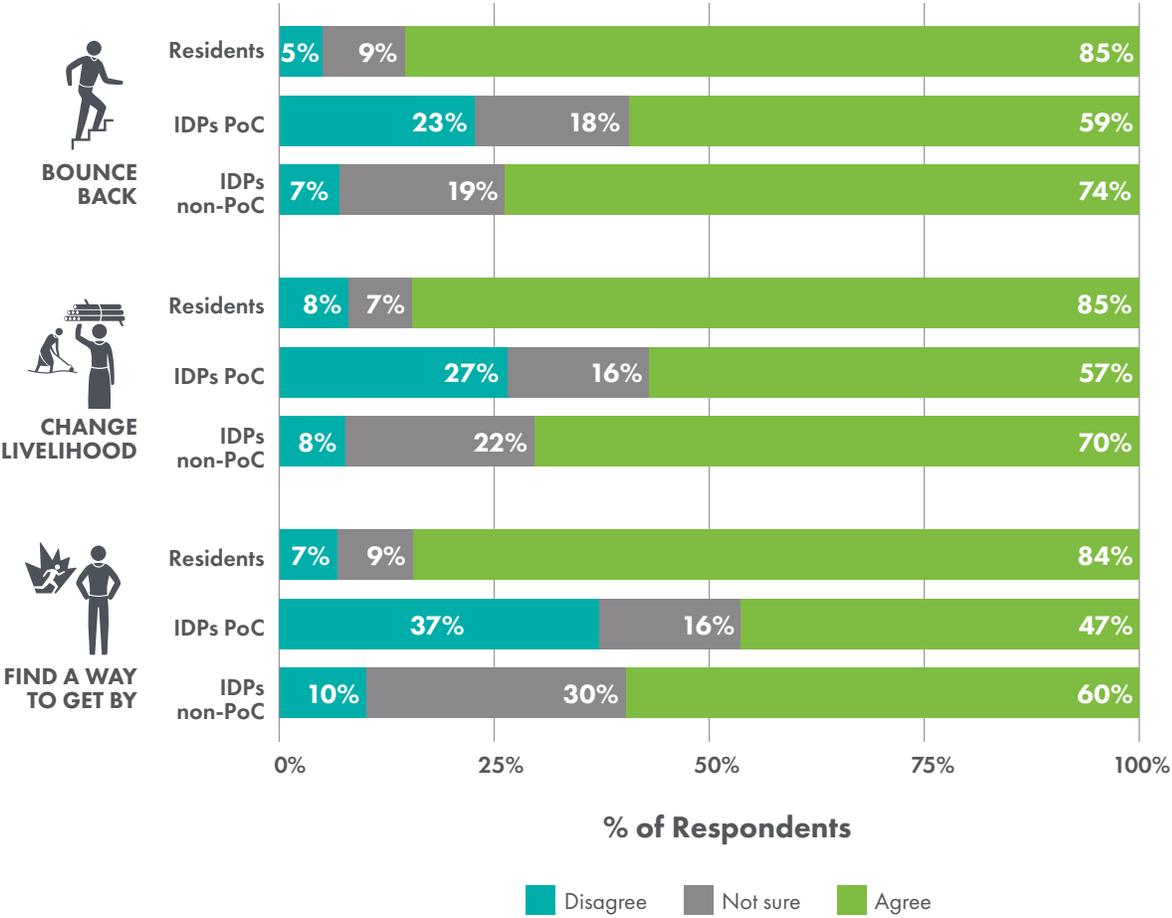
Households' scores on the Social Connectedness Index, as well as Reliability and Reciprocity dimensions are positively associated with their subjective resilience.



\*This figure presents findings for the overall sample which includes households of all displacement statuses.

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 somewhat or strongly agreed that they could bounce back from any challenge, change their primary income if needed, and find a way to get by even if threats became more frequent and intense (Figure 5).

FIGURE 5: Subjective Resilience by Self-reported Displacement Status (n 828)



However, households’ subjective resilience varies significantly by their displacement status, and in particular, whether or not households live inside the PoC. Participants in the PoC explained this is a function of people’s inability to provide sufficient levels of support to one another due to resource scarcity. Nevertheless, participants of all displacement statuses highlighted the role their social connectedness played in their optimism about their own resilience. Indeed, quantitative analyses show that households’ scores on the Social Connectedness Index, as well as Reliability and Reciprocity dimensions, are positively associated with their subjective resilience.

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. These 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 #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.

**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.** 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 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. 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.

**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. 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." 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. 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. 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. 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.



South Sudan—Dominic Nahr for Mercy Corps

# 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.

**) 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 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 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, Mercy Corps

## **Acknowledgments**

Thank you to Mercy Corps' South Sudanese research team who tirelessly and masterfully led interviews and focus group discussions to make this report possible. They are: Gatjang Gabriel Kai, Gateah Pakita Nyasunday, Nyuon Moses Gathuoy, Thompson Kulong, and Kuerdiil Maziaw Chuol. We are also thankful to Elizabeth Stites, Daniel Maxwell, Jon Kurtz, Roxani Krystali and Alison Hemberger for their detailed feedback on earlier drafts of this report. We are further grateful to Carly Schmidt and Natalia Cañas for providing thoughtful research assistance, and to Anne Radday for her support with dissemination of the findings. We also acknowledge members of Mercy Corps' Technical Support Unit and external stakeholders who provided guidance on the potential implications and recommendations of this research. Finally, and most importantly, we thank the hundreds of South Sudanese respondents who willingly sacrificed their valuable time to tell us their stories.

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

## **Suggested citation**

Kim, Jeeyon, Alex Humphrey, Anastasia Marshak, Nyuon Moses Gathuoy, Vaidehi Krishnan. 2020. "The Currency of Connections: Why Do Social Connections Matter for Household Resilience in South Sudan?" Washington, D.C.: Mercy Corps.

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

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