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Harnessing Informal Social Safety Nets for Resilience and Development

RISING PROGRAM

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Acronyms

CAFOD	Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance
CRS	Catholic Relief Services
HAC	Humanitarian Aid Commission
IRB	Institutional Review Board
ISI	Income Streams Index
NGO	Non-governmental organization
OR	Operational Research
RAG	Research Advisory Group
SILC	Savings and internal lending community
SSN	Social safety net
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

Glossary

Ageed—the Native Administration, or tribal, leader who is responsible for a population's security. Most function at the community level, but they also exist at much higher levels within the tribal structure.

Ajaweed—a committee of respected community members, usually spontaneously formed when needed and with the membership reflecting the need

Ashoor/oshur—a traditional tax based on the land used by an individual, used for supporting leadership

Damre—a semi-permanent settlement, often near a settled village. Members of a pastoralist family may live in a *damre* seasonally, or even throughout the year.

Darra—a system of regularly sharing evening meals, more formally practiced among a relatively set group of men. Each household contributes to the meal.

Farique—a temporary nomadic camp for a group of herders moving together with a herd, generally set up well away from settled communities and often comprised of a single extended family of multiple brothers or other close relatives and their wives and children. Different *farique* groupings may move in coordination with other related groups.

Faza'a—a posse; community members joining together to chase after thieves, usually livestock thieves. Also a call to battle. The *faza'a* is organized by the *Ageed*.

Hakammah/hakamat—a group of influential women in the community responsible for maintaining culture and traditions, sometimes through song and poetry, but also through imposing penalties on individuals who do not fulfill societal obligations

Hareeq—the rapid response to a house fire, to fight the fire, prevent it from spreading to other homes, and then to rebuild the homes and provide other material support

Judiya/diya—a system of reconciliation, especially following murder, in which the guilty party agrees to pay a *diya* (an amount of money or livestock negotiated through the process) as compensation to the relatives of the victim. The extended family and sometimes even clan are expected to contribute.

Nafeer—a system of working together to accomplish what one person may struggle to do alone. Often used as a way to help someone in special need, or to provide agricultural labor without paying for it. Commonly, a group will spend one day working in each member's field.

Omda—a leader in the Native Administration. One *Omda* may be responsible for a large number of Sheiks and their communities, representing these *Sheiks* in tribal or government affairs.

Sandouk/sandouq—a simple traditional savings group, most similar to a rotary savings group. At regular meetings members contribute a set amount to a pot. Each meeting, a member receives the pot. The recipient may be chosen based on need, or the members may take turns receiving the pot.

Sheik—the leader of a community. Many represent the community to both the tribal hierarchy and the government. They are traditionally responsible for allocating land. Receiving an allocation of land from a *Sheik* implies allegiance to that *Sheik* and the norms of that community.

Zakat—an annual tithe on wealth used to support the needy. Collected locally, a portion may stay local for local needy, and a portion is passed on by a committee to be aggregated at a higher level.

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Executive Summary

Overview

People turn to each other to get through difficult times, to celebrate life events, or simply to ease daily living. The research study detailed in this report examined the nature of these systems of mutual support in selected communities in North and South Darfur. We refer to these community-based systems as informal social safety nets (SSNs) and define these systems as a set of somewhat standardized procedures and expectations created and managed by a group to support individuals and households within the group; these procedures and expectations are known by the participants and are enforced through societal norms. **A group of individuals, households, or communities may activate SSNs when they face shocks or pursue regular livelihood activities.** Importantly, SSNs are based within the local community and thus use those resources that are found within or accessed by this population. This means that when a shock is persistent, recurring, or affects a large swath of the population, informal social safety nets can be overwhelmed and unable to respond effectively or adequately to the extent of need. In such occurrences—which can include chronic poverty, insecurity, and repeated climate stresses—an external response is normally required.

Objective and methods

This research study was carried out by the Feinstein International Center, Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University as a member of the RISING consortium led by Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and funded by United States Agency for International Development (USAID)/Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA). Additional partners included Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD) and World Vision. **The study aimed to review informal social safety nets in Darfur, to understand how these systems interact with**

external interventions, and to highlight avenues for promoting synergy between the SSNs and interventions to promote resilience and support livelihoods. In two field visits in late 2020/early 2021 and mid-2021, two Sudanese researchers collected interview data in Arabic using qualitative research methods, which were supplemented with insights from a panel of Sudanese experts. The field team worked in five communities in El Fashir, North Darfur. In South Darfur, they worked in three communities in Alsalam and two communities in Kubom. The team worked with both agro-pastoral and pastoral populations, conducting a total of 125 interviews. Limitations caused by the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in a smaller and less diverse sample than initially planned, less time for data collection, and the inability of the Tufts faculty members to travel to Darfur. Although the sample is small and the data are not representative, we found consistent trends and commonalities across the locations that align with Tufts' previous work and observations in the region, and the experiences of the Sudanese expert panel. The coherence among these factors leads us to hypothesize that the findings in this report are likely more broadly applicable to other populations across Darfur.

Main findings

Informal social safety nets among the sampled populations in North and South Darfur operate as **coherent webs that support social connections and norms, providing social and practical benefits as well as immediate emergency assistance when needed.** SSNs operate between two or more different communities, within a community, or across a portion of a community. The function of SSNs can be event based, such as in response to a life event (wedding, birth, or death) or in reaction to an incident (such as a fire, theft, or dispute), or non-event based, such as when people come together to assist each other in livelihood activities (farming,

building, working on communal infrastructure repairs), provide regular support to the poor, pay into a central system for land management, or join together in mutual support networks such as savings groups.

Informal social safety nets can function in a variety of ways, as determined by need, relations among members, and norms of the local community and those participating. Our data show that main functions include **meeting practical needs, sharing risk throughout a community in response to a shock, and supporting people who are struggling to meet their daily needs.** The SSNs that function to meet practical needs may be ad hoc or more established and often form around specific livelihood activities. Those SSNs that help to share risk are based on notions of collective survival governed by norms of reciprocity, even if participation involves a risk or loss to the individual. SSNs that function to help those who are struggling to meet their needs are deeply embedded in daily practices and may be invisible to outsiders. These include, for instance, the daily shared meals called *darra*. Taken together, SSNs are important both for the reliability of appropriate, timely assistance and for their ability to preserve the dignity of the beneficiaries by being inconspicuously embedded in the day-to-day operations of the social order.

The informal social safety nets described by participants are **fluid and adaptive to emerging needs and conditions.** Because these systems are able to be spontaneous, temporary, and dynamic when needed, **they can respond efficiently and effectively to a variety of situations.** Participation is not hampered by an extended commitment. This fluidity is not without order, but rather is directed by the common set of norms that inform how the SSNs function. This is a key area of difference between local SSNs and the systems that external actors sometimes introduce that mimic the functioning of SSNs, including local savings associations. These external systems adhere to the norms, paradigms, and rules of the implementing agency, which are often based on stability and permanence. They require more resources (e.g., labor, time, or income) and commitment from participants. In contrast, community-level SSNs can be flexible and active

only as and when needed, though at the expenses of longer-term growth or sophistication.

Social norms determine how SSNs are structured and function, and yet these norms are not static and may change rapidly in times of social or economic upheaval or other transitions. As norms shift, so do the roles and functions of SSNs within communities, and the parts that different people can play in them. This is apparent in the incorporation of shifting gender dynamics and generational roles into SSNs. For example, the expansion of economic roles for women in many communities means that women are increasingly involved in trade-based SSNs that were once limited to men. Additional drivers of the evolution of SSNs in Darfur are displacement, the emergence of alternative livelihoods (such as gold mining), increased migration to other areas, the improvement of infrastructure and technology, and the expansion of economic opportunities.

SSNs depend on relationships and trust to function. **They are governed by shared norms. We have seen that SSNs can also restore broken trust and violated norms.** The conflict in Darfur violated norms and disrupted many relationships, and therefore undermined the SSNs that depended on them. However, **SSNs can also play important roles in reconciliation.** A number of respondents for this study explained that as people have moved back home in recent years, even if only seasonally, or are newly settled near a community they once fought with, participation in inter-community SSNs—such as condolences after a death or joint action to fight a fire—has been a way for one community to signal to another that they hope to mend their relationship. However, SSNs on their own are unlikely to be able to fully restore trust after acts of violence or estrangement.

Participation in all informal social safety nets is neither automatic nor guaranteed, and SSNs are likely to reflect socioeconomic hierarches and dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. Some of these patterns may not be viewed as exclusionary by communities. For instance, an activity “for men” or “for married women” excludes those who do not fall into these categories, but if these parameters are long standing and accepted, they are unlikely

to be labelled as discriminatory. While we can assume these and other restrictions on participation exist along lines of gender, wealth, age, and social status, the respondents for this study insisted there were no overt forms of exclusion from SSNs. We acknowledge these topics can be sensitive and difficult to investigate; as such, more in-depth research is needed to understand these parameters and their impacts.

Although informal social safety nets are essential for local support, mutual aid, and social connectedness, they have inherent limitations that are important for international actors to understand. First among these is the fact that the extent of support or assistance an SSN can provide (whether on a daily basis or in response to a crisis) is based entirely on the extent of resources available to the community in which the SSN is based. As such, covariate or extended shocks have the potential to easily overwhelm local resources and those of a community's network. In addition, expectations to participate in a given SSN may tax a household's or community's resources beyond recovery, thereby having a negative impact upon broader resiliency. Taken together, these factors mean that **while SSNs are an excellent first line of defense for shocks that affect a portion of the community, in many types of crises, SSNs are overwhelmed, and external interventions are still necessary.**

Programmers and policy makers often wonder how external programming influences existing customary systems, including mutual aid networks such as informal social safety nets. Respondents for this study reported that external interventions had little positive or negative impact on SSNs, although they could function as a complement or supplement to existing SSNs. Overall, the SSNs reported in this study were most helpful in responding to the constant stream of small-to-medium idiosyncratic shocks and for promoting livelihood production. Most NGO interventions, in contrast, focus on responding to wide-scale shocks and disruptions. As such, **external interventions and the local SSNs serve different functions, both of which are important.** In addition, respondents reported that receiving assistance via an NGO or other external program did not exclude someone from receiving support from an SSN. Similarly, receiving external aid

did not increase expectations of that household to contribute to SSNs, though relations and immediate contacts may have such expectations. The one exceptional impact that NGOs have had on SSNs is in improving the sophistication, organization, and impact of savings groups.

Conclusions and recommendations

Informal social safety nets play a critical role in communities in people's daily lives and in response to ongoing idiosyncratic shocks. SSNs build and strength social ties, even helping communities begin to reconcile after conflict. The interconnection among the web of SSNs, following relationships and governed by norms, is a dynamic system. The range of SSNs serve different needs for different sectors of the population, built by and woven together by relationships and norms into a living fabric that is constantly adapting to meet the evolving needs of a changing world. Understanding how SSNs function, their role in society (not just livelihoods), and their strengths and limitations can help humanitarian programmers to better see potential avenues to complement them rather than to create rough replicas to compete with them, or even harness them to promote reconciliation, resilience, and a more certain future. For example, when targeting the most vulnerable in communities, consider current systems that have already identified those most in need at that moment, or who cannot meet their needs more generally. Community leaders in Darfur often manage the community portion of the zakat contributions to aid the most vulnerable and therefore maintain a current list of these households. Reviewing the existing zakat list – as opposed to the NGOs starting their own list from scratch— would serve two purposes. First, the list provides insight into how the *community* views what makes a household vulnerable (as opposed to imposing the NGO's concept of vulnerability) and can therefore offer insights into local risks, threats, and dynamics. Second, such a list provides a community-generated starting point on which NGOs can build and verify.

Additionally, evidence from the Taadoud ISI operational research shows that illness is by far the most common idiosyncratic shock in Darfur, to

the extent that it is a drain on the development of resilient livelihood strategies. Medical treatment requires a sudden cash expense that cannot be delayed. Very often, households must sell an asset to quickly get sufficient cash to pay the medical bills. The poorest are the most likely to sell those assets that reduce their productive capacity and resilience to other shocks. As a resilience promoting activity, it may be possible to work through the existing community *zakat* distribution system to provide a community health fund to cover a portion of these expenses as they are needed, protecting both the health and livelihoods of the poorest while reinforcing good governance practices. While sustainable models of this approach would need to be developed and tested, this type of support could be used either in the aftermath of a major shock or during times of stress (such as hyper-inflation) to build and protect the resilience of the most vulnerable.

Perhaps the most important finding from this study was that SSNs might be used to foster reconciliation and prevent the escalation of tensions into conflict. Historically, regular positive interactions encouraged a symbiotic, collaborative relationship between different individuals or groups. Because SSNs in Sudan are based on relationships, Darfurians are now at times using these mechanisms to help normalize relationships after conflict or to reduce tensions. The more members there are who participate in collaborative SSNs such as social insurance funds or joint investments ventures, the more practical impact they can have, coupled with lower risk to individual members. The regular interaction generated by these activities as well as the joint benefits derived from them increase the cost of conflict and encourage better understanding between groups. Promoting joint or networked collaborative SSNs among and across communities previously at odds with each other may promote reconciliation in a natural, unforced manner.

With the foundation of understanding about SSNs provided by this report, members of the RISING consortium can begin to delve deeper into the specifics of the SSNs in each of its communities.

A better understanding of exactly how SSNs function can give insights into the social priorities

of a community, what factors they believe make a person truly vulnerable and worthy of assistance, and even opportunities for promoting reconciliation in a tense and fragile era. SSNs are critical to the survival of communities, but they are not sufficient to meet all needs. Through understanding how communities are helping themselves, NGOs can come in as partners to meet the needs communities cannot meet on their own. The final section of the report contains detailed take-away messages and programmatic implications.

resilient. By cultivating, pastoralists reduce their need to sell livestock during good years, allowing their herds to multiply faster. By raising livestock to sell for cash needs, farmers can reduce the amount of grain they need to sell, thus preserving their granaries, which are necessary to weather dry years. Both approaches make use of the same natural resources, but in different ways.

Introduction and Background

When we face struggles that are difficult to handle alone, we turn to others for support. Most often, we turn first to those who are nearest to us or to others we have helped in the past, hoping they will remember our kindness and return the favor. People who experience frequent shocks or stresses (including those associated with chronic poverty and insecurity) may often face struggles that threaten to overwhelm them and push them into destitution or cause displacement, forcing them to repeatedly seek assistance from others. For many, these experiences can be cyclical or seasonal, and immediate personal networks may become fatigued, making it necessary to turn to other support measures. Some households may need assistance only infrequently but may not have enough people near them who can help, or they may fear the stigma of making direct requests. When a large proportion of a population faces these situations often, a systematic response may be needed.

In the absence of robust formal government systems to provide support during periods of shock or extended hardship, people turn to informal systems. Over time, many populations develop local mutual aid systems to support households or individuals when they are facing crises, using the resources and capacities already found within the community or within the community's networks and often going beyond the individual's network of contacts. Support may be ad hoc or in the form of established systems, extending from simple sharing of basic needs between households to complex inter-community networks of support and response. Overall, support systems work both to uphold cultural and social norms and to ensure that no one falls below locally acceptable levels of welfare.

Households engage in multi-faceted livelihood systems to ensure their survival over time. To be sustainable and effective, livelihood systems

In this study we define informal social safety nets (SSNs) as a set of somewhat standardized procedures and expectations created and managed by a group to support individuals and households within that group as they face shocks or as they pursue an activity, using the resources found within that population or those accessed by that population. SSNs follow set procedures known by the participants and enforced primarily through local societal norms.

must not only provide for basic needs, but must also generate surplus capital (including financial, social, natural, human, and/or physical assets) to move households toward their goals while also building resilience to potential shocks or crises. Rather than simply allowing for a reaction to shocks, being resilient means having a cushion to absorb a shock, reducing the impact of a shock or even preventing shocks altogether, and finally, facilitating development and improving well-being. In rural livelihood systems, many activities are difficult to do alone, and are much easier, more efficient, and maybe even more pleasant when done as a group. Social safety nets exist within this context of livelihood systems to enable individuals and

households to support each other in mundane tasks as well as to mitigate shocks. As such, social safety nets in many areas have evolved to help households and whole communities reduce their expenses and hardships while also enabling livelihoods to become more productive.

In this study, we call these continually evolving local mutual aid systems informal social safety nets (SSNs), which we define as follows: *informal social safety nets (SSNs) are a set of somewhat standardized procedures and expectations created and managed by a group to support individuals and households within that group as they face shocks or as they pursue an activity, using the resources found within that population or those accessed by that population. SSNs follow set procedures known by the participants and enforced primarily through local societal norms.*

This study aims to review the nature of SSNs in Darfur and how they interact with external interventions such as those provided by the RISING program, and to highlight ways to promote synergy between the SSNs and program interventions to sustainably improve the resilience of households and to promote livelihoods that support development.

Social connectedness, social networks, and social protection—concepts related to informal social safety nets

Social connectedness, social networks, and social protection are concepts that overlap with informal social safety nets, but they are not synonymous. The literature provides a wide range of discussions on the importance of social connections and social networks, and how households, individuals, and communities actively manage social connections and norms to mitigate risk and vulnerability. There is much less literature on the role and function of informal social safety nets as systems either embedded within these social connections or as mechanisms through which these social connections are leveraged. However, we can draw on the literature on social networks, social connectedness,

and social protection to help us better understand and contextualize SSNs.

We use the term social connectedness to include both the more static notion of social capital and the more dynamic ways in which people are connected to each other. As Kim et al. describe it, “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” (Kim et al. 2020, 5). We understand “connections” to be relationships between and among individuals, households, and communities. Different types of connections provide a person with different potential benefits, and a person with more of these useful relationships is said to be more connected or to have stronger and better social connectedness. A person’s individual characteristics—including gender, age, ethnicity, marital status, and wealth—often influence the extent to which that individual is more or less connected and to whom (Campos et al. 2019; Stites, Humphrey, and Krystalli 2021). When a person faces a crisis or needs help with a livelihood activity, a more connected person has more people from whom he or she can ask for support or collaboration. If a collaborative group (like a farmers’ association) requires all applicants for membership to be introduced and recommended by an existing member, a person who is more connected will have a better chance of having a connection to a member who will recommend him or her. A person who is less connected may need to use a broader network with weaker ties—i.e., maybe a friend of an uncle who is well connected can introduce him or her to the group. These simplified examples are given to clarify the concepts.

Within a population, **these relationships form an intricate web, or a “social network.”** As detailed by Woolcock, these connections are often classified as *bonding connections* when within a group or among similar people; *bridging connections* are those between similar groups; and *linking connections* are connections those between different types of people (Woolcock 2001). For instance, in this study we

What are norms?

Norms are the unofficial, often unrecognized rules for how we are expected to act in a certain situation within a group.

Stefanik and Hwang define norms as “behavioral rules constructed and shared by a group, and are different from individually held beliefs or attitudes” (Stefanik and Hwang 2017, 2). They propose that social norms are maintained by social influence—that is, by the anticipation of social approval or disapproval for one’s actions, also called positive or negative social sanctions. They are guides for how people perceive fairness, justice, good manners, and hospitality. Social norms range from expected greetings upon meeting a friend, to acceptable activities for men and women, to the ways we extend apologies when we cause another person to suffer. Norms are also “situational;” that is, the way they are followed depends on the situation. For example, you may greet a friend you saw this morning differently from a friend you have not seen for a long time.

might think of a bonding connection as one between two females within one pastoral village who assist each other on a regular basis, with the unspoken assumption of reciprocity. A bridging connection might be between two women in different pastoral groups who come into contact on an occasional or seasonal basis and have established each other as informal trading partners, whether of goods, animals, or information. A linking connection might be between a female in a pastoral village and one in a settled farming village who engage in informal trade and exchange. We highlight these differences between bonding, bridging, and linking because these terms are frequently used by practitioners and donors. However, as these types of distinctions were not raised by the research participants, this terminology does not feature heavily in our discussion and analysis.

An important point is that social networks, connections, and connectedness are dynamic. This means that each time someone uses a connection or navigates his or her social network, he or she may take a different path to meet a need. In fact, they may intentionally take a different path to prevent over-burdening a few individuals with repeated requests for support. While some basic norms may dictate who is a connection and the likelihood or ability of the connection to provide support, there are no set or fixed procedures determining the form or flow of social connections. Without an organized system of support, each person must depend on his or her own connections, navigating them in an ad hoc fashion when assistance is needed. A more connected person will find it easier to function in this way and will likely be able to leverage more support from his or her network (and will likely also receive more requests for support). A poor or marginalized person with fewer connections, or with connections only to others with a similar resource base, may find it more difficult.

A social network alone is not a system. It is just a roadmap of connections in a population, one that each person navigates on his or her own. We differentiate SSNs from social networks or social connectedness in that an SSN is a recognizable system with procedures and rules for organizing multiple components or actors within a relatively fixed framework or network to achieve a specific outcome.

An analogy may make the difference between these concepts easier to understand, although it is not a perfect analogy. **Roads are like social connections**—linking different destinations. The **many interconnected roads in a city form a network**. I can travel by multiple different routes from my house to my office. If one road is blocked, I can take another road. Every time I want to get to my office, I must think about the options, then decide which roads to take. The more roads I am familiar with, the larger my network and the more likely I can get to my office without a problem. If I don’t know very many roads, my options are limited, and I may not be able to get to work on time if one road is blocked. Similarly, the more connections we have, the more ways we have to negotiate for support, but we have to decide

We use the following working definition for a **system**: a set of procedures and rules for organizing multiple components within a relatively fixed framework to achieve a specific outcome.

which set of connections to use and negotiate with them individually each time we need support. An SSN would be more like a system of buses in a city. The routes of the buses are designed and organized so that people can ride a bus to the most common destinations at a price that most people can afford (or at least enough people can afford it to keep the system running and useful). One bus will provide transportation to one destination on one schedule by one set route for a set fare paid by every passenger, while another bus will go to a different place by a set route, often for a different fee. The riders on a bus do not need to know the roads or the other riders. They do not have to negotiate with the other riders to decide the route each time they use the bus. Each rider simply gets on the bus that will take them to the place they want to go, paying a set fare to the driver. Similarly, different SSNs are designed to provide different types of support. Like the set routes and fees, SSNs have set ways of working that reduce the need for individual connections or the need to negotiate expectations each time support is needed.

Having an established system for doing some common activities or getting support in a community for common problems prevents having to figure out or negotiate a new solution every time a particular need arises. A system with known rules reduces confusion and conflict, and ensures all participants know what is expected of them, allowing members to plan or participate with confidence, using the system as a tool. Informal SSNs are a type of system. Each SSN identified in this study uses a recognizable set of procedures and rules that organizes the people belonging to that SSN and the activities they do together to meet a specific need, with fairly specific, known benefits to and requirements of each member. This is in contrast to using a social network in which each person negotiates expectations individually with the connections in their personal networks.

The use of the rules and procedures in SSNs (like bus routes and fees) makes SSNs more efficient and predictable but also sometimes less flexible. At times, people with extensive personal networks and resources may choose to use their own networks instead of the more predictable but more limited SSNs, though some who do not need to depend on the material benefits of SSN continue to include themselves in SSNs to retain or expand their networks. Others who cannot meet expectations of an SSN (like paying fees on a bus), will have to resort to their own networks, even if they are very limited.

Some social safety nets are always in place, encompass the entire community, and are activated when there is a need. Others exist only transiently for a specific need or when people opt into an activity where norms may not require them to participate (such as a savings group). At times, people and households may be included in an SSN simply because they are a member of a particular society or community, whether a member of a clan, a resident of a village, a student in a university, or an employee of a business. Through such cases of automatic inclusion, someone may receive support from or be expected to provide support to someone they have never even met and with whom they have only a limited connection. Such SSNs can enable people to build more connections in their personal networks if they fulfill their obligations within that SSN. For example, suppose a Darfuri woman from a different village marries a man and moves to his village. If the man dies after a short period, the woman may have only a limited network of personal connections in her new home. But because she is a member of the community, she can expect everyone in the village to provide support to help her in this crisis. She will be given a list of people and the specific support that they provide. In time, she will provide similar support to others on that list. This highlights a major difference between a social network of connections and an SSN: an SSN is a recognized system that provides specific benefits to (and requires specific obligations of) its members. Once a person is a member of an SSN, s/he does not need to depend on navigating connections each time s/he needs to access those benefits.

Social protection and social safety nets are sometimes mistakenly considered to be the same

thing. By some definitions, **SSNs can be considered a subset of a much larger group of measures that fall under “social protection.”** Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler use the following rather all-encompassing working definition of social protection:

SOCIAL PROTECTION is the set of all initiatives, both formal and informal, that provide: social assistance to extremely poor individuals and households; social services to groups who need special care or would otherwise be denied access to basic services; social insurance to protect people against the risks and consequences of livelihood shocks; and social equity to protect people against social risks such as discrimination or abuse. The key objective of social protection is to reduce the vulnerability of the poor. (Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler 2004, 9)

There are also many different social protection measures that are not SSNs, such as regular government disbursements of cash or food to the poor, even when there is no crisis. This paper will explore specifically **informal social safety nets** rather than the full array of social protection measures.

At the heart of informal SSNs is the idea that a group working together can accomplish what one or two people alone cannot (Kim et al. 2020). Each SSN mechanism is designed to meet a specific need, has its own procedures, and has expected benefits for members and expected contributions or participation from each member. Each person participating in an SSN expects to receive certain benefits from the group but is also obliged to contribute to others’ benefits in a way specific to that SSN, perhaps at a different time and perhaps not in exactly the same manner. The many SSNs within a community are pieced together to meet a range of needs the community is experiencing at that moment. Through the SSNs, when members of a community support any one member of the community when he/she is unable to support him/herself or is unable to accomplish something alone, the community ensures that all members will survive or prosper.

Methodology

This study uses information from two rounds of qualitative open-ended semi-structured interviews with respondents purposively selected to represent as wide a range of characteristics as possible at both the household and village level. The first round of interviews, conducted December 18, 2020 to January 4, 2021, provided information for the Scoping Study. The analysis of this information was presented to Taadoud/RISING partners and to the Tufts Research Advisory Group (RAG)—a group of experienced Sudanese academics and practitioners—for further interpretation and critical feedback. The Scoping Study findings and critical feedback informed a more targeted and specific second round of interviews (May 22 to June 11, 2021). Supplemental information and understanding came from previous work with this same consortium in the Taadoud I and II Operational Research (OR).

All but a few interviews were conducted in Arabic, the common language for communication in Darfur, and researchers used interview guides to steer the conversations. Arabic is easily spoken by most of the population throughout the areas targeted by RISING, though in a few cases in South Darfur, a local community member translated from Fur to Arabic during the interview. For the first round of interviews, we relied on findings from the literature, previous experience in Darfur, and findings from Taadoud OR to establish the interview guide and sample selection. As new information was uncovered, we adjusted the emphasis of the interviews to explore those new aspects. We based the emphasis of the interviews for the second round of data collection on our analyses of the Scoping Study findings and discussion of these findings with RISING consortium staff and a panel of Sudanese subject experts (the RAG).

Two field researchers (Hassan Alattar Satti and Dr. Sarra Rasheid Beheiry), both Sudanese with extensive experience in Darfur livelihood systems and qualitative methods, worked together to conduct the interviews. The Covid-19 pandemic and related travel restrictions meant that the two Tufts faculty

members on the team, Drs. Merry Fitzpatrick and Elizabeth Stites, could not travel to Sudan after March 2020. However, the Tufts faculty worked closely with the Sudanese researchers, including regular debriefings while the team was in the field. Due to cultural sensitivities and to gain a more nuanced picture of local social dynamics, the male researcher (Hassan) conducted interviews with male respondents and the female researcher (Sarrah) with female respondents. After data collection in each locality, the two field researchers would compile and discuss their information with the two American researchers by telephone.

Timeline

As with many things during 2020, the timeline of the RISING Operational Research was severely disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic. When it became clear that the pandemic would continue for an extended time, the Tufts Integrative Safety Committee agreed to allow the local members of the RISING team to conduct face-to-face research under strict protocols to protect both researchers and participants (see the section on Covid-19 protocols for more details). Below are details of the timeline for the study.

- February 2020—Initial organizational visit to Khartoum, meetings with key personnel in the RISING consortium, planning for the Scoping Study
- March 2020—Suspension by Tufts University of all face-to-face research and international travel due to the Covid-19 pandemic
- March/April 2020—Initial literature review
- May/July 2020—Study design
- July–September 2020—Applications and efforts to seek exemption for face-to-face research failed; parallel efforts at remote data collection under Taadoud deemed unsuccessful; Covid-19 worsens in the United States, removing the possibility of international travel in late 2020
- October/November 2020—Waiver obtained from Tufts to allow face-to-face research, but not international travel

December 2020/January 2021—Scoping data collection
January/February 2021—Analysis of Scoping Study data
March 2021—Scoping Study Report
April/May 2021—Consultations regarding Scoping Study and reworking of interview guide
May/June 2021—Second round of data collection
July–September 2021—Analysis and drafting the full report
October/November 2021—CRS and Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) review of draft report
December 2021/January 2022—Incorporation of CRS and BHA feedback
February/April 2022—dissemination and learning events

Sampling strategy

In sampling, we aimed to collect information from villages that were as different as possible from each other regarding livelihood specializations, recent experiences of conflict, and natural resource endowments. The sample size was limited by the time and resources needed to reach these remote areas. We felt that we quickly reached saturation among the farming villages, and hence adding more farming villages would not have influenced the findings. We would likely have benefitted from expanding the sample in pastoral and agro-pastoral areas, but doing so was difficult due to the available time of the consultants, the inability of Tufts faculty to be present on the ground, limited time and personnel resources, and the RISING program parameters.

Time and funding supported visits to one state for the Scoping Study and two states for the second round of interviews. We selected North and South Darfur based on security considerations and to maximize exposure to different livelihood systems. The similarities in the information provided by participants in all villages visited in North and South Darfur, regardless of identity or livelihood specialization, and the consistency between these

findings and those from previous experiences in West, Central, and other parts of North Darfur led us to believe that the discussion and analysis presented here reflects the experiences of a much larger portion of the Darfur population than covered in this specific research sample. That said, we can only speak specifically about the populations in the locations where we collected data for this work. The Scoping Study included interviews from South Darfur, while the second round included interviews from both states (Table 1). During the Scoping Study, the team conducted a total of 30 interviews (15 with male interviewees and 15 with female interviewees) in 7 villages across 4 localities in South Darfur. During the second round of interviews, the team conducted a total of 95 interviews comprising 10 interviews (5 with male interviewees and 5 with female interviewees) in each of 10 villages across 4 localities in 2 states, North and South Darfur (except one locality in South Darfur where no interviews with females were conducted). In all, the team interviewed 125 respondents (65 male and 60 female) from 17 villages representing 8 localities in 2 states.

The RISING program targeting strategy takes a geographic focus, which by default prioritizes sedentary villages engaged primarily in cultivation, or in a balance of livestock production and cultivation. As we worked in RISING locations, all villages visited during the Scoping Study consisted of these types of populations. Although the activities of nomadic pastoralists and the sedentary villagers appear drastically different, they share broader livelihood systems and resources, and both benefit when they collaborate (Osman et al. 2012). For example, nomadic pastoralists spend time each year in many parts of the RISING intervention area, interacting with the sedentary population and, by right, using the natural resources, government services, and market systems of the area. The well-being of the sedentary population is intimately tied to the nature of their relationship with these nomadic pastoralist populations. The often-systematic exclusion of nomadic populations from humanitarian assistance has been highlighted as one of the factors aggravating polarization of relationships along the lines of livelihood specializations (Young, Osman, and Dale 2007; Young and Ismail 2019). Although

the nomadic population is not actively targeted by RISING, members do potentially participate in activities or benefit from programs when they are in the catchment area. Prior to the conflict, and increasingly in recent years, nomadic groups and settled villagers have been known to participate in each other's SSNs when in proximity to each other.

During the second round of interviews, the team therefore intentionally extended the sample to include the nomadic population that regularly moves in and out of RISING areas and interacts with RISING beneficiaries and programs. In each state we visited three sedentary and two pastoralist communities, including two nomadic pastoralist communities in North Darfur, to gain a better idea of social safety nets across a wider range of livelihoods typical in Darfur and of the role SSNs may play in the interactions among, between, and within these livelihood specializations. We also consulted with two experts in nomadic pastoralist livelihoods and society, Mohammed Siddiq and Salih Abdel Majid Eldouma.

Sedentary population sampling

We based the selection of sedentary RISING villages on discussions with RISING program staff while

organizing the study. Upon arriving in each village, RISING staff introduced the study team to the local authorities. Together, the study team, staff, and local authorities selected participants to interview. The sample intentionally included village leaders who could provide details about the history of the villages, interactions or connections with other communities, and the organization of some of the broader community-wide social safety nets. The sample also included typical residents (i.e., without official positions) of different ages, genders, and roles in the community in order to gain as wide a range of experiences as possible. This type of sampling ensures a breadth of information but, as it is not a representative sample of the entire population, may introduce bias towards certain activities and obscure detection of exclusion.

Nomadic population sampling

The nomadic settlement (*farique*¹) and respondent selection was in large part a convenience sample. *Fariques* are generally located in isolated areas to provide space for the livestock. Within a *farique*, small clusters of households are widely scattered. The *farique* selection was based on discussions with the *Omda*, selecting those *fariques* that were within a reasonable distance to visit in a single day.

Table 1: Study locations and dates of data collection

North Darfur

Community	Locality	Livelihood	Date
Khirban	El Fashir	Agro-pastoralist	May 22, 2021
Kolkol	El Fashir	Agro-pastoralist	May 23, 2021
Torrah	El Fashir	Agro-pastoralist	May 24, 2021
Harhasa	El Fashir	Mobile pastoralists (long-term mobile pastoralism and rainy season cultivation)	May 26, 2021
Al Ewijah	El Fashir	Mobile pastoralists (long-term mobile pastoralism and rainy season cultivation)	May 27, 2021

1 For meanings of Arabic terms, please refer to the Glossary at the beginning of the report.

South Darfur

Community	Locality	Livelihood	Date
Foula Umkaka	Alsalam	Agro-pastoralist	June 1, 2021
Amar Jadeed	Alsalam	Agro-pastoralist	June 2, 2021
Amkhabirni	Alsalam	Agro-pastoralist	June 3, 2021
Tagla	Kubom	Agro-pastoralist (rainy season cultivation and short-term mobility pastoralism)	June 6, 2021
Alwafideen	Kubom	Agro-pastoralist (rainy season cultivation and short-term mobility pastoralism)	June 7, 2021

The Omda made the necessary introductions to the residents of each *farique*. The team interviewed those residents who were present on the day of the visit.

Table 1 provides a breakout of communities visited during the second round of data collection.

Ethical review

Ethical review and approval for the study protocol and instruments were granted by the Tufts Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the Sudan Humanitarian Aid Commission (HAC). Both national researchers had previously worked with Tufts and had undergone in-person ethical trainings. Tufts faculty members conducted (remote) refresher trainings with both team members. Upon meeting potential respondents, the national researchers explained the study and objectives in depth, including how the interview information would be used, and sought verbal informed consent in accordance with the IRB approved protocol. No names or identifying details beyond gender and village of the respondents were taken or noted by the researchers.

Covid-19 protocols

All data were collected during the Covid-19 pandemic. The national researchers were tested for Covid-19 prior to departure from and upon return to Khartoum and were provided with masks and hand

sanitizer. The researchers were instructed to avoid shaking hands, to maintain six feet of distance from others during all meetings, to wear a mask when in the vehicles or when in the villages, and to keep interviews short. During all interactions between the researchers and participants, both the researcher and the participant were required to wear masks. The team offered masks to respondents who did not have their own. All interviews were conducted outdoors.

Limitations

Limitations to this study fall into two broad and related categories: extent of fieldwork and sampling. As discussed above, the planned start of this study lined up almost exactly with start of travel bans and national lockdowns caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. We initially delayed fieldwork in the hope that the situation would improve but later revised plans to allow the work to take place without the in-country involvement of the Tufts faculty members. While the Tufts faculty worked closely with the highly qualified national researchers, the absence of the expatriate researchers meant that we had a smaller team and hence collected fewer data than initially planned. Covid-19 safety protocols also introduced restrictions on how people could be interviewed (e.g., only individual interviews, held outside, from a distance, masked, and in short time periods), which also affected the nature of the data we were able to collect.

Limitations to the sampling were firstly about numbers: had we not experienced Covid-19 delays, restrictions on travel, and revisions to the interview techniques, we would have been able to interview more people in more locations (especially in pastoral and agro-pastoral areas) over a longer period. In particular, having more time and a larger team would have enabled us to more carefully balance respondents in terms of characteristics of gender, age, location, status, ethnicity, and other variables. Regarding specific population groups, we were limited by our focus on RISING partner program locations, which did not include mobile pastoralists at the time of the interviews, though they do pass through most of the areas at other times of the year. While we were able to interview mobile pastoralists in two locations in North Darfur through intentionally seeking them out, the study would have benefitted from greater inclusion of this livelihood specialization. In addition, we only worked in RISING locations in North and South Darfur due to the HAC requirement to work in RISING operational locations. These two states were selected because, based on previous research, we felt they offered the broadest possible range of customs and SSNs. Within each state we attempted to select locations that varied as much as possible. Nevertheless, a broader sample would potentially show differences in the nature of informal social safety nets in different locations and strengthen our analysis, though there were strong consistencies between the North and South Darfur interviews, and experiences in West and Central Darfur with the Taadoud Operational Research. To minimize this limitation, two experts in nomadic pastoralist livelihood and social systems were consulted.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study build on and complement previous observations made by Tufts researchers during the Taadoud OR research about informal SSNs, adding more detail about the dynamics and drivers behind the SSNs and allowing us to see how SSNs are inter-related and form an integral component of both society and survival in North and South Darfur. We start with a discussion of the most common SSNs in North and South Darfur and then turn to how SSNs function. We examine the role of SSNs in the dynamics of society, and in particular the multi-faceted interactions between relationships, norms, and SSNs. Next, we investigate processes of inclusion, exclusion, and exemption within SSN membership and provision of support. We examine the role of social hierarchies in shaping SSNs, and then move to the potentially negative aspects and limitations of SSNs. We discuss factors involved in maintaining and sustaining the SSN system as well as the impact of NGO activities on SSNs. We end with conclusions and recommendations.

Most common social safety nets in North and South Darfur

The following discussion provides background for the reader to more easily distinguish between different SSNs that are covered in the analysis. However, we urge the reader to focus not on individual SSNs but rather on the underlying principles that tie them together into a coherent web. We envision this web of SSNs to be much like the unseen skeleton that provides structure to the various individual parts of the human body and brings it together into a single entity. **It is the combination of these SSNs—the connections and norms they support—that provide the deeper, less appreciated yet crucial social benefits on top of the practical benefits.**

We first discuss how SSNs are organized. Within North and South Darfur there are many recognized and common ways that one individual will support another following widely understood social protocols. The findings described here focus on mutual support systems that extend beyond

two individuals. We focus on broader systems of support that require groups to work together to add more value, stability, and resilience than is normally achieved through a two-person interaction, with commonly known and accepted rules and procedures. In these group systems, non-compliance of one person is compensated by the compliance of others. Despite differences in location and livelihood specialization, interviewees in all communities visited described relying on a broadly similar set of informal mutual support systems.

Many of the SSNs described here are not unique to either Darfur or the Sahel, and some can be found throughout the world, with contextual variations. However, some of the SSNs are specific to the local area, and others that may be more widespread may follow rules and procedures that are unique to Darfur.

Arranged by organizational level, Table 2 provides a brief description of the SSNs described by interviewees; for a more detailed description of each SSN, please see the Annex. Although a version of each of these SSNs can be found in almost every community, the ways in which they function vary according to the needs, habits, and preferences of the population.

The function of informal social safety nets (SSNs) in Darfur

Taking into account the organization levels, we move now to the different functions of SSNs as observed in the study data. In Darfur, people come together to support one another in different ways in both good and hard times. They organize various SSNs at multiple and overlapping levels, including the sub-community (close circles of friends, neighbors, and acquaintances), community, and inter-community levels. The reach of the inter-community SSNs varies by area and type of safety net, ranging in the data for this study from 17 communities to six or seven communities, to even just two communities.

Table 2: SSNs by type and purpose

Community-wide or inter-community SSNs

Event-based

Name	Purpose	Organized by	Membership/ participants	Brief description (see Annex for a more complete description)
condolences	share the cost of burial and of feeding the mourners	committees of men and women separately	community-wide, inter-community	Members give contributions to a committee (by gender) to help cover the cost of burial and of hosting the mourners.
weddings	share the cost of the wedding parties	committees of men and women separately	anyone who wants to contribute, especially those related	Members give contributions to a committee (by gender) to help cover the cost of the ceremony and wedding party.
births	support the mother at a difficult moment	usually solely women	relatives and those who live nearby	Women provide food, money, and assistance with chores. Men sometimes also contribute.
<i>hareeq</i>	respond to a house fire; fight fire, prevent it from spreading, rebuild homes, and support affected households	<i>Ageed/Sheik</i>	all community, inter-community	When the <i>Ageed</i> sounds the alarm, all respond to contain the fire. Afterwards, a committee or the <i>Sheik</i> will organize the assignment of contributions or activities to support the victims.
<i>faza'a</i>	respond to a community alarm, and track and capture thieves, murderers, and attackers	<i>Ageed</i>	all community, inter-community	When the <i>Ageed</i> sounds the alarm, all respond to either chase the thieves or to support those who are doing the chasing.
<i>judiya (diya)</i>	reconciliation (between victims and culprits) and provision of justice	<i>Ajaweed</i> (committee from a pool of respected elders)	all men in the community, especially those involved in a dispute	informal justice system usually reserved for violent crime and possibly livestock theft. Those admitting guilt agree to pay a fine (<i>diya</i>) to the victim or his/her family.

Community-wide or inter-community SSNs

Non-event-based

<i>nafeer</i>	build, repair communal infrastructure	Sheik, able-bodied residents	all community, with roles differentiated by gender	Groups come together for an activity that will benefit the community such as building or repairing infrastructure (e.g., school or bridge). Contributions may be in kind or in labor.
<i>zakat</i> (tithe)	provide support for the poor	Sheik/Native Administration ² /government	all community	As required by Islam, a proportion of income or wealth is contributed to a fund for the poor. A portion stays within the community, and a portion is passed on to the central government. However, some people choose to give directly to the poor.
<i>oshoor</i> (traditional land tax)	support the Native Administration for organizing land management	Local Native Administration	each household that has land allocated to them for cultivating	These payments support the Native Administration to lead the communities, so leaders do not need to ask for payment to carry out individual duties.

Sub-community SSNs

<i>sandouk/sandouq</i> (savings group)	provide lump sums for investments, access to cash for unforeseen expenses or consumption smoothing	individuals able to mobilize others to act	men and women with similar needs, close relationships, trust	Members contribute regular sums to be redistributed in lumps to members in turn; can provide loans or grants, or support group investments.
<i>nafeer</i>	shared labor or communal investment to increase production of various forms	individuals	people with similar livelihood strategies who trust each other to reciprocate	Many models; all include sharing labor. The most common is to work in each member's fields in turn.
<i>darra</i>	ensure all have a source of food, preventing those without food from the indignity of asking for food	by mutual agreement	men and boys living near to each other	Men and boys from nearby households eat a daily evening meal together, each household contributing to the meal. Women may form smaller groups to eat together with the girls and small boys.

² The Native Administration is leadership based on historic tribal and/or ethnic lines, as opposed to those who form part of the formal government system.

In addition to size and level, the way an SSN comes together in Darfur and how it functions reflect its purpose, relationships among members, and the norms of the community or group of communities. Here we discuss three types of functions performed by SSNs, noting that these may also overlap. First, some SSN activities meet practical day-to-day needs, such as increasing productivity or reducing costs (including time costs). Second, other SSNs address emergency needs, either after the fact to bring a crisis under control or to assist with costs, or before a crisis to share risk within the group. Third, some SSNs are embedded into daily life as a means of supporting those who may otherwise struggle to meet their basic needs, whether temporarily or chronically.

SSNs that exist to meet **practical needs** normally form around a specific need at one point in time, often one that relates to livelihoods. Members in these networks are often a small group of people with similar needs and capacities who hope to benefit through combining resources or efforts. Such groups may form spontaneously or in a more organized fashion. Members often negotiate expectations of participation and returns at the start of an activity, usually following a pattern common to that community. For example, a group of cultivating women may come together for a *nafeer*, with the group rotating through each member's fields. Variations among groups might be the exact membership, type of labor performed, the amount of food and drink the host of the day must provide, the order of the rotation, etc. Some of these variations are generally somewhat fixed within a community to the point of becoming a set expectation; for instance, everyone in a given community knows the expected food and drink to be provided when a *nafeer* is working in their field. These local but informal standards reduce the need for negotiation and prevent misunderstanding. Rather than official, formal sanctions or penalties for not fulfilling an obligation to the group, the norms of the community provide pressure on the members to each fulfill their obligations as long as they are able but usually provide an avenue for adjustments if someone becomes unable to fulfill their part.

As some participants explained, survival is a shared community responsibility. To paraphrase (in our

Survival is a shared community responsibility. SSNs that share risk ensure one person does not face too much risk at any one time.

own words) a theme from multiple conversations, this goes something like: "When you are in need, I help you even though it may deplete my reserves or risk my own survival. Later, when I am in need, you will do the same for me. In this way we share risk between us. The more people who share this risk with us, the smaller the risk is that any one of us will not survive." **The SSNs that share this risk throughout a community or that respond after a shock has occurred are normally activated only when needed.** For example, a *faza'a* is formed to chase animal thieves, and the men in pursuit often risk their lives to reclaim the cattle belonging to someone else. After a death, a person may contribute the only food they have in their stores, risking their own food security. In return, there is less risk that any person will not have help to recover their livestock or face the indignity of not being able to feed mourners.

Spontaneous committees may form to provide organization, including the collection and recording of contributions, and then disperse. The composition of these committees may be fixed or may depend on the person or household affected. The important point is that because their function is not constant, they form only when needed and then dissolve until the next need arises. This reduces the burden of managing the SSN, increasing its efficiency and the likelihood of its continuance.

In general, all members of a community are both eligible to receive and expected to contribute to these SSNs, though this does not preclude additional private gifts to the affected household. Pressure is very high to participate when called to because this system is critical to the survival of individual community members and therefore to the well-being of the community as a whole. Abstaining from participating in this type of SSNs is thus seen as putting one's own interests before the common interests of the community, which is a violation of the norm of solidarity that runs strongly through Darfur. Formal local leadership (the Native

Administration) usually plays a stronger role in this type of SSN than with others because it ultimately involves the survival of the community as a whole and the enforcement of the most foundational norms.

Following a shock, certain people are recognized as those responsible for organizing community members to respond, like the *Ageed* who organizes community members to put out a fire or to chase animal thieves, or the committee that collects contributions for the family of a deceased person. If the shock affects an important person (like a *Sheikh*), a significant portion of the community, or even multiple communities, are likely to participate, and it is the Native Administration (*Sheik*) who often organizes this. When a shock affects another, related community, in addition to the formal support organized by the men, women will also sometimes collect contributions in food and send an older, respected woman as an envoy to contribute to the other community.

SSNs to support people struggling to meet their daily needs are often embedded in the ways people carry out their daily lives, and hence can be invisible to outsiders. These mechanisms are crucial to smoothing out difficult periods in a way that preserves the dignity of the receiver. Chronically needy people are known and provided direct support by the leadership when resources are available, like the distribution of *zakat*. People who are temporarily needy may be identified when they refrain from activities they might normally participate in, such as meal-sharing (*darra*) for lack of ability to contribute food. Once identified in this way, either friends or leaders will confirm their need and provide resources through private conversation and discrete home visits. The preservation of dignity is as important as the support itself.

The structure and organization of SSNs are fluid, contributing to their efficiency and effectiveness but limiting their sophistication and growth

The informal social safety nets examined in this study show fluidity at multiple levels, including in composition, organization, and nature of activities. Safety nets arise to meet a need or conduct an activity, with expectations and membership or leadership specific to the occasion. After serving

Informal social safety nets are activated in response to a specific need, structured for that need, then dissolve when no longer needed. This transitory nature keeps them relevant and effective while reducing organizational burdens.

its purpose, the group conducting the activity may dissolve until the next time a similar need arises, when the activity may resume, often with changes to the membership, leadership, or even expectations of members.

This dynamism of most SSNs keeps them relevant and highly adaptable to the situation at hand, reducing the organizational burden in times when they are not needed. The spontaneity of SSNs encourages participation by limiting the extent of members' commitments; when an SSN activity is time-limited, members know they can both benefit and potentially eventually drop out, all while staying within the bounds of the norms of membership. The fluidity of composition and activity also helps to prevent any one individual or interest faction from monopolizing an activity or receiving disproportional benefit at the expense of other members.

The uncertainty in roles and expectations that this fluidity might otherwise create is reduced by a common set of long-standing norms that underlie the rules of each type of SSN. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) often try to mimic traditional SSNs' structures and functions through the organization of "associations" and "committees," but NGOs often follow a different set of expectations about committees based on their own static organizational structures and rules, not realizing they are different from the community's. While at times this stability and longer-term vision is an appropriate means of maximizing potential benefits, such models can also limit the flexibility to respond rapidly or adjust to changing needs. Longer-term models require more commitment—whether of time, labor, or income—when joining and therefore may be a disincentive to those living with uncertainty. We now examine an example of savings groups that are common under the RISING and Taadoud projects and contain characteristics that mimic informal SSNs.

Rotating savings groups³ are an example of an SSN that has been popular throughout Sudan for generations and are known locally as *sandug*. These self-selecting groups are often short term and engaged in simple savings activities with a rotating payout system. Groups often dissolve after a complete rotation. Additional rounds might include some of the same members and adjusted terms, according to the circumstances of the members and their needs at the moment. This fluidity limits the commitment of members, as they can drop out at the end of a round if it has become difficult to make the monthly payments. It also allows new members to join as their situation allows, providing wider benefits.

In some of the Taadoud and RISING communities, NGOs have built on this concept of rotating savings groups, often adding mechanisms for loans and/or forms of social insurance. These additional components usually require a longer savings cycle, formalized leadership positions, and semi-permanent membership. Research elsewhere has found that men, women, and youth may each use the savings groups differently according to their economic and social responsibilities. This finding appears to apply equally in the Sudan. The Taadoud Income Streams Index (ISI) data show that women most often use the groups to smooth household consumption, to invest in small income generation, or to cover costs of small crises. In contrast, men most often use the groups to obtain a lump sum for a larger income investment to increase the productivity of a livelihood activity or help with a crisis that involves the honor of the household. Male youth may use it towards establishing their livelihoods or towards bridewealth. These more sophisticated structures may allow the groups to provide greater and more diverse financial benefits, but they also require more stable organizations and more formal forms of sanction if members fail to fulfill their obligations. Some respondents from this study appreciated the adapted savings group model, but others report that these changes limit the flexibility to meet unexpected cash needs or to respond to the fluctuations in members' ability to contribute. The formal savings groups also tend

to have much longer cycles for disbursement, tying up often-scarce resources for a much longer period. Overall, while potentially more efficient and providing greater benefits, the NGO model lacks the dynamism to respond to shifts in the local need and environment. This trade-off is indicative of those that are often made when an external entity seeks to improve upon an existing SSN.

Norms are also fluid, changing with the history and experiences of each generation

The social norms that determine the parameters and functions of SSNs are not static. In general, norms change slowly and over multiple generations but may change more rapidly in times of social or economic upheaval or transition. As norms shift, so do the roles of SSNs in response to different situations and the interactions between SSNs and community members.

Fluctuating gender norms in SSN activities and membership

Gender norms are central characteristics of a social and cultural order. These norms shift based on situation, context, and the individuals involved; they may fluctuate even more rapidly following a shock or in periods of upheaval. In discussing SSNs with communities in Darfur, many respondents highlighted the ways in which gender norms have shifted over the past two decades. For instance, multiple respondents described insurance schemes or other collaborative activities that took place among traders, noting that previously only men had been able to participate in such groups due to the extent of public interaction required by traders. However, as the interviewees explained, during the conflict, many women found themselves separated from their husbands' support and responsible for procuring all their households' needs. Women were pushed into market activities, starting with the more "acceptable" activities for females, like selling tea or small amounts of fresh produce in the markets. Gradually, however, women expanded into other activities such as construction or agricultural labor (noting that these activities are low status and not preferred by men). As women proved their

3 Traditional rotating savings groups are groups of self-selecting women who all agree to meet on a regular basis. At each meeting, each member contributes the agreed amount. One of the members receives the entire pot. A different member receives the pot at each meeting until all have received the pot once. No money is retained in a fund, nor are loans made.

Norms change over time. SSNs are enforced by norms and change with the norms. We cannot assume that the way an SSN was organized before, or the purpose it once served is still true.

entrepreneurial success, they were able to further expand their economic engagement, including into other commercial sectors normally dominated by men. For example, over the past ten to twenty years in South and East Darfur, women have moved from their traditional role as smallholder producers at the bottom of the lucrative groundnut value chain to multi-market retailers, and more recently to wholesalers with their own storehouses. Along with this move into commerce, women are now part of traders' mutual aid and shared investment schemes, either in female-only or mixed groups. This example of women expanding into SSNs that were previously off-limits to them is indicative of the ways in which gender norms influence SSN participation and function.

Norms and associated SSNs also fluctuate along generational lines. Today's male and female youth in Darfur have spent most of their lives in conflict, often living in peri-urban displacement camps or hosted in urban areas. In such settings (and given the rise of cell phones), many have come of age with more liberal expectations, including greater contact between boys and girls. As these young people have returned to their more rural places of origin within RISING communities, they have brought these norms with them and are generally open to participating in mixed-gender SSN activities like participating in savings groups and working together in communal fields.

Other drivers of changing norms

Over past 20 years, Sudan has experienced tremendous changes—economically, politically, and socially—all of which have had an impact on the norms that govern informal social safety nets. Displacement, new work opportunities like gold mining, and better transportation infrastructure have all increased the physical movement of people out of their communities at the same time that

better communications and banking technology have allowed people to stay connected to their communities. The result is that geographic distance is not necessarily a barrier to participation in or contribution to SSNs in their communities of origin. People who have jobs away from their home village often even face increased expectations to contribute to SSNs but are also still able to call on support from their communities when they are in crisis. This two-way exchange of support helps to maintain the connections between communities and diasporas, and facilitates the occasional return of diaspora members.

Conflict-induced displacement broke up communities and scattered local populations. People lost their trusted connections, thereby eroding existing SSNs, as one respondent described: "War negatively affected our relationships with neighboring communities. The war created a disruption in the relationships between different communities. Many ties were lost during that period." Some new SSNs guided by evolving norms have arisen to meet the needs of the displaced in both camps and host communities. These included creating systems of mutual aid with people from different areas and groups that do not depend as much on having a long history together or on being from the same community. A respondent described how communities that may have had tense relationships during the conflict have rebuilt through shared SSNs in the aftermath:

The war created a lot of problems between communities, and every community moved to live near their relatives. This happened due to the burgling, killing associated with the conflict. When the conflict stopped, we returned to our communities, we held a meeting, and we asked each other the question of why what happened has happened, and we found no answer, and we agreed to forget the past. Right now, students from neighboring communities come to our community to study in our schools. At the breakfast break, they come for meals to our houses.

Upon return to their places of origin, community members bring new experiences and expectations and must re-establish trust and shared norms with

those who may have had very different experiences during the conflict. Some populations now live part of the year in an urban environment (such as a former displacement camp) and part in their villages to cultivate. These people often have SSNs associated with both locations, and some have SSNs that are maintained through telephone contact and transfer of mobile money rather than through being physically present together. As mentioned above, this transition and negotiation of new norms and bonds can be particularly difficult for youth who grew up in displacement settings and may not feel bound by the traditional norms of their home communities.

Economic and livelihood changes have also affected SSNs. Financial contributions made by men to community SSNs were traditionally in livestock. Women, who traditionally provided food to pooled SSNs because they were barred from most cash-generating activities, are also now giving in cash for certain events. A *Sheik* explained, “Women have their separate contribution recording in a notebook... They have one for cash and another one for utensils. Women’s cash contributions come from their work in agriculture, trade, small animals. Women also make contributions using food items.”

As the economy has become more cash-based and as fewer households have large numbers of livestock, contributions are now set in terms of cash value. While cash provides the recipient more flexibility, inflation has eroded some of the benefits of cash-based SSNs. Multiple communities explained that previously, when someone died or married, the donations provided covered all of the family’s needs; the combination of cash-based donations and inflation makes this outcome much less likely today. Interviewees noted that now the totality of gifts rarely covers the full expenses associated with a death or marriage, and expectations have shifted accordingly. Many people seek to expand their SSN networks for support to a broader community in hopes of recouping more funds. In many communities, leaders constantly adjust the expected donation amount, but it is still difficult to keep pace with inflation.

These are just a few examples of how fluctuating norms influence SSNs. In turn, the dynamic and

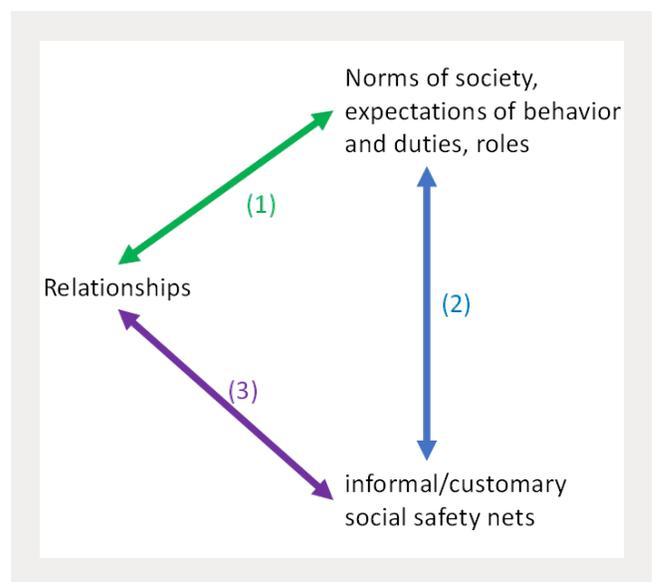
iterative nature of these informal systems allows them to respond to new and emerging norms.

The role of SSNs in the dynamics of society

The data from this study reveal the intimate and reinforcing interactions among members of a society and how societal norms shape informal social safety nets.

Based on the data from this study and our review of the literature, we propose a simple framework (see Figure 1) to illustrate the interactions between social norms, relationships, and SSNs. Each component of the framework affects and is affected by the other components. While the norms and organization of the SSNs are context specific, we found that this three-way interaction between these components existed in all study locations. We summarize the relationships below and explore them in more detail in the subsequent sections.

Figure 1. Framework illustrating the interactions among norms, SSNs, and relationships.



1. Relationships and norms—Different norms govern how people interact within specific types of relationships: fathers and daughters, *Sheik* and general population, single men and single women, age mates, young men and older men, etc. Non-compliance with these

norms can disrupt or weaken the relationships; therefore, the value someone puts on a relationship provides an incentive to comply with the norms.

2. Norms and SSNs—Larger membership in most SSNs provides more benefit to participants. Some involve risk sharing in which some participants may contribute but not directly benefit (condolences, *faza'as*, etc.). One norm identified by respondents is the requirement to participate in these SSNs. Through participation, people signal compliance with the norms in general. Non-compliance with norms is often punished by exclusion from many SSNs, especially from SSNs that are not community wide.
3. Relationships and SSNs—Participation in an SSN requires a certain amount of trust that others will act in accordance with the rules of the SSN and the norms of society. Each time someone fulfills their obligation in an SSN, they are building trust. Shared participation in SSNs therefore strengthens or reinforces existing relationships. Seeking to participate in and contribute to an SSN can be a way to establish a new relationship. In the reverse direction, there is usually a norm that dictates that the stronger a relationship, the greater the obligation to participate by contributing to shock-related SSNs or providing support to someone in need.

The interaction between relationships and norms

The way a person acts toward another person, their responsibilities to another person, and their expectations of how that person will act toward them depend on the nature of their relationship as much as it does on their shared history or on their personalities. Societal norms play an enormous part in determining whom we interact with and how. To act otherwise, to violate these norms, can bring about some of the more severe reactions from others in that society. The nature of how a person participates in an SSN enacted to benefit someone, such as for support for a wedding, depends on the relationship between the wedding party and the donor. Very often, norms dictate that the closer the relationship, the more a person is expected to

contribute even if a set amount is named by the community.

The interaction between norms and SSNs

SSNs function successfully because they are enforced by social norms more than by rigid legalistic penalties. Norms also dictate who can participate and how in SSNs. In an earlier section we discussed how norms change over time and how changes in norms result in changes in a person's access to SSNs, or in expectations of participation in those SSNs.

The norms of the community or group ensure that members participate and reciprocate. A failure to abide by norms can result in a member's "systematic exclusion from reciprocal support networks" (Kim et al. 2020, 3). Such a failure, failing to pay into a monthly savings group for example, violates the group's trust in that person and may weaken social relationships or the personal network. The individual may not be able to access other informal SSNs in the future.

The way SSN activities are carried out and the benefits they offer reinforce a wide range of social norms of the society in which the members live. Many interview respondents explained that contributing support through SSNs is a pattern they inherited from their parents and ancestors. Participation has become a "norm"—a necessary part of community life, demonstrating in practical, meaningful ways that they share the same norms with others in the community. Individuals' or communities' participation in the SSNs of another community can be a means to gain the other community's approval or support (Bicchieri 2006). Participation can also be a way of gaining back approval after losing it, for example following a dispute. Reciprocation is another very strong norm. When you accept benefits from others through an SSN, you are then obliged to provide support to others as needed.

Social norms are shaped by individuals' beliefs about how others in the community expect them to behave (normative expectations) and how they believe other people actually behave (empirical expectations). According to Bicchieri, people prefer to conform

to a social norm if they know that other people are also likely to conform to it and that other people expect them to do the same (Bicchieri 2006). Our discussions with different communities in North and South Darfur reflect this. Indeed, many people mentioned reciprocity as a key driver of participation. The more an individual contributes to SSN activities, the more they hope to eventually benefit from them. At times, the benefit may be increased esteem and influence rather than something of monetary value. Even at the community level, such as support through a *faza'a* in response to a fire or raid, there is a strong expectation that other communities would reciprocate with help in the future.

Norms are different from and more broadly applicable than the specific rules that govern how an SSN activity operates. Norms exert social pressure to conform to both rules of society and SSN activities. Norms provide a common understanding when establishing SSN activity rules and how to apply them, such as determining the level of sanctions to impose in cases when commitments are not fulfilled. Norms even influence when rules and expectations can be waived, for example when someone is too ill or too poor to contribute their expected portion.

Because norms extend beyond a given SSN to every aspect of social life, the way an individual adheres to the norms within one SSN can have wider implications. For example, someone who always contributes generously to condolences develops a reputation of generosity and reliability. S/he may be more readily invited to participate in group activities such as a producers' organization and may receive more contributions if s/he experiences a loss. These SSNs may appear unrelated, but they are connected by a common set of norms related to trust, reliability, and commitment.

Social backlash in the form of sanctions may occur if people do not contribute to SSNs as expected. Such sanctions are a means to ensure conformity with the social norms of the community. Interviewees explained that people will first attempt to convince the non-participating household or individual to contribute. For example, in one case a woman would not allow her kitchen utensils to be used during preparations for a wedding despite the usual

expectation that all the women would share their utensils in order to prepare the meal. When this woman had a death in her family, the other women refused to share their utensils in the preparation of the condolence meals. Through mediation, the other women relented, and the woman resumed providing her utensils for all such events. In another case, a man refused to let the *faza'a* use his vehicle to chase livestock thieves; this created a social mark against the man. The *hakammah* imposed a fine upon him, which he refused to pay. Other community members began to distance themselves from him and refused to include him in various SSN activities. Illustrating the longevity and seriousness of the repercussions of non-participation, sanctions against group participation and community mistrust extended to the man's wives and children, who were left attempting to repair social ties after the man finally moved to the city.

People might refuse to fulfill obligations to an SSN if they believe that sanctions did not matter, or they thought the sanctions would not affect them. However, sanctions are meant not only to enforce compliance to a particular activity but also to demonstrate the importance of upholding the social norms of reciprocity and connectivity. This is the connection between norms and SSNs.

The interaction between relationships and informal/customary social safety nets

Relationships and participation in informal social safety nets often reinforce each other. Participation in SSNs helps to reinforce relationships by bringing people together in cooperative ways that benefit both; at the same time, positive relationships themselves facilitate engagement in activities that require a certain level of trust. Encouraging participation in SSNs can expand networks, increasing both the resources in the networks and the benefits of the SSNs to the members.

Within a social circle, the frequency or intensity of participation in the same SSNs depend largely on relationships. For example, the contributions of relatives and friends in weddings and condolences is generally expected to be higher than the contribution of other community members. In some cases, like paying a *diyya*, a set amount to contribute might be

Relationships and participation in SSNs reinforce each other. Participation in SSNs reinforce relationships or provide links to build new relationships. Positive relationships facilitate collective, mutually beneficial activities.

imposed on relatives but not on friends or neighbors. In other cases, people from a close circle of friends can come together in a self-selecting way to form a saving group because they already have a bond of trust. Neighbors who are part of the same *darra* are expected to contribute more to one another because they are already in a relationship of supporting one another.

In all study sites, respondents described exchanging support through SSNs with networks of specific neighboring communities. Like intra-community SSNs, the selection of which communities are included in inter-community SSNs appeared to depend on relationships developed through history and proximity. Most of the SSNs that bring communities together are multi-identity, with people from diverse identity backgrounds or even livelihood specializations. The strength of inter-community SSNs affects the expectations of participation and depends on the history of cooperation. The more communities interact collaboratively in shared SSNs, the more opportunities may exist for building bridges of trust.

SSNs mediating the interaction between relationships and norms in society

Looking back at Figure 1, the framework has three components: SSNs, relationships, and norms. In this framework, we find that we can conceive of informal social safety nets as a practical output arising from the intersection of norms and relationships, and a practical means for each to influence the other. Joining in the activities of an SSN can signal to other members that you accept common norms and desire a relationship (Kim et al. 2020).⁴ On the

other hand, poor performance in an SSN can be seen as neglect of norms and can harm relationships. Shared norms make expectations of performance more easily and intuitively understood. Violating the shared norms can disrupt the relationship and make collaborative activities like SSNs untenable. At the same time, however, because SSNs operate at the nexus of relationships and social norms, they can also provide mechanisms for reconciliation and recovery. For example, at the start of the conflict in Darfur in the early 2000s, rape was seen as an act of aggression that intentionally signaled a breaking of shared norms and a severing of inter-community relationships. On a much lesser scale, the cutting of fruit trees was also seen as a violation of shared social norms that forbid the wanton cutting of trees that produce food. Following these and other aggressive actions, the experience and/or the memory of such acts made participation in collaborative activities, like natural resource management or building a shared school, very difficult. Reconciliation of these damaged relationships has started in study sites through the gradual resurrection of inter-community SSNs. A respondent explained that damaged “relationships are restored through local initiatives, exchange visits between communities, and participation in SSNs. We agreed to turn the page of the past forever and start a new one.”

By participating in an SSN taking place in another community, such as contributing to condolence pools, a community can signal their interest in restoring relationships and in resuming adherence to the shared norms. However, it should not be assumed that all has returned to normal in the post-conflict period, either socially or economically, as pointed out by one respondent:

In the past, people in different communities were more committed to SSNs than now. This is because the war has had a damaging impact on the social fabric. During the war, people also lost a lot of assets due to destruction of grain stores and animal thefts or the stock they have in cash.

4 A series of studies conducted by the Feinstein International Center, Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University on social connectedness described several instances when South Sudanese internally displaced persons (IDPs) wanting to be accepted as part of a community sought out shared activities in which to contribute, both to build additional relationships (connections) and to demonstrate they were willing to follow local norms (Stites et al. forthcoming; Stites and Humphrey 2020; Stites, Humphrey, and Krystalli 2021; Krystalli et al. 2019)

While joint SSNs are unlikely to be sufficient on their own to restore trust following acts of violence associated with conflict, they may provide a first step in the normalization and reconciliation process. As more inter-community SSNs are encouraged, there will likely be more positive interactions between members of the two communities, possibly reducing tensions and facilitating dialogue.

While following the norms of participation in SSNs can strengthen relationships, failing to follow these norms can weaken those relationships. One of the norms governing inter-community relations is that communities should cooperate with any *faza'a* in responding to animal theft if the trail of the stolen livestock leads into that community. In one example, when a community refused to allow the *faza'a* to follow the trail into their community, this refusal immediately escalated tensions between the communities. In the event that a community does not participate in another community's *faza'a*, the benefits will not be returned, as explained by a local Aged: "Everyone can benefit [from *faza'a*], but to benefit you need to participate in other people's *faza'a*." The expectation of participation and sanction for withholding it also exists at the individual level.

Inclusion, exclusion, and exemption

For some types of SSNs, all members of a community are obliged by local norms to participate. For other types of SSNs, participation is neither automatic nor guaranteed. People may have to actively seek to participate and may find themselves excluded. Discussing exclusion is difficult, as it is often not recognized as such even by those who may be excluded. This is, in part, because widely-accepted social norms—as around gender or status—may determine parameters of inclusion and exclusion. Thus, if an activity is deemed "for men" or "for married women," those who are excluded on these grounds may not consider it as such. On the other hand, in instances where social norms explicitly forbid exclusion (such as exclusion of the poor or vulnerable), people may be reluctant to admit that exclusion occurs for fear of making their community look bad. When conducting interviews, we found that the combination of exclusion being unrecognized and sensitive made it very difficult to collect

information on patterns of exclusion, and hence our understanding of exclusion within social safety nets is somewhat limited.

Based on the responses we have heard from interviewees in each of the communities visited, there is no overt exclusion from community-wide shock-related SSNs, such as receiving support after a death or a fire. Sanctions of temporary exclusion or a reduction in the amount of support occur when people do not contribute or participate in line with social expectations. When asked about the smaller and more optional SSNs, respondents also claimed that there were no instances or patterns of exclusion. As mentioned above, however, we believe that deeper investigation on this topic is important to have a better sense of patterns of inclusion and exclusion within Darfur.

The literature provides examples of exclusion taking place in less overt forms or along less absolute lines. For instance, even where everyone may participate in a given communal activity, not everyone may be able to participate on an equal basis. As Kim et al. explain based on research in South Sudan, "'connectedness' for some households may imply marginalization and exclusion for others" (Kim et al. 2020, 1). The authors found that some of the poor or those with reduced physical capacity (who were therefore potentially unable to participate or contribute equally) were excluded from collaborative SSNs such as farmers associations and savings groups. This was not because anyone intentionally excluded them, but because no one invited them to participate in group activities (Kim et al. 2020). This example is one of exclusion due to lack of overt inclusion.

Participating in optional SSNs relies heavily on social capital, and the death of a socially connected family member can lead to difficulty accessing certain SSNs. In Stites' and Humphrey's interviews with South Sudanese refugees in Uganda, some respondents explained that they did not receive material support or information leading up to their exodus from South Sudan because members of their social networks had been killed in the conflict (Stites and Humphrey 2020). Though these networks were not weakened from lack of trust or wrongdoing, the result was the

same: decreased information and material support during a crisis.

SSNs that are based on a small group activity are usually built around a core of people that have strong relationships, often family members. Invitation to these SSNs usually requires a connection to a member. Then once in the group, the new member automatically has connections to all others in the group. But those with few connections to start with may struggle to get invited into an SSN. This is another example of a lack of connectedness inadvertently leading to exclusion due to lack of inclusion.

At times, people intentionally exclude themselves from informal networks. During the first round of operation research under Taadoud, some respondents said they did not participate in rotational agricultural *nafeers* because they did not have the means to provide the requisite meal to the participants on the day the group would be in their fields (Fitzpatrick and Young 2016). Other respondents under the Taadoud research said they excluded themselves from savings groups because they lacked reliable-enough income to make regular contributions and feared losing trust if they had to stop contributing. Others did not join NGO-improved savings groups or communal cultivation activities because they were illiterate or were physically weaker and therefore felt they did not have the capacity to participate equally. Indeed, the literature gives examples of the poorest finding it difficult to join in collaborative activities with those wealthier than themselves. Therefore, they often end up collaborating with other poor, reducing their opportunities to escape from poverty (Carranza, Copley, and Donald 2018).

Our data for RISING illustrate an important difference between exemption and exclusion. Economically vulnerable community members may be exempted by other participants from the expectation to contribute, or their contribution may be reduced. Older people and poor community members are usually exempted from contributing to many SSNs, but that does not affect their ability to benefit from the SSNs. In fact, a number of respondents pointed out that the main reason

behind establishing many of the SSN activities was to maintain the dignity of the poor through consistent access to communal support. In some areas, community leaders keep one list of all those expected to contribute and one of all those who are exempted from contribution and need to be prioritized for support.

Social hierarchies heavily influence the structure and types of participation in SSNs

The relationships and social networks that inherently underpin informal SSNs are heavily influenced by social hierarchies, including gender, age, and status (economic, social, marital, etc.). These factors influence livelihood activities and responsibilities of individuals to their wider community; these dynamics are in turn replicated in SSN structures and mechanisms. For instance, when people contribute to community-wide shock-based SSNs, such as condolences, men will often contribute to one committee and women to another. Types of contribution (i.e., cash, food, or labor) reflect each person's status, gender, and life stage, in addition to their relationship to the deceased. Men normally contribute cash or livestock in line with their roles and livelihood responsibilities within the community. Women, who have traditionally had less access than men to cash and are closely associated with managing their households' food stores, usually contributed food, kitchen utensils, or labor to community-wide shock-based SSNs. However, in recent times and with shifts in economic roles, interviewees mentioned that a growing number of women do contribute cash. A person's status and economic position are also considered. For instance, elderly widows without a source of income are usually not expected to contribute, but widows with wealth or income are expected to contribute. These gender- and age-dependent roles affect how people engage with SSNs in their communities, and therefore expectations of the types and quantities of contributions.

SSNs also have a negative side and limitations

Informal SSNs are best known for their positive impact on communities and are very important tools for resilience and development, but they also have limitations and can include negative aspects.

One important limitation is the extent or scope of SSNs to respond to shocks and crises. While support via an SSN often comes quickly and can be relied upon, the amount of the support and protection is often limited, leaving some of the vulnerable exposed to severe crises (Dercon 2002). The extent of the support an SSN provides will depend on the wealth contained within a community, and hence there will always be shocks and needs that exceed the combined capacities of a community or of a community's network. Exhaustion of an SSN's capacity is most likely to occur when a large portion of the community is in crisis, a crisis is of long duration, or when most of the wealth is in a few hands. As such, SSNs are best equipped to respond to idiosyncratic shocks (such as a death in a family) or—depending on the severity of the event—at best a community-wide shock. **While SSNs are an excellent first line of defense for shocks that affect a limited portion of the community, in many types of crises, SSNs are overwhelmed, and external interventions are still necessary. External support should therefore strive to complement or improve rather than replace SSNs.**

Protracted crises pose a difficulty in that the stamina of the donors and humanitarian agencies behind the interventions often peters out before the crisis is over, and yet even the most robust informal SSNs cannot cover the ongoing needs of the population.

SSNs can also have negative aspects. Marginalized people will have fewer connections and may receive support from fewer people in SSNs or have more difficulty participating in collaborative SSNs, potentially increasing the gaps between them and the wealthier, more capable, or more influential people.

SSNs are a necessary part of life in rural Darfur and advance the population's welfare, but they cannot meet all needs in all crises. This is the role of government, and where government is unwilling or unable to meet those needs in a crisis, even a protracted crisis, it becomes the responsibility of the international community for however long that crisis lasts.

SSNs depend on reciprocity and connectedness, which may reinforce inequities within the community

SSNs reflect the socioeconomic dynamics of the communities in which they operate. Those who have more resources are expected to contribute more. But under the norms of reciprocity, those who give more also expect to receive more. Contributions generate approval from others, and therefore some people may give more to a wealthy or influential person to enlist them as a potential future supporter. Wealthier, more influential people are also generally more connected, so more people are likely to contribute to them in response to a personal shock. The marginalized, almost by definition, will have fewer connections and receive support from fewer people, potentially further increasing their gap with the well-connected.

SSNs may push households to give beyond their surplus, possibly weakening their own livelihood strategies or ability to respond to shocks unaided

Carranza et al. note that while SSNs are often a critical pillar of community resilience, such networks also create social pressures to redistribute income, which can possibly hinder individuals' capacity to save and to reap the benefits of their productivity (Carranza, Copley, and Donald 2018). For example, their study of women's productivity in cashew processing factories in Côte D'Ivoire found that factory workers are highly pressured to redistribute earnings among family and friends, with 83% of respondents stating that they gave money to a friend or family several times in the past month (Carranza, Copley, and Donald 2018). This level of heavy demands may make accumulating wealth nearly impossible.

Data from our study indicate that even though there is grace available for those who cannot contribute, a household may choose to contribute

anyway to maintain good relationships. This is likely especially true in systems based on the expectation of reciprocity. One respondent recalled, “Last year my neighbor’s son was circumcised. At that time my family was passing through a hard time, so I did not contribute. She never asked me why I did not contribute, but she called me for the *karamah* (celebration). It took several months until I was capable of paying my contribution, and then she refused to take it, but I insisted because it shows we do care for each other, and that spirit of support is what is keeping us together.”

In other cases, people may give beyond their means, risking their current situation to invest in building their social networks and potential support in the future. Though we did not hear of an example in Darfur, one of the author’s research from South Sudan provides an example:

A male [refugee] respondent in Palorinya explained that he took some of his food aid to a certain host family each month for several months. After doing this for some time, he asked them for a piece of land on which to farm; they agreed. In our conversation, he explained that he provided the food with the intent of making it difficult for them to refuse his eventual request for land. (Stites and Humphrey 2020, 21)

In most cases described, either in the literature or by interviewees, when individuals contribute to aid someone else to the point of endangering their own resilience or food security, either as part of an established system, such as the circumcision ceremony, or one-on-one, there are often (but not always) unseen social benefits or the potential for future economic support.

Factors involved in maintaining and sustaining the SSN system, or those reinforced by SSNs

Beyond the pressure of social expectations, a combination of factors influences the means through which social norms and relationships enforce and maintain participation in SSNs. At the same time, SSNs in turn affect relationships and norms. In this

section, we discuss some of the factors behind this cyclical interaction in more detail, distinguishing between factors at the level of the individual community member (or individual household) and structural factors.

Individual factors

Attitude

Community members with a proactive attitude play a strong role in promoting SSNs and may encourage others to initiate or participate in new activities like saving groups or *nafeers*. However, our data also contain examples of people who abstain from participating in any SSNs in their communities. This nonparticipation appears to often stem from a personal attitude that considers participation as purely an exchange of resources and does not value the social benefits of engaging in SSNs. In some cases, a person may refrain from participating in productive SSNs because they feel they lack social standing, as in some households from minority groups or the very poor (Fitzpatrick and Young 2016).

Some activities have a higher expectation of participation, like condolences or *faza’as*, while others have little pressure to participate, such as *nafeers*, savings groups, or farmers associations. If a person has previously had a bad experience from participation, he or she may refrain from the optional activities while still participating in the more obligatory community-wide risk-sharing activities. Communities have different strategies to encourage participation in the more obligatory SSNs, often wisely focusing on changing a person’s attitudes rather than forcing participation for the sake of enforcing a norm. For example, when someone refuses to contribute to a wedding or birth, before imposing sanctions, community members will speak to him or her several times to remind him or her of their duty, the likely social ramifications, and to try to change his or her attitude. Doing so allows the person a chance to prevent the damage to relationships that would result by nonparticipation.

Gender, age, and marital status

As discussed earlier, expectations for participation in SSNs differ based on gender, generation, and

lifecycle stage; this is especially true for community-wide SSNs. These differences reflect the variations in responsibilities and the resources likely available to individuals in these different categories. While expectations for participation are based on these individual characteristics, parameters vary from one community to the next. For example, in some communities, all men above 20 years of age are expected to contribute to community-wide SSNs (such as social events, *faza'as*, and relief activities), but in other communities only married men contribute to these same SSNs. Elderly people, especially those without wealth or family support, are rarely expected to contribute to SSNs, though are still included as beneficiaries. Nevertheless, respected elderly women often take the role of a delegate when women from one community wish to send material support to another community.

Gender is a major factor in expectations and desire to participate in various SSNs, as they support gendered responsibilities differently. Married women's public contributions to these SSNs are usually expected to be in kind, particularly food items or the loan of kitchen items, because those are the resources these women manage on a daily basis. Women often have a separate and more private or contained system of cash support among themselves in times of weddings, condolences, or childbirth. Both married and unmarried women contribute labor in the form of preparing meals for social occasions and may also be assigned specific tasks in construction (such as collecting grass for the roof) if there is a building *nafeer*, while men may be assigned different tasks like transportation or cutting lumber, more in line with their everyday work and capacities.

Women form their own *sanduqs*, traditional saving groups, more often than men, but rarely are both men and women involved in the same *sanduq*. This may be because *sanduqs* are often organized as much for social support as for financial support, and meetings are regarded as a social time rather than a strictly business exchange (Taneja 2013). But there are also some practical reasons. Men are responsible for major investments for the family's long-term survival, so they are less interested in small activities that might be funded through a savings group. Men,

therefore, are more likely to be interested in larger, more formal savings and internal lending community (SILC) groups in which disbursements are often on a cycle of nine to twelve months. Women, on the other hand, are responsible for meeting the many smaller emergencies and daily expenses, including many relatively small, unexpected expenses. Therefore, women's groups are structured around meeting these smaller, more frequent consumption expenses. Formal, NGO-initiated savings groups stress the larger investment component (more typical of men's strategies), often measuring success on the volume of loans and capital rather than the number of events in which the group met a need among its members. When brought together into the same group, men's interests are likely to take the fore at the expense of the women's interests.

Some SSNs are more clearly within the control of men, increasing risk of further marginalizing women. Many of these have subtle counterbalances that are not obvious. For example, the *Ajaweed* may be implicated in domestic disputes, including domestic violence. The composition of the *Ajaweed* committee varies with the dispute to be resolved, and parties to the dispute can request representatives to sit on the *Ajaweed*. According to one cultural expert consulted, in cases of domestic violence the woman can request someone to represent her on the *Ajaweed*. Men are also known to request a representative from the woman's household that she respects so that the negotiated resolution will hold.

Type of shock or social event experienced

Households generally receive more support following shocks than happy occasions, like the birth of a child. The perception is that people need support the most when they are suffering from a shock, but they will not suffer if they do not receive support in recognition of a happy event. This prioritization of shock response highlights the role of SSNs in the survival of the community as a whole.

Structural factors

Conflict prevents mutual aid, but stability facilitates collaboration

The relationships underpinning inter-community SSNs have been challenged by conflict in the Darfur

region, associated political polarization, and armed confrontation. During the conflict, norms were intentionally violated, deepening wounds that went beyond the conflict's physical manifestations. Even in instances where relationships remained intact, the insecurity made access to other communities difficult and prevented people from participating in many types of SSNs.

In some of the communities visited, people are making genuine attempts to restore broken relationships and social cohesion as part of their endeavors for peace, and are using SSNs to initiate this process. "We turned the page of the past and we are starting a new clean one," one interviewee said. We found that some communities that had been in direct conflict with each other previously now show noticeable, though still limited, participation in each other's SSNs. In North Darfur for example, the *damres* of Harahsa and Ewija are engaged in limited SSN activities (e.g., condolences, *nafeers*, and weddings) with their neighboring settled communities, though their participation is not on a large scale. In West Darfur near Habila, during the conflict pastoralists built permanent homesteads on land that had previously been cultivated by the local sedentary population. After a long period of tension, the first steps to normalize the relationship was to participate in each other's condolences in recognition of a common shock that both communities could relate to and feel sympathy for "because everyone is affected by death." These efforts appear to be making steps in reducing tensions between the newly settled pastoralists and the original residents. In an example from South Darfur, populations who fled Alsalam locality early in the war have since returned to their original locations and reconciled with neighboring communities. Today the two sets of communities that clashed during the conflict have started regularly participating in joint inter-community SSN activities like condolences, weddings, and even *nafeers*, as explained by the *Sheik* of an agricultural settlement: "Even pastoralists when they are available in the area, they come and make contributions in weddings and condolences. We have their phone numbers and we let them know whenever something happens in the community, and they do the same."

When more people contribute to an SSN, it increases the potential benefits to the members, providing an incentive to set aside grievances from the conflict, and the restoration of relationships helps to enable the support of a wider population.

A cluster of communities that cooperate in joint SSNs may join together for a variety of reasons: kinship, shared natural resources, shared livelihood systems, or even just proximity. While kinship comes with familial obligations, living within the same area requires coordination to access social services, to access and manage the use of natural resources, and to maintain security; all of which requires working through relationships. In times of stability, communities build and maintain relationships partly through participation in shared SSNs. A disrupted relationship between two communities within a cluster of interacting communities may disrupt the whole system and negatively impact all the linked communities. In one location, we interviewed members of a community who moved recently to South Darfur from Central Darfur. The main reason for their resettlement was that two of their neighboring communities in Central Darfur were in conflict with each other and some members were raiding each other's herds. As the dispute continued, each of the two conflicting communities expected the community we interviewed to support them with *faza'as* for restoring stolen livestock. As the interviewed community did not want to side with one community and lose the other from their support network (or risk being brought deeper into the conflict), they decided that their best option was to leave the area entirely and move to another where they already had a relationship.

Cooperation among and between communities can promote stability. Regular and continuous collaboration strengthens inter-communal relationships until each community feels that their own welfare depends on the welfare of the others (Osman et al. 2012). Earlier, we discussed the way in which survival is a collaborative endeavor within a population; here we see the same concept in effect among multiple communities. In some instances within our study population (and likely many more among the broader population), we found that the notion of shared survival was strong

enough to counter the divisions brought by conflict. Near Mornei in West Darfur, we found multiple examples during the Taadoud I research in which two communities, one specializing in cultivation and the other specializing in livestock, had a strong relationship before the war and collaborated through many SSNs and other shared activities that supported both of their livelihoods (Fitzpatrick and Young 2016). At the start of the conflict, the pastoralist community refused the call to join the conflict, remained in place, and shielded their cultivating neighbors from attack. When we visited this area in 2015/2016, many other communities were still struggling with tense inter-community relationships, and their livelihood systems had not recovered. In contrast, those sets of communities where their collaboration and relationship had endured the conflict were far more food secure and resilient.

One respondent reflected on the current political climate in the Darfur region and pointed to the ways in which the relative stability in the region was good for cooperation in inter-community SSNs like *faza'as*:

Before the Darfur conflict, cooperating with a *faza'a* group was the norm, and it was unlikely to see communities not cooperating. During the Bashir era, there was a prevalence of arms, resulting in increased rates of theft and murdering crimes, with many communities not cooperating with *faza'a*. There was no peaceful resolution, and many communities resorted to violence to resolve their issues with other communities. Since the formation of the new government, cooperation has improved.

We see through these dynamics and cases that SSNs help to build and maintain strong, positive relationships that can reduce the overall risk of conflict and also minimize the ways in which conflict can create divisions among communities. When conflict does arise, gradual resumption of and participation in SSNs provide a way to repair damaged relationships while providing support and material benefits, thereby speeding recovery and supporting resilience.

Customary rules and the role of the Native Administration

Different communities have different rules for organizing support through SSNs. In some communities, a standardized contribution amount exists for specific SSNs like condolences. In other communities, people may contribute varying amounts according to their own judgement, capacity, or relationship to the person. Making contributions directly to your friends and relatives is common in most of the communities, but in some communities even if one gives a gift directly to the victim, the norm is to also contribute jointly with other community members through the recognized system.

On certain occasions, the Native Administration will organize SSN activities for emergency response. The SSN activities organized by the Native Administration are usually on a larger scale than those organized directly between individual *Sheiks*, and these activities bring together more communities to generate significantly more resources to meet the needs of multiple communities. For example, in the past year the Native Administration in South Darfur organized an emergency response for households in multiple communities in Gereida that lost their homes to fire, setting a specific amount of food crops or cash to be contributed. Similar examples were cited in North and Central Darfur. Local Native Administration leaders can impose penalties for not participating in specific SSNs. For example, if an adult male does not participate in a *faza'a* to chase stolen livestock or in controlling fires, he can be penalized by the *Ageed* and *Hakamat*. The punishment is usually a material one, such as paying a fine or preparing a community meal.

Material vulnerabilities

Many respondents in South Darfur indicated that the declining economic capacity of the population is negatively affecting the functioning of the SSN system. The economic hardships they are experiencing as a result of inflation have reduced their contributions, despite revisions to the standard contributions. One community member said, "You cannot imagine how the amount of *diya* inflated from SDG [Sudanese pound] 70,000 a couple of years

ago to above one million now.” Aside from inflation, people also recall times when they had better economic resources and more assets. Contributions were higher, and wealth was measured in livestock. “After a wedding, the groom would find himself with a large herd of animals, as many people used to contribute with livestock,” one community leader said. The protracted insecurity, theft of livestock, and then the economic decline of the country had a major impact on economic status, with people losing herds and grain stores. Today people are rarely able to offer livestock as a contribution. Displacement of some communities also affected access to land for cultivation and undermined market systems, further fragmenting communities and reducing the social basis of SSNs. The result is an overall reduction of economic capacity in many areas, meaning that people affected by shocks are receiving less support from within their communities.

Access to technology

Changes in technology have changed the organization and operation of SSNs. New technologies with the greatest impact on the facilitation of SSNs are mobile phones and motor bikes. Mobile phones essentially extend the network of people who can participate in an SSN regardless of geography. Phones help people who are far away stay in touch with their communities. This provides a social connection and allows people to either give or solicit support in times of need. For example, one Ageed may call another one by phone to solicit support in a faza’a or to fight a fire. Occasionally, phones allow members of the community who are not physically living in the community to invest in joint activities within the community, using the phone both for communications and for transferring monetary contributions. Through access to motorbikes, people can quickly deliver urgent messages to each other or nearby communities to activate SSNs that solicit support in emergencies like fire and to chase thieves when livestock has been stolen.

While only a limited portion of the population can own modern technological items, it appears that most people do have access to them. Some people acquire technology items to generate income by renting them out or providing a service for a fee

that is usually affordable to the majority of the population. For example, in the ongoing Taadoud ISI research, about half of the respondents were able to list a telephone number to a mobile for someone in their household (usually the senior male). Others said they could access a telephone through paying someone a small fee in their neighborhood. This availability was further confirmed in the baseline ISI interviews, where 95% of households reported at least some telephone expenses, indicating that this technology is widely accessible. The bigger problem is infrastructure, as many of the more remote villages do not have network coverage. Hence people often have to either climb a hill or travel to where they can get an adequate signal to make a call.

Other technical innovations like village *tuktuks* (motorbike taxis) are based on fees per use. Many people in the Taadoud ISI research mentioned that these technologies increased net income or productivity, providing an almost immediate return on the cost of the transport. Plows with animal traction were also commonly mentioned as becoming very common, with the rent of the plow costing much less than manual labor to do the same work. So, although there is the potential for technology to exacerbate economic disparities within communities, it appears that so far these items are fairly accessible to most of the population once they become available in a community.

Mobility of nomadic populations

According to the experts consulted (and reflected in the interviews with the nomadic interviewees), “Nomadic communities have all the systems the same as in the village but they [are] organized through [the] clan leader because they move together, and if they are all camped in some scattered area they have their communications systems.”

Some of the SSNs and strategies employed within nomadic groups are specific to the vulnerabilities of their livelihood: often being scattered, far from the protection of police or the law, with their wealth and future income invested into a living commodity (livestock) that is very mobile and therefore at risk of theft or death. The experts explained that related groups “move together during the different

seasons [to] search for good pasture and water and to protect the clan herds together from attack...[In the] worst situation [they] get huge support from their main tribe...in case [a] family lose[s] their herd or house [is] burnt under any case their relatives contribute to compensate him, not all but above 50%.”

Due to their frequent movement and the dispersed nature of households through much of the year, their SSNs are based more on clan and lineage than on proximity. They are often managed through the tribal or family hierarchy. Therefore, the interaction of SSNs and relationships is especially close among nomadic groups. When they are dispersed, they coordinate, transfer wealth, or visit using mobile phones, cars, and motorbikes. Just as with sedentary populations, if a nomad kills someone from another tribe and the *Ajaweed* of both tribes reach an agreement for payment to the victim’s family, the *diya* (payment) will be paid by the members of that tribe, not just the immediate family involved. Poor families are supported by wealthier relatives with the loan of an animal giving milk. The poor family cares for the animal and can drink or sell the milk. When the animal stops giving milk, they can return it to the owner, and someone will provide another animal giving milk. The experts went on to explain that “nomads get all outside support such as *zakat* and humanitarian assistance through the clan leader, the *Sheikh*, who is always a man. Because of the security issues, clan members now move and settle close to each other.” During conflict with another tribe, the clan *Ageed* steps in to organize members through the local *Ageed* “to protect the individual or their herds, lands or other tribe resources (mining area)” or to take revenge on another tribe. Because of this very close interaction between SSNs and lineage relationships, it is not surprising that settling pastoralists turned to participation in the village SSNs as a first step to normalizing relationships with their sedentary neighbors.

The impact of NGO activities on SSNs

The impact of NGO and government programs on local customary systems has long been debated and was one of the driving factors behind this study.

In this report, we have found that individuals and communities use SSNs to build social resilience as well as to meet specific needs. Therefore, if formal institutions replace specific SSNs, there is concern they may improve economic standing but weaken social resilience. But do NGO activities like those of RISING displace SSNs?

Writing in 1999, Morduch reported that while many observers believed that formal social protection mechanisms were pushing out informal SSNs at the community level, he felt that the evidence was not strong (Morduch 1999). Citing a study in South Africa, which found that the addition of elderly black South Africans to the formal government social security program only displaced 20% to 40% of private gifts to these elderly. Morduch concluded that “even where informal insurance is well developed, public actions that displace informal mechanisms can yield net benefits” (Morduch 1999, 188). From a strictly economic point of view, this may be the case, but from a social point of view, this formalization still may remove many of the social impacts of SSNs.

Interviewees consistently reported that NGO-sponsored relief and development services did not have a strong direct impact on SSNs, either positively or negatively. As one respondent reported, “The benefit some community [received] from an NGO does not change the relationships between them and other communities.” NGO support did sometimes serve as a supplement or complement to SSNs. SSNs were most helpful for responding to the constant stream of small-to-moderate idiosyncratic shocks and for promoting production, but SSNs were quickly eroded in the event of a widespread covariate shock when the entire population was affected. Most NGO interventions, on the other hand, focus on those irregular covariate shocks, especially climate-related shocks.

Respondents did not seem to feel that there was a potential for NGOs to crowd out SSN activities. Interviewees consistently made a distinction between SSN activities and NGO support and talked about them as serving different functions. NGO support, from the perspective of respondents, appears at random and with unknown rationale

for who benefits and who does not. NGO support uses external decision processes not based on the community's norms, using resources from outside the community, and does not require either reciprocity or relationships. Respondents felt that neither the average participant nor the community leadership has control over how NGO benefits are distributed. In contrast, respondents reported that SSNs are integrated into the fabric of their lives, built on relationships, and governed according to norms they know and understand. Through SSNs, resources generated by the community are redistributed according to an intimate understanding of people's needs. Households know and understand the benefits they can count on receiving from SSNs in response to any particular idiosyncratic shock, and how to actively maximize those benefits. Communities can also modify the SSNs to meet their own needs or values. Though the monetary benefits received may be limited, SSNs are reliable, allowing households or communities to incorporate them into their resilience strategies.

If an individual or a community benefits from an NGO's activity, it is considered a good thing for that person or community, but respondents claim that receiving NGO assistance does not affect either the receipt of support or expectations to contribute to support for others. This was the case even when people complained about lack of transparency in the distribution of NGO services. According to one community member, "If an NGO decides to do something in another community but not in our community because of bias, we don't accept that, but it won't affect our relationship with the other community." However, surrounding communities do expect to have access to public services like schools and water facilities established by NGOs in one community. In the views of one respondent, this shared access of NGO-provided facilities may increase positive inter-community interactions, which in turn likely strengthens informal SSNs: "NGO interventions do not cause problems between communities. Instead, when communities cooperate in sharing the services, this strengthens their relationships."

Some people suggested that the economic gains individuals make from participating in NGO activities

may encourage them to contribute more, but the choice was seen largely as a personal one, not an expectation. As one respondent explained:

Being on the [NGO distribution] list does not change the expectations of someone's participation and contributions [to SSNs]. A person on the list may choose to contribute more or less without being influenced by any expectations...Being an NGO beneficiary may encourage some people to contribute more to SSNs, but when it comes to an SSN, nobody cares about being a beneficiary or not. There are no obligations based on participation in NGOs activities.

Some poor participants in the Taadoud research felt proud when they were able to share with others the items they received from an NGO distribution, as doing so was a chance to be the giver instead of always being in the undignified role of supplicant. There have been reports in other contexts of an organized redistribution of goods within a community after only a portion of people in the community received them from the NGO, but this particular strategy was not mentioned by any of the participants in the RISING study.

The one exceptional impact the NGOs have had on SSNs is the savings groups. Local savings groups have long existed in many communities, but usually in a very simple form. The increased sophistication and organization of the NGO models have reportedly increased the impact of savings groups, such as by enabling larger loans, creating a small social emergency fund, and extending social connections that may be able to bring additional collaboration or support. In interviews under Taadoud and RISING, participants have specifically noted their appreciation of the skills and concepts of SILC/Saving for Change activities, noting how these skills have been applied to other joint enterprises. In the Taadoud II ISI Operational Research, we found that in 2018 (before hyperinflation made cash-based activities problematic), 15% to 20% of all responses to shocks in each of three Darfur states cited the use of "loans, credit, and savings groups," a large proportion of which came through the NGO-supported savings groups. These groups also provided small grants from their associated social

insurance fund, which may or may not have required repayment. Unfortunately, as hyperinflation devalued cash-based savings, the savings groups had to adapt, converting their cash into inflation-proof goods such as livestock and cash crops, reducing their ability to provide these protective services.

After the initial Taadoud and RISING savings groups (and some from other NGOs) were established and completed one or two cycles, other groups started to emerge. Some of the NGO-initiated groups continued into new cycles without NGO supervision. Although these savings groups may no longer strictly follow the SILC methods, respondents have said they have incorporated some of the skills and concepts learned through these NGO versions into their traditional savings groups to increase their impact and usefulness. Other respondents report having transferred these skills to producers' groups, private enterprise, and various collaborative activities within the communities.

In summary, NGO-sponsored activities rarely displace or disrupt customary informal SSNs because they serve very different purposes. NGO-sponsored humanitarian activities are more likely to be one-off or temporary, and unreliable, designed to address a specific covariate crisis. SSNs address the constant stream of idiosyncratic shocks. Customary SSNs are woven into the day-to-day lives of communities, reinforcing relationships and norms. If NGO-sponsored activities are informed by SSNs, they can be structured to either supplement or complement them—strengthening them instead of competing with them.

Conclusion and Recommendations

SSNs are not independent entities; rather they are a network of activities that are based on and reflect the web of relationships and the norms of a society. They are interlinked, and the violation or support of norms related to one SSN may affect a person's ability to participate in other SSNs and many other aspects of their lives. SSNs are both integral to and embedded within society, bringing many community-level social benefits beyond the specific material needs each SSN addresses.

SSNs are especially important in the Darfur context where a protracted crisis has disrupted livelihoods and society itself. **Because SSNs operate at the nexus of relationships and social norms, they can provide mechanisms for reconciliation and recovery.** During this research and the Taadoud Operational Research, we found instances where communities participated in the SSNs of another community as an early step to reconciliation after conflict or heightened tensions. **The more frequent these positive interactions between former opponents, the stronger the incentive to reconcile.** We posit that communities that have more shared SSNs and interpersonal linkages—even when hostilities or tensions exist—are better able to settle disputes and reconcile before small conflicts escalate into crises.

Informal SSNs are most common where formal governance is weak and state institutions are absent or inaccessible to a large portion of the population. In these cases, government mechanisms are unlikely to be able to ensure people's well-being or survival. Communities and customary governance mechanisms therefore take on these responsibilities and devise systems to share risks among the population to minimize detrimental impacts on any one portion of the population. **As such, the most fundamental norm underlying the network of SSNs is that survival is a shared community responsibility.** At a practical level, this norm means

that when you are in need, I help you even though it may deplete my reserves or risk my own survival. Later, when I am in need, you will do the same for me. In this way we share risk between us.

The more people who share this risk, the smaller the risk is that any one member will not survive. Most SSNs, therefore, try to be as inclusive as possible, often even bringing in multiple communities. **The more people (and communities) who are included, the less detrimental the impact will be from any single shock. This further increases the role of SSNs in building networks of relationships to reduce risk of conflict.**

There is a common concern that external support will undermine, replace, or crowd out customary SSNs. Respondents, though, did not seem to feel that there was a significant risk of it happening. NGO-sponsored activities appear to rarely displace or disrupt customary informal SSNs because they serve very different purposes. Customary SSNs are a part of everyday life, both supporting productivity and responding to the most frequent shocks that can erode livelihoods and undermine the accumulation of resources. On the other hand, NGOs generally respond to covariate shocks that are large enough both for the organization to recognize and to warrant an external response. These responses are considered to be out of the ordinary, out of people's control, and designed to meet unusual needs through mechanisms beyond local social and economic systems.

When NGO-sponsored activities are informed by SSNs, they can be structured to either supplement or complement them—strengthening them instead of competing with them, such as the examples discussed in the section below.

Opportunities for increasing the impact of SSNs

Formal social protection and shock response measures can remove some of the burdens from communities, possibly providing more efficient ways to address individual needs or bringing new resources into the community. Respondents explained that, today, many SSNs provide less support than previously because people do not have as much to contribute. To help fill this gap, externally supported activities that bolster the productivity of a community can bring new resources and organizational skills into communities and increase the ability of people to contribute to local SSNs, thereby increasing the capacity of the SSNs to address larger needs.

When external actors engage in program design, they should begin by considering what systems a community may already have in place to meet the needs the program aims to address. If that system is insufficient, ask how it might be strengthened rather than replaced. For example, sheiks have many responsibilities in their communities, including maintaining lists of vulnerable individuals and households for the distribution of resources, such as the *zakat* or *oshoor* systems. These lists are created and maintained according to concepts of vulnerability held by the community and are formed with an intimate understanding of what makes life difficult for people or households in that community. NGOs often arrive with their own concepts of vulnerability and ask community leaders to create lists according to the NGO's criteria. They often consider this "community involvement". In a worst-case scenario, the NGO forms a committee that excludes the Sheik and instructs this committee to create a list according to the NGO's criteria. Sheiks with experience of how humanitarians work are known to often keep two different lists, one for their own use and one to provide NGOs. Focusing on the Sheik's own list, we can support stability in the community by supporting the Sheik's role in the community rather than competing with it and undermining his leadership. This is important, as strong and respected Sheiks can help promote stability within and between communities. The community inclusion criteria used for these lists can

also offer key insights into what creates vulnerability. Programs can then be structured to address these real factors rather than factors which may be based on NGO assumptions.

Darra groups are created with the intent of sharing food in a self-selecting manner. The men from the participating households get to know what is happening in each other's lives, creating connections for other collaborative activities. Within these intimate settings, those going through hard times can receive support in a way that maintains their dignity. In contrast, humanitarian distributions are often public events. People receiving goods at a distribution are usually required to line up, are herded through a series of stations and then shuffled out the exit as quickly as possible. This can be a very degrading experience, especially when people take pride in being self-sufficient. Distribution directly to *darra* groups instead of to individuals may be a way to allow the existing systems of distribution to take place, as members of each *darra* generally know the state of each member, their current needs and are accustomed to appropriately pooling or sharing resources in very discreet ways that preserve dignity. Such an approach would reduce the administrative burden on the program while reinforcing a tradition that provides on-going support, a safety net against hard times long after the humanitarian program has finished.

Many of the SSNs discussed in this paper have more impact when more members contribute. Supporting networks of SSNs can effectively increase their membership, especially if they are networked between villages or, even better, between groups with different livelihood specializations. If a major crisis hits members of one village or a specific livelihood activity, then those in other villages or livelihood specializations may be able to provide support. Similarly, linking production-related SSNs (producers savings groups or marketing coops) can enable the sharing of innovations or expansion of access to value chains.

A word of caution: when building upon these local informal systems, external actors need to be careful not to simply reinforce norms that marginalize a portion of the population or that exacerbate

tensions between groups. Exclusion takes many forms, and SSNs can unintentionally reinforce marginalization through entry barriers. Many production-related SSNs require labor and material contributions that the neediest lack, creating unintended barriers to improving productivity. In self-selecting groups, people tend to select others who are similar to themselves, further insulating them from interactions with those who are different.

For example, traditional savings groups provide small but important financial services that allow individuals to build up sums for large purchases or investments and to create a social network to draw on during crises. These savings groups are spontaneously formed among individuals who share a common bond, often relations or classmates, and similar economic circumstances. The amount of the regular contribution is set depending on the ability of those in the group. The higher the regular contribution, the greater the potential benefit of membership, hence there is a motivation to make the regular amount as high as feasible for members. Stated a different way, people estimated to be able to bear a higher contribution amount are more likely to be invited to participate with other highly productive members. People without a common bond or who do not have the means to regularly contribute a set amount are less frequently invited to participate. Given the benefits that these groups can convey, those who cannot join may risk falling even further behind economically and socially. While savings group participants may not consider their selection of members to be exclusionary, the effect is the same. The formal “improved” savings groups encouraged by NGOs follow this traditional pattern of group formation based on the observation that trust and interconnectivity increases success rates. However, the improved group model may replicate or even multiply the risks of excluding individuals who have limited social bonds or financial means, thereby allowing fewer opportunities for entry and participation. Understanding these exclusionary elements, NGOs may choose to address these issues with groups as they are forming, looking for certain portions of the group’s activities that could be open to those who might not be able to contribute as much. For example, most improved groups include both contributions to the groups’ capital fund and

contributions to a social insurance fund. The social insurance contributions are generally quite small, but the benefits can be significant. Encouraging groups to allow members with less means to participate in just the social insurance would not only provide those individuals with the benefits of social insurance, but also the chance to build connections and trust with the other members. These connections may then lead to other support outside of the group’s activities.

Nafir, calling for shared labor, is often used among those with similar livelihood specializations and with similar short-term labor needs. For example, a group of farmers will work in turn a negotiated amount on each member’s fields in a single rotation. The owner of the field where the group is working on a given day is responsible for providing a meal of acceptable quality. As with the savings groups, members choose each other carefully because they must trust that each will contribute as much as they receive. This trust is strongest amongst those with common social or familial bonds. Those who do not have the strength to work at the same level, who do not have their own fields or who cannot afford to provide a meal to the group not able to join – either because they are not invited or because they opt out, knowing they cannot reciprocate with the meal. Many NGO agricultural training activities are built partially on the *nafir* concept. For instance, land allocated to an agricultural activity is divided amongst the participants and each must work her allocation as part of the training experience. However, those who cannot work as much as the others, or who cannot afford to take the time away from other income-earning or domestic labors are unable to participate and lose access to the training opportunity, which may leave them even further marginalized. Simply following traditional patterns like *nafir* does not necessarily make an activity accessible to all. Program staff should be sensitive to the barriers the structure of their activities may pose to those who might benefit most from the activities. Once the barriers are recognized, the NGO can seek guidance from the community on how to make the activities more flexible and inclusive. For example, allocating smaller plots to those with less physical capacity, or alternative training for those who cannot dedicate as much time to the activity. Actively

seeking out potential barriers to participation in all types of activities, not just nafir-based activities, through open discussions with participants would improve the NGO staff's understanding of barriers to participation. It would also bring to the forefront within the community population the issues of unintentional exclusion.

Findings from this study indicate that encouraging diversity within a group can bring strength and risk sharing, can bring in different skills and perspectives, and may further extend the network of the group.

Contributions in NGO-promoted SSNs and activities do not have to be uniform across diverse group members: those who cannot contribute in one way may be able to contribute in other ways, or the group can allow special dispensations to members who might otherwise be excluded. Similarly, external actors need to pay attention to gender dynamics; in particular, how women may be excluded from systems that are based around male-dominated leadership structures and mechanisms.

Such exclusions may be overt, such as restrictions to participation in certain SSNs like the *Ajaweed*, or more subtle, such as segregated *darra* meals that may have different quality food or different condolence mechanisms by gender. Simply discussing these potential, often unintentional, exclusionary dynamics in designing program activities may promote more equitable community dynamics.

In summary, seeking to understand how SSNs work within a community and integrating these systems into programming strategies—or vice versa—can not only improve the economic or productive impact of the program but can also support social structures, reduce risk of conflict, and promote reconciliation. Because customary SSNs are an enduring feature of the community, programs that support them are more likely to have sustained impact.

Take-Away Messages

1. SSNs are not just unrelated groups or activities; they are instead deeply embedded in all aspects of the social, cultural, and economic life of a community. Setting up a standalone SSN is to misunderstand how it fits into a larger mosaic that includes dynamic interactions between and among norms, relationships, and the SSNs.
2. SSNs are closely linked with norms and relationships. They provide a way to reinforce norms and values in a society and to maintain order without force. This connection to norms and relationships means that performance in one SSN can affect inclusion in or benefits from other SSNs, even over time or generations.
 - a. SSNs provide a means of extending a network of connections to increase resilience and productivity of individuals and communities.
 - b. As norms and values in society evolve and change, so do the parameters of relationships, functions, and structures of the SSNs.
3. The existence of SSNs and community participation in these systems can serve to rebuild relationships undermined or even severed by the conflict. Such reconciliation might happen slowly as communities begin to participate in each other's SSNs, such as offering condolences. These initial small steps often pave the way for greater interaction and gradual mending of ties. At the same time, communities that participate in each other's SSNs may be less likely to engage in hostilities with each other. The more closely tied these communities are, the more everyone has to lose by allowing conflict to undermine the relationships.
4. Because SSNs are rooted in communities, the material support that these systems can provide depends both on the extent of contributions from members and on the total extent of resources within a community. As such, an impoverished community or very small community will be able to offer less support to members following a crisis than a wealthier or larger community. While SSNs can provide immediate, flexible, and appropriate support in response to a range of situations, these mechanisms are often unable to go beyond a first line of defense. External support may still be needed to help communities recover from shock.
5. SSNs reflect the norms and beliefs of the communities in which they are embedded. Many tenets of local, cultural, and religious tradition in Darfur emphasize supporting and assisting the poor; the informal SSNs apparent in this study reflect these values. These values create a supportive social safety net designed to help people recover from shock, preserve the life and dignity of those who are experiencing protracted vulnerability, and emphasize collaboration. At the same time, the fact that the SSNs do reflect norms and beliefs means that exclusion may be difficult to identify from the inside or may take place along such well-established lines (such as gender, age, or marital status) that it is nearly invisible. When NGOs and others target programs, they need to take into account the potential for both overt and hidden cleavages that may result in exclusion.
6. As with many other cultures, **the maintenance of dignity is very important in Darfur**. To be seen as unable to feed your household or to be in need of support from others is a terrible indignity. During the Taadoud I research, a questionnaire included a coping strategy index in which one question asked the number of times someone in the household had requested food from someone they did not know (i.e., begged). The question was considered such an indignity that the interviewers resisted even asking it in the interviews. Those who are able to avoid this indignity and ask for direct assistance appear to be the elderly (who are seen as deserving support after a long life) and the handicapped. Based on these culture norms around shame and dignity, lining up to receive support or being photographed receiving assistance is something

that most people actively seek to avoid. As such, informal SSNs intentionally offer support in a low-key manner, sometimes even providing a way to detect a need without requiring someone to openly seek support.

7. Even common informal SSNs can exclude those who might benefit most from them, reinforcing power and wealth imbalances within a community or society. These exclusions are often unintentional and so engrained within the SSN structures that they may not even be understood as exclusions. The beauty of SSNs is their ability to be flexible. This allows opportunity to adjust the operation or structure of an SSN to lower barriers to participation and to become more inclusive.

Recommendations for programming

- 1. Recognize that SSNs are complementary to those of NGOs and other external actors, and vice versa.** Informal social safety nets are most effective and efficient in responding to frequent idiosyncratic shocks and in providing support for productive activities. In contrast, external interventions normally target more serious covariate shocks that are beyond the resources of the community—and hence the capacities—of local SSNs to handle.
- 2. SSNs are intertwined with relationships and social norms, and external actors should proceed with caution and be well-informed before seeking to change existing SSNs.** These systems often extend across generations (past and future) as well as across multiple population groups.
- 3. Value the social benefits of the SSNs, not just the economic ones.** SSNs have many social benefits, and can build and strengthen relationships within and across communities. In some instances, **these social benefits include normalization of relationships after conflict and displacement**, particularly when groups are sharing resources or living in proximity. Any efforts to alter (or “improve”) an SSN can create unintentional social harm, such as weakening of important relationships.
- 4. Recognize that some local systems may be working well, and others may work less well.** Seek to understand how well these local systems are functioning without making assumptions about corruption or efficacy. If local systems such as the *zakat* committees are well respected, seek to work through them as opposed to going around them.
- 5. In the design of any program or program activity, consider how to maximize its integration into the customary SSNs without structurally altering these systems.** For example:
 - a. Review the *Sheik*’s own list of vulnerable individuals (those to receive from *zakat*) to better understand what makes someone vulnerable in the eyes of the community. Then consider how this understanding of vulnerability may differ from that of the NGO and the implications for targeting and programming.**
 - b. Give the *Ageed* a lead role in disaster risk reduction. It is already his responsibility to mobilize the population in case of a sudden shock.**
 - c. The *darra* groups provide a means of passing information among men (and women, though to a lesser extent) or mobilizing populations. They may also serve as effective systems through which to provide material assistance.**
- 6. Community members have different roles in SSNs based on gender, age, and status. When considering gender, do not assume that just because women have different roles or functions within SSNs that these roles are inferior or that the system intentionally marginalizes women.** Many of the roles performed by women are done so based on their knowledge and expertise. While exclusion and marginalization do exist, the way in which these take place may not be obvious or as expected, and more investigation is necessary before making assumptions.
- 7. Consider the implied commitments and risks associated with external improvements SSNs.** Due to the flexibility and transitory nature of customary SSNs, some people may be able or willing to participate in a customary version of an SSN but not the NGO-adapted versions of a similar SSN.
- 8. Link up similar SSNs within a community and then between communities with different livelihood strategies.** Not all activities can

be done jointly, but some may be. Livelihood strategies within a community are often very similar. This diversification within an SSN can insure a community against a shock that affects the central activities of one livelihood more than another.

9. Be aware of the barriers to participation, both in traditional SSNs and those elements of SSNs adopted by a program. Actively seek to identify and resolve the barriers to participation in program-supported SSNs to improve the targeting, reach and impact of the program. The open discussion of often unintentional exclusion can promote increased awareness and more equitable community dynamics.

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