



Uganda—Ezra Millstein, Mercy Corps

# THE CURRENCY OF CONNECTIONS

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

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FRIEDMAN SCHOOL OF NUTRITION SCIENCE AND POLICY  
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# Introduction and overview

## Rationale for study

This report examines the importance of social relationships for South Sudanese refugees both during their flight and after their arrival in refugee settlements in West Nile, Uganda. The objective of this report is to help humanitarian aid actors understand important and often overlooked sources of household resilience during displacement. This understanding may help humanitarian aid actors design more effective interventions that strengthen existing social connections on which displaced populations rely for support. Equally, this analysis may help humanitarian aid actors avoid inadvertently undermining these important sources of household resilience during crises. This report is based on interviews and focus group discussions conducted in Palorinya and Rhino Camp refugee settlements in West Nile, Uganda between March 2018 and February 2019.

This research aimed to examine several questions in both South Sudan and refugee settings in Uganda. First, we wanted to better understand the effect of violent conflict and associated displacement on the nature, characteristics, and evolution of people's social connectedness. In addition, we sought to investigate whether, and if so, how humanitarian assistance interacts with social networks and connections. In order to answer these questions, this analysis examines critical sources of material and non-material support that people receive via their social connections, and the potential bases of exclusion that prevent some households from accessing important social networks and related support. We describe the development and importance of refugees' new relationships in Uganda, changes to their pre-displacement relationships, and the consequences of these changes for refugees' perceptions of their own wellbeing. Rather than only examining individual relationships or focusing on the household as the unit of analysis, this report tracks the formation and evolution of relationships at various levels, capturing the many types and layers of bonds that affect refugees' experiences.

This report adds to a growing literature on the importance of social connectedness during conflict and displacement. First, in considering peoples' own strategies for forming, preserving, and adapting social relationships during crisis and displacement, our analysis contributes to existing research on the ways in which communities rely on one another during conflict and in its aftermath. Our analysis offers a different lens on the localization of humanitarian response, the analysis of which to date has primarily focused on formal local institutional responses to humanitarian emergencies.<sup>1</sup> Second, until recently, the literature on social connectedness tended to ignore new relationships formed while people navigated armed conflict and displacement.<sup>2</sup> In this report, we discuss these relationships as important components of understanding self-protection, and how people respond to and attempt to recover from crises. Third, while most social analyses in refugee contexts focus primarily on refugee-host dynamics, this report also considers internal refugee dynamics, as well as how refugees relate to people who remain in their communities of origin.

This report is part of an OFDA-funded partnership between Mercy Corps and the Feinstein International Center (FIC) at the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy, Tufts University to examine changes to social connectedness for conflict-affected South Sudanese in South Sudan and Uganda, and how these connections are linked to coping and recovery. This report expands on key themes that emerged from research on social connectedness in Panyijar County, South Sudan discussed in [a report released in January 2019](#), and from Bentiu, South Sudan described in [a series of reports released in October 2019](#). These preceding reports highlight the significance of social support networks for survival and coping during conflict and in its aftermath.

## Context



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For most of its short history, South Sudan has been plagued by violent conflict. Since December 2013, when fighting erupted between forces loyal to President Salva Kiir Mayardit and Vice President Riek Machar, approximately 4.5 million South Sudanese have been displaced from their homes and nearly 400,000 have been killed.<sup>3</sup> While conflict-related violence has decreased significantly since the signature of the 2018 Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), key aspects of the agreement have not been implemented and intermittent fighting continues, especially in the Equatoria region. As a result, displaced people, including respondents interviewed for this study, remain deeply reluctant to return to their communities of origin. Today, approximately 2.2 million South Sudanese refugees

- 1 Maxwell, Daniel G., and Nisar Majid. "Famine in Somalia: competing imperatives, collective failures," 2011-12. Oxford University Press, 2016; Baines, Erin, and Emily Paddon. "This is how we survived": Civilian agency and humanitarian protection." *Security Dialogue* 43, no. 3 (2012): 231-247. Santschi, Martina, Rango Gworo and Elizabeth White. "Caught Between Two Cultures: When Aid in South Sudan is Pulled Between Local Norms and Western Systems," *Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility*, November 15, 2018; Mo, Ali, Lona Loduro, Victor Lowilla, Lydia Poole, and Barnaby Willitts-King. "Funding to Local Humanitarian Actors: South Sudan Case Study," *Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility*. November 29, 2018; Mégret, Frédéric. "Beyond the 'Salvation' Paradigm: Responsibility to Protect (others) vs the Power of Protecting Oneself." *Security Dialogue*, 30, no. 6 (2009): 575-595.
- 2 Krystalli, Roxanne, Allyson Hawkins, and Kim Wilson. 2018. "I Followed the Flood": A Gender Analysis of the Moral and Financial Economies of Forced Migration." *Disasters* 42: S17-S39; and Wilson, Kim and Roxani Krystalli. 2017. "The Financial Journey of Refugees: Evidence from Greece, Jordan, and Turkey." Henry J. Leir Institute for Human Security.
- 3 Checchi, Francesco, Adrienne Testa, Abdihamid Warsame, Le Quach, and Rachel Burns. 2018. "Department of Infectious Disease Epidemiology Faculty of Epidemiology and Population Health London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine," September, 45.

continue to reside in neighboring countries, including Uganda which is home to an estimated 854,000 South Sudanese refugees—more than any other host country.<sup>4</sup>

This report is based on interviews conducted in Palorinya and Rhino Camp, two highly populated and geographically expansive refugee settlements in the Ugandan sub-region of West Nile. Located in the northwest corner of Uganda and bordering South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo, West Nile is home to the majority of the South Sudanese refugees residing in Uganda.<sup>5</sup> Most refugees in Rhino Camp and Palorinya are from South Sudan’s Equatoria region, which borders Uganda.<sup>6</sup> While many of these individuals fled South Sudan as a result of the country’s current civil conflict which began in 2013, others have resided in Uganda for generations, having fled violent conflicts related to South Sudan’s decades-long struggle for independence from Sudan.

West Nile has long been affected by multidimensional poverty and consistently ranks among the least developed of Uganda’s sub-regions. According to the 2017 Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), 77.3% of the sub-region’s population lives in poverty, compared to 55.1% nationally.<sup>7</sup> Previous insecurity caused by rebel groups has spurred internal and cross-border displacement in the region and contributed to low levels of economic development.<sup>8</sup> Outside of Arua Town, the sub-region’s economic hub, livelihoods are primarily agricultural. Some households may sell surplus crops, and those residing in proximity to the River Nile may engage in fishing to supplement agricultural activities.<sup>9</sup>



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4 UNCHR. 2019. “South Sudan Situation.” <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/southsudan>.

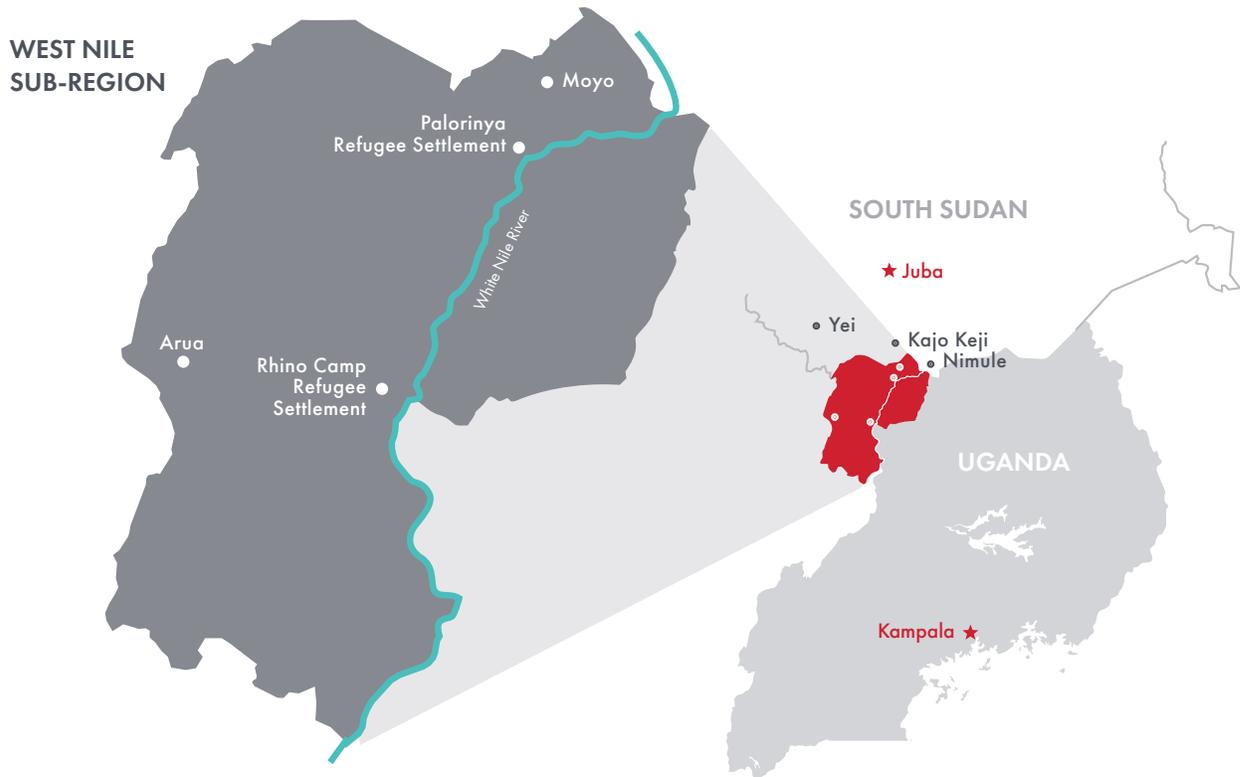
5 In 2014, West Nile’s population was just over 2.6 million. However, that figure has increased dramatically with the latest influx of South Sudanese refugees following the outbreak of South Sudan’s current conflict. For example, UNHCR currently estimates that Adjumani, one of nine districts in West Nile, is home to 209,337 refugees, nearly matching the district’s overall population in 2014, of 225,251 people. See: UNHCR. 2019. “Uganda - Refugee Statistics October 2019 - Adjumani.” <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/72276>; Uganda Bureau of Statistics. 2014. “Northern Region - Parish Level Profiles (Census 2014).” <https://www.ubos.org/explore-statistics/20/>.

6 Christopher Tuckwood. 2019. “Reports from Rhino Camp: Baseline Survey Results on Refugees and Rumours.” The Sentinel Project. <https://thesentinelproject.org/2019/09/09/reports-from-rhino-camp-refugees-and-rumours/>.

7 Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI). 2019. “Global MPI Country Briefing 2019: Uganda (Sub-Saharan Africa).” [https://ophi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/CB\\_UGA\\_2019\\_2.pdf#page=11&zoom=100,0,360](https://ophi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/CB_UGA_2019_2.pdf#page=11&zoom=100,0,360).

8 Inter-agency Regional Analysis Network. 2017. “Bridging the Gap: Long-Term Implications for South Sudanese Refugees in West Nile, Uganda.”

9 Storer, Elisabeth, and Georgina Pearson. 2019. “Cross-Border Dynamics and Healthcare in West Nile, Uganda.” *Social Science in Humanitarian Action*.



The UNHCR estimates that Rhino Camp, located in Arua District, is home to 113,176 refugees, of whom 97% are South Sudanese and 83% are women and children.<sup>10</sup> Rhino Camp was first established in 1980 and has grown in the years since as new waves of refugees fled violence in neighboring countries. The vast settlement, which covers an area of more than 85 square kilometers, is divided into six zones.<sup>11</sup> The interviews conducted for this report took place in various villages, many of which are separated by considerable distance, inside Rhino Camp’s Ofua Zone.

The UNHCR estimates that Palorinya settlement, located in Moyo District, is home to 121,091 refugees, of whom over 99% are South Sudanese and 83% are women and children.<sup>12</sup> While South Sudanese refugees from earlier conflicts had previously resided in this area, in its most recent iteration Palorinya settlement was formally established in December 2016. Despite hosting a larger population than Rhino Camp, Palorinya settlement—at 37 square kilometers—is less than half the size of Rhino Camp.<sup>13</sup> The interviews conducted for this report took place in Palorinya’s Ibakwe Basecamp zone.

## Methods

The findings in this report are based on research conducted by a team of three South Sudanese and two expatriate researchers from Mercy Corps and FIC. Between March 2018 and February 2019, researchers spoke with a total of 136 people in 19 semi-structured open-ended individual interviews and in 13 focus group discussions in Palorinya and Rhino Camp settlements. We did not question respondents on their official displacement status and hence we assume a mix of refugees and asylum seekers in the population. However, as the respondents considered themselves to be refugees, we use this term to describe the respondent population throughout this report. Research participants included men and women of diverse ages and livelihoods in

10 UNHCR. 2019. “Uganda - Refugee Statistics October 2019 - Rhino.” <https://reliefweb.int/report/uganda/uganda-refugee-statistics-october-2019-rhino>.

11 UNHCR. 2018. “Rhino Camp Refugee Settlement in Arua District Masterplan.” <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/64436>.

12 “Uganda Refugees and Asylum Seekers as of 31-December-2019.” 2020. Government of Uganda Office of the Prime Minister.

13 UNHCR. 2018. “Uganda Refugee Response Monitoring Settlement Fact Sheet: Palorinya.” <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/63294>.

an effort to document varying perspectives and experiences of flight and life in the settlements. Interviews were led both by South Sudanese researchers in Juba Arabic and by expatriates in English. With participants' consent, most interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed and analyzed in English.<sup>14</sup> Transcripts were analyzed using Dedoose through an iterative process of inductive coding, paying attention to patterns that emerge from the research, rather than assigning pre-determined analytical categories. The names of research participants have been removed in order to ensure privacy and confidentiality.

While leading interviews for this study, we remained cognizant of the various ethical considerations associated with conducting research in contexts where humanitarian service delivery is ongoing.<sup>15</sup> This included the development of an informed consent script which emphasized respondent anonymity and clarified that participation would have no direct influence on the respondent's eligibility to receive assistance from Mercy Corps or other implementing agencies.



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14 When participants preferred not to be audio recorded, researchers took notes by hand.  
15 For a thorough discussion of various ethical considerations associated with humanitarians conducting academic research, see: Chloé Lewis, Alfred Banga, Ghislain Cimanuka, Jean De Dieu Hategekimana, Milli Lake & Rachael Pierotti (2019) Walking the Line: Brokering Humanitarian Identities in Conflict Research, *Civil Wars*, 21:2, 200-227.



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## Key findings and analysis

This section addresses the central themes that arose in the analysis of the data. These include the functions and characteristics of social connections leading up to and during flight from South Sudan to the refugee settlements in West Nile, the ways in which refugees established new connections once in Uganda and how these connections may have differed from those in South Sudan, and how refugees sought to maintain connections back to their places of origin in South Sudan.

### Social connections during flight

In this section, we discuss the role that social connections play in determining when, where, and under what conditions refugees fled to Uganda. Specifically, we describe the critical importance of social networks as a source of both information about security and flight and of material support that refugees rely on to facilitate their travel to Uganda. We also describe the importance that refugees ascribe to fleeing in groups, the ways in which new relationships are established during flight, and the forms of support that migrants extend to one another while fleeing.

### Access to information and material support

Refugees in West Nile explained that as violence escalated in South Sudan in 2016, critical information about security and flight passed between socially connected households. Many respondents recalled being unaware of the deteriorating security conditions in the country and said that they lacked knowledge about where to flee until their social connections raised alarms and urged them to seek refuge in Uganda. As one

female refugee in Rhino Camp recalled, “My father heard the news that many people were going to Uganda and that the UN helped them in terms of food, and that kids in Uganda were going to school. I personally had no knowledge about this place. He was the one who told me to bring the kids here. My father gave me a lot of directives on how I should move with the kids.”<sup>16</sup>

**› *I was in Yei when the conflict began. Most of the killings happened at night. People were randomly murdered, including children, and we had no idea who was responsible or who was behind the killings...***

—Female research participant, Rhino camp

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were not able to access this kind of information. Others were able to get the information through me because I delivered it to them there and then.”<sup>17</sup>

However, not all households had access to this type of information, with implications for decision-making about migration. Indeed, respondents suggested that the breadth, composition, and accessibility of a household’s social network influenced when, where, and under what conditions they eventually fled. This had often dramatic consequences for a household’s safety and wellbeing. Those who were unable to obtain timely information were frequently among the last to leave their communities and risked exposure to extreme violence.<sup>18</sup> As one woman explained, “I was in Yei when the conflict began. Most of the killings happened at night. People were randomly murdered, including children, and we had no idea who was responsible or who was behind the killings...I did try to reach out to relatives and friends about what was going on, but the mobile network was already shut down.”<sup>19</sup>

Respondents explained that households with male relatives working in urban centers, especially Juba, often had better access to information about security, and, as a result, fled earlier than other households. As one woman in Rhino Camp recalled, “The people who fled first to Uganda were the ones who had relatives, husbands, and friends in big towns who provided them with vital information and asked them to leave for Uganda.”<sup>20</sup> Another woman from Yei, South Sudan, similarly highlighted the often gendered barriers to information that

Others described calling those who had already fled to Uganda to consult them about life in the settlements in order to decide where to flee. One man explained, “Before I came [to Uganda], I used to consult my friends by phone about the support [they were receiving] as refugees, the items agencies give and the quantity of food they give to each household.” The man explained that he would in turn share what he learned with others in his community who lacked such relationships. “There were a lot of people who

**› *Those who remained behind mostly were women who don’t travel to big towns, and women without husbands who struggled to get information about what was going on. We just saw cars moving from our places to Uganda and we began to trek on foot with our families because it was not safe anymore.***

—Female research participant, Rhino camp

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16 Female research participant, Rhino Camp, February 2019.

17 Male research participant, Palorinya settlement, November 2018.

18 Research in camps in Jordan similarly found that Syrian refugees’ abilities to access accurate and timely information, often disseminated through social networks, has important implications for their safety and security. See: Wall, Melissa, Madeline Otis Campbell, and Dana Janbek. 2017. “Syrian Refugees and Information Precarity.” *New Media & Society* 19 (2): 240–254.

19 Focus group discussion with female research participant, Rhino Camp, February 2019.

20 Focus group discussion with female focus group participant, Rhino Camp, February 2019.

some refugees experienced, which in turn caused her to be late to flee. “Those who remained behind mostly were women who don’t travel to big towns, and women without husbands who struggled to get information about what was going on. We just saw cars moving from our places to Uganda and we began to trek on foot with our families because it was not safe anymore.”<sup>21</sup>

The ways in which information about the conflict and associated insecurity travelled (or did not travel) within communities of origin is difficult to reconstruct from refugee testimonies. Some people, including those represented in several of the above quotations, described sharing or attempting to share information they received with those who did not have the same access to information. In other instances, however, respondents described seeing people in their communities pack their things and prepare to depart without informing others of the impending danger. In the course of the data collection for this study we probed this question of why such critical and life-saving information would have been kept private. While there are no definitive answers and each circumstance would have differed, a few themes emerge.

First, some of the respondents who said they were not privy to this information may have been ashamed, in hindsight, to admit that they opted to disregard such warnings. In many instances, people lacked the financial means to flee, and instead simply hoped that the violence would not come to their community. When this calculation proved wrong, they may have been hesitant to admit that they heard the warnings but had not heeded them. Second, people who did have security information may have kept it private out of mistrust or fear. Political allegiances within communities were not always known, and people may have feared that if word got out that they were fleeing they would be stopped or face other repercussions. As a key informant described, “By the time the crisis began, strangers were not trusted.... Marauding soldiers were there in almost every village and [also at] the exit points at which the affected populations would flee the country. These [factors] made many people fear to disclose information to others.”<sup>22</sup> Third, as the conflict



21 Focus group discussion with female research participant, Rhino Camp, February 2019.

22 Email correspondence with a key informant living in Juba. December 2019.

intensified, community leaders with political clout were often specifically targeted by armed groups because of their status and wealth. These politically connected households likely had access to information about deteriorating security conditions before others. However, in an effort to avoid identification by armed groups, these people may have fled without disclosing information about their destinations or reasons for flight.<sup>23</sup> Lastly, the nature of social connectedness may explain why some people didn't have this information. Security information passed through some networks and not others, and those who did not receive this information may simply have not been connected—directly or indirectly—to the right people.

Whether or not a household had advance information also affected who they fled with. Those who had the means—both economically and in regard to information—often left as entire households or made plans for the household members to be united. In marked contrast, respondents who only fled when the violence reached their communities were more likely to be separated from household members and their journeys were largely unplanned. Not being part of a household—or being in a partial household, such as without two parents or without a partner—continues to influence material and emotional well-being once in Uganda. While beyond the scope of this paper, not being part of a standard household unit also has implications for accessing humanitarian aid.<sup>24</sup>

› *Some people, like the sister to my mother, received the information about [refuge in] Uganda late and could not manage to raise money for transport to come to Uganda up to now. That is one of the reasons why some people remain in South Sudan, even if they are told of the safety of living in Uganda.*

—Male research participant, Palorinya settlement

The nature of a household's social connections also influences their abilities to access material support, especially cash, to facilitate flight.<sup>25</sup> Respondents explained that those who lacked social connections capable of extending financial support often experienced particular hardship during flight, or in some cases were unable to flee at all. As a male respondent in Palorinya settlement explained, "Some people, like the sister to my mother, received the information about [refuge in] Uganda late and could not manage to raise money for transport to come to Uganda up to now. That is one of the reasons why some people remain in South Sudan, even if they are told of the safety of living in Uganda."<sup>26</sup> Other respondents

explained that they did not receive material support or information in the lead-up to their flight because members of their social networks had been killed in the conflict. In some such cases, respondents informally adopted the children of the deceased and fled with them to Uganda. Respondents described experiencing additional stress as a result of taking in others' children. As one man explained, leading up to his flight, "we got no assistance at all. It was so hard for me to reach Uganda with my brother's kids, whose father got killed in Juba when the war erupted...[the children] got so tired because we came here on foot."<sup>27</sup>

23 Email correspondence with a key informant living in Juba. December 2019. Note: This is the experience of one individual and should not be taken as representative. However, given that we were repeatedly told that some people were departing without sharing information on the escalating conflict, we feel that this account warrants presenting as a possible explanation.

24 See Krystalli, Roxanne, Allyson Hawkins, and Kim Wilson. 2018. "I Followed the Flood": A Gender Analysis of the Moral and Financial Economies of Forced Migration." *Disasters* 42: S17–S39; and Turner, Lewis. 2019. "Syrian Refugee Men as Objects of Humanitarian Care." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 21 (4): 595–616; and Schulz, Philipp. 2019. "Towards Inclusive Gender in Transitional Justice: Gaps, Blind-Spots and Opportunities." *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 1–20.

25 This finding has been documented among other refugee populations, including in Greece, Jordan and Turkey. See for example: Wilson, Kim and Roxani Krystalli. 2017. "The Financial Journey of Refugees: Evidence from Greece, Jordan, and Turkey." Henry J. Leir Institute for Human Security.

26 In-depth interview with male research participant, Palorinya settlement, November 2018.

27 In-depth interview with male research participant, Palorinya settlement, November 2018.

These narratives highlight the profound importance of social connections as potential sources of material and non-material support during flight. Understanding the scope and composition of peoples' social networks, including whether they are connected to individuals, especially in urban centers, who possess sharable knowledge and material resources is an important basis for examining displacement patterns and associated vulnerabilities.

### The importance of fleeing with others

Just as one's social relationships can influence when, and under what circumstances, people flee from their homes, social relationships were also critical sources of support during the course of respondents' travel to Uganda. Respondents tended to emphasize the importance of pre-existing relationships in the leadup to their flight, but explained that while en route, they often depended on new, spontaneous relationships.

As one man recalled, "I moved with other people. Those people were my friends whom I made on the way. You don't move alone. We moved as a team. If you moved alone, you would be killed."<sup>28</sup>

Respondents described banding together with fellow travelers, including strangers, in ad hoc groups. The groups evolved as they moved towards Uganda, and people recalled moving fluidly between different groups as they adjusted their pace. As one man explained, "We found people running, escaping the town, and you're also escaping the town. Then all of us met on the way, and two to three families may move ahead, and when they got tired, they took rest, cooking and drinking. Then you can find another group of families are coming up behind, and you may decide to move with that group."<sup>29</sup>

**›** *We shared the goat meat with others. They were all different people from different counties, and I did not know them, but I shared with them because we were moving together. They also shared with me. If some of them had flour and the other ones had grains, we would gather them all in one place and eat all together.*

—Female focus group participant,  
Palorinya settlement

**›** *I moved with other people. Those people were my friends whom I made on the way. You don't move alone. We moved as a team. If you moved alone, you would be killed.*

—Male focus group participant, Palorinya settlement

Fellow group members were critical sources of material support, such as food, and non-material support including help in terms of transportation and the provision of directions. Respondents described pooling and sharing food within groups during flight. For example, a woman in Palorinya whose family carried their goats with them when they fled Yei, South Sudan recalled, "We shared the goat meat with others. They were all different people from different counties, and I did not know them, but I shared with them because we were moving together. They also shared with me. If some of them had flour and the other ones had grains, we would gather them all in one place and eat all together."<sup>30</sup>

28 Focus group discussion with men, Palorinya settlement, February 2019.

29 In-depth interview with male research participant, Rhino Camp, November 2018.

30 Focus group discussion with women, Palorinya settlement, February 2019.

Respondents explained that group members also helped each other with transportation, such as by carrying one another's children. One man in Rhino explained that "we came with a group of children, women, and men. The journey took long because my children had to rest frequently. Some people we were moving with were carrying their belongings on bicycles, and when our children had to rest, sometimes they offloaded the luggage and took children on their bicycles instead. It was group movement, not just a few people or one family."<sup>31</sup> In addition, respondents recalled relying on fellow travelers who had fled South Sudan during previous conflicts. For example, a female respondent in Palorinya who initially fled to the DRC before Uganda stated, "I got support in terms of directions from those who knew the route before. That was a good thing I got from people that walked along with us to the Congo, because if you don't know the direction you can easily be caught by the government soldiers and you will be killed."<sup>32</sup> This is an example of how people's social connections may have expanded during displacement and flight in order to incorporate those with specific knowledge or information. In addition, individuals such as repeat refugees may have had specific information that placed them in a position of importance within these evolving networks.

Many research participants emphasized the inclusivity of these ad hoc groups. "We were just walking together as one family without discrimination. We were one big family," said one female refugee in Palorinya.<sup>33</sup> At the same time, respondents did emphasize the need to first establish trust with new acquaintances they met en route, before agreeing to travel together. For example, one young man in Palorinya explained, "When we first met, we would greet each other and ask ourselves questions, like 'where do you come from,' and 'how was the road before you reached here,' and eventually we would know each other, and then we would move together. You never move blindly with others because if he is an enemy, he can turn against you at any time."<sup>34</sup>



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31 In-depth interview with male research participant, Rhino Camp, November 2019.

32 Focus group discussion with women, Palorinya settlement, February 2019.

33 Focus group discussion with women, Palorinya settlement, February 2019.

34 In-depth interview with male research participant, Palorinya settlement, February 2019.

Some respondents, especially those from Equatoria, noted that this inclusivity extended across ethnicities. One man in Rhino Camp recalled that “the people who came with me were not my relatives or friends I knew before. None of them were even my tribe mates, or people from my hometown. We met on the way for the first time, and we shared everything happily along our way to Uganda.”<sup>35</sup> In contrast, another respondent explained how he felt more comfortable in a homogenous group of fellow Nuers whom he met en route, and that their common language facilitated the provision of support between group members. He explained, “On our way to Uganda, I came together with my fellow Nuers. We ate together and told stories. We shared what we had. We met each other on the way to Uganda, and because we used the same language, I knew that they were good people. I had no relation with them, but we just assist each because we are from the same place.”<sup>36</sup> Importantly, our sample did not include members of the Dinka ethnic group, and hence the discussion of ethnic inclusion and/or solidarity misses an important element of the civil conflict.

Respondents explained that groups often dispersed when members were sent to different refugee settlements or blocks after arriving at reception centers in Uganda. As a man in Rhino camp explained, “The only thing that separated us was the UN. After we reached Uganda, we were sent to different blocks [within the camp].”<sup>37</sup> In many cases, however, the social relationships refugees developed during flight withstood these separations and remained important sources of material and non-material support. For example, one man recalled providing financial assistance to another man he fled with, who had remained in the Congo. “Last year my friend in Congo called me and told me that his daughter was sick and was admitted in a clinic and wanted some money for her...I decided to send him the money.”<sup>38</sup> Others explained that they received information and emotional support from those with whom they fled, even when they were not nearby. Referring to the people he met along the way to Uganda, one man said, “they support me in terms of advice, because for me I am somehow disturbed in my mind...I am frustrated until it makes me want to go back to South Sudan and look for a job. The advice that I get from them is not to go back because Uganda is very safe. I wanted to go back to Yei but they advised me not to go back there.”<sup>39</sup>



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In sum, social connections were critical for refugees both before and during their flight to Uganda. Whether or not people had strong connections to those with access to timely and accurate security information could be, quite literally, a matter of life or death. Once on the journey, most people described strong and beneficial connections to others they met en route. These relationships appear to be forged primarily through shared experience, as opposed to through the kinship ties that were of primary importance in communities of origin. We lack adequate details on these experience-based connections to know whether some people were excluded or who was not able to benefit from these informal systems of assistance. Likewise, the analysis indicates that some relationships were fleeting while others endured, but we do not have enough information to know what might—other than circumstance—differentiate these two types of connections. We turn next to the nature of social connections forged, lost, and maintained once in Uganda.

35 Focus group discussion with men, Rhino Camp, February 2019.  
 36 In-depth interview with male research participant, Palorinya settlement, November 2018.  
 37 In-depth interview with male research participant, Palorinya settlement, November 2018.  
 38 Focus group discussion with male research participant, Palorinya settlement, February 2019.  
 39 Focus group discussion with male research participant, Palorinya settlement, February 2019.

# Social connections in Uganda

We now turn to the ways in which, once in Uganda, refugees establish new social connections and how they rely on these connections for both material and non-material support. This section also discusses the gendered differences inherent in establishing new connections, and the ways in which ethnicity appears to function as both a uniting and dividing factor among refugees in Uganda. We also briefly discuss social connectedness in the context of refugee-host community relationships.

## New relationships in Uganda

Refugee respondents in Rhino Camp and Palorinya settlement rely heavily on support from other refugees. These supportive social networks vary and at times overlap, and include relatives, people with connections from home, and people whom they met while fleeing. However, many people report that their immediate neighbors are their most important source of support. At times these are people who arrived in Uganda together and were allocated plots near to each other, but often they were strangers prior to being assigned nearby plots. Across refugee respondents in West Nile, these social connections based on proximity provide critical material and non-material support.

### Non-material support

Respondents describe receiving a great deal of non-material support from those within their social networks. Very often this is in the form of having people to help ease stress through discussion and the knowledge that others have experienced similar hardships and trauma. Numerous respondents discussed the importance of having someone to offer a sympathetic ear. For example, a young woman who took part in a focus group discussion in Palorinya settlement explained:

When I remember my dead beloved ones [who died] during the conflict I started weeping because these terrible memories are still in my mind and defeat my strength...A neighbor came and asked why I was weeping. Sometimes they know what has actually happened and they give me positive pieces of advice. They give courageous words, come frequently and converse with me and then I forget those disturbing memories.<sup>40</sup>



Uganda—Ezra Millstein, Mercy Corps

40 Focus group discussion with female youth, Palorinya settlement, February 2019.

Helping people to move on from the painful memories of the past was frequently cited as an important form of emotional support provided by neighbors. A number of respondents said that while they rarely asked directly for help, neighbors watch out for each other and intervene if someone appears dejected or depressed. For instance, a woman explained that her neighbor could see that she was suffering and came to speak with her. The woman said, “She did not give me anything but her encouraging words and made me feel better about my problems.”<sup>41</sup>

› *There are people who were not brought up in an agricultural mode of life so I am teaching them how to rear goats and how to grow crops on a small scale.*

—Male research participant, Rhino camp

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Advice is another form of non-material support. A man in Rhino Camp explained that “there are people who were not brought up in an agricultural mode of life so I am teaching them how to rear goats and how to grow crops on a small scale.”<sup>42</sup> Informal groups, often of women, provide each other non-material support in a variety of ways. A woman described that she is a member of an informal group of women who travel together when leaving the settlement in order to have better protection against attack.

Numerous respondents described giving or receiving support in the form of labor, including caregiving. This could be occasional assistance, such as when “your neighbor can remain in charge of your home and children when you are travelling to a far place like Arua,”<sup>43</sup> or in response to a crisis within the household, such as “the death of a family member and sickness. We go and help the person who is involved in a problem like that with housework like fetching water and cooking.”<sup>44</sup> People also reported that they receive or provide help in emergencies if they have certain assets that others do not. For instance, a participant in a focus group discussion in Palorinya explained that he had a motorcycle and that he provides transport to the hospital free of charge when someone is sick, even if he does not know them.<sup>45</sup>

Support for livelihood activities is at times reciprocated within social networks. For example, women described providing one another with support in each other’s gardens on a rotating basis. However, respondents also described helping those who lack adequate resources or labor without expectation of reciprocity. For example, young men in a focus group in Palorinya explained, “Sometimes you find elders who came here without any relatives. As youths of this community, we mobilize ourselves to do [what is] needed and to support our people. For example, we go to the forest to collect firewood for building the homes [for these elders].”<sup>46</sup> A man in a different focus group explained that in other instances there could be an exchange of different types of labor:

› *Sometimes you find elders who came here without any relatives. As youths of this community, we mobilize ourselves to do [what is] needed and to support our people. For example, we go to the forest to collect firewood for building the homes [for these elders].*

—Male focus group participant, Palorinya settlement

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41 Focus group discussion with older women, Palorinya settlement, February 2019

42 In-depth interview with male research participant, Rhino camp, November 2018.

43 Focus group discussion with male youth, Palorinya settlement, February 2019.

44 Focus group discussion with middle-aged women, Rhino camp, February 2019.

45 Focus group discussion with middle-aged men, Palorinya settlement, February 2019.

46 Focus group discussion with young men, Palorinya settlement, February 2019.

There are some women here who don't have husbands and need help from us because they are not able to make a shelter or latrine. Sometimes we negotiate and come to an agreement that I build for her and she cuts the grass for me for my roof because I am unable to cut the grass by myself.<sup>47</sup>

Importantly, though most respondents reported widespread sharing of tasks, this view is not universal. As indicated by a male respondent, "There is no support extended unless you pay and hire some laborers to construct the shelter."<sup>48</sup> These variations in experiences may be due to a number of factors, including differences in the composition of social networks or social exclusion, either of which are likely to influence the ability of an individual to both receive and offer support. While many respondents described community relations in the settlements as harmonious and inclusive, others narrated cases of active and passive exclusion based on factors including gender, language, and sometimes ethnicity. We examine the various bases of inclusion and exclusion raised by respondents in a subsequent section of this report.

### **Material Support**

Refugee respondents described in depth the role and nature of material support provided within social networks. The majority of material support is food shared among friends and neighbors. This is much more common than sharing cash, as explained by a woman in Rhino Camp:

We provide ourselves with small support. When I lack food, I can go to [my friends] and ask them to give me [food] and they respond positively if they have [any]. Likewise, when they experience the same, they can come to me asking for support and I give them [food] too. But things like money are not given because there is no money.<sup>49</sup>

These exchanges are most often of humanitarian food aid as opposed to food people buy with their own (limited) funds and are central to how people manage from one food distribution to the next. In most instances, food is 'borrowed' and then repaid following receipt of the next humanitarian ration. A woman in Palorinya described this system:

If your friend comes to borrow something and to refund it back at an agreed time we do [lend]. For example, in the middle of the month before we receive food from WFP, if your friend's food is over you lend her some kilograms of sorghum. She refunds it back when she gets her food. That is how we are managing life here.<sup>50</sup>



Uganda—Ezra Millstein, Mercy Corps

47 Focus group discussion with middle-aged men, Palorinya settlement, February 2019.

48 In-depth interview with male research participant, Palorinya settlement, November 2018.

49 In-depth interview with female research participant, Rhino camp, February 2019.

50 In-depth interview with female research participant, Palorinya settlement, February 2019.

› *When we give we don't expect anything in return. Who knows if tomorrow it will be my turn to ask for help.*

—Male research participant, Palorinya settlement

and does not expect repayment.<sup>51</sup> Many people explained that they help others when they can and, while they don't expect a direct repayment, they do expect to receive help if and when required. At the same time, people are aware of how little everyone has, and that there are times when someone is not able to provide assistance. For example, when asked if her neighbors come to her for help, a woman in Palorinya settlement explained, "Yes, they do always come and if I have anything at hand I definitely give to them. If I have nothing they can understand it."<sup>52</sup> A man in Palorinya explained, "When we give we don't expect anything in return. Who knows if tomorrow it will be my turn to ask for help."<sup>53</sup> However, if someone is believed to be capable of assisting and opts not to, their refusal is likely to damage their social connections. A female respondent in Palorinya explained that such actions "will definitely lead to the collapse of the relationship you have. Because friendship means sharing and helping in times of problems."<sup>54</sup>

Cash is also shared and exchanged, though to a lesser extent than food due to its greater scarcity. Indeed, many respondents explained that since arriving in Uganda, the accessibility of cash has dramatically declined. According to respondents, the most common means of obtaining cash is through the sale of portions of a household's humanitarian food ration to members of the host community, often in order to pay for specific household needs such as school fees, or in order to purchase different foods from local traders as a means of dietary diversification. One respondent estimated that she sells approximately a quarter of her food ration each month for these purposes.<sup>55</sup> Other respondents described intermittently obtaining cash as payment for casual work from NGOs, in exchange for labor from members of the host community, as 'seating allowances' from their participation in NGO-led trainings, or in the form of remittances from social connections in other countries (the topic of remittances is discussed in more detail below).

Sharing can also take place without expectation of repayment. Some respondents explained that they keep an eye upon their neighbors to make sure they are okay, knowing that at times people may hesitate to ask for assistance. A woman in Palorinya explained that if her neighbor doesn't light a fire, she knows that her neighbor has nothing to cook for her family. On these days, she will bring her neighbor some food,



Uganda—Ezra Millstein, Mercy Corps

51 In-depth interview with female research participant, Palorinya settlement, March 2018.  
52 In-depth interview with female research participant, Palorinya settlement, February 2019.  
53 In-depth interview with male research participant, Palorinya settlement, November 2018.  
54 In-depth interview with female research participant, Palorinya settlement, February 2019.  
55 In-depth interview with female research participant, Rhino Camp, March 2018.

Some of the few refugees who have salaries—such as a male respondent who worked for an NGO—explain that they do share their money when they get paid. In this case the sharing appeared to be primarily with relatives and friends, as opposed to with neighbors in need. The respondent explained, “Because I am working [for an NGO], when I get some money, I give my aunt some to go and buy things like salt, soap, shoes and many other materials she wants to buy. I also extend the same support to my friends.”<sup>56</sup> Another individual employed as an agricultural extension worker for an NGO explained that he tries to help the people whom he “came to Uganda with” when he gets paid, by sending them small sums using mobile money.<sup>57</sup> Additionally, a few respondents also described NGO cash transfer programs as a source of cash in the settlements. Notably, respondents explained that cash beneficiaries may experience significant pressure to share large portions of the money they receive with non-recipient relatives and friends. For example, a woman in Palorinya explained that “NGOs do of course give [cash beneficiaries] instructions not to share what has been provided to them, but beneficiaries can face pressure to share sometimes up to half of the money with others who didn’t receive it.”<sup>58</sup>

› *NGOs do of course give [cash beneficiaries] instructions not to share what has been provided to them, but beneficiaries can face pressure to share sometimes up to half of the money with others who didn’t receive it.*

—Female research participant, Palorinya settlement

Despite such examples, overall, there are few people able to share cash and few instances in which such support is requested. This is a marked difference to the regular, almost daily, sharing of small amounts of food among neighboring households. Cash appears to be most often contributed in response to major crises or investment; respondents mentioned asking for and receiving cash to cover the costs of a funeral, travel in response to a death in the family (including back to South Sudan), the purchase of a motorbike, or the hospital fees for a very sick child. The provision of cash for more quotidian needs was not common among refugee respondents. One respondent did report receiving money to cover school fees, but distinguished between the people whom he turns to for this support and those who provide regular in-kind assistance: “When I run out of food my neighbors help me, then sometimes I can call my friends to help me with cash in case I don’t have school fees.”<sup>59</sup> These “friends” appear to be outside of the camp, and, perhaps, to be called upon only for specific purposes.



Uganda—Christopher Schuch for Mercy Corps

56 In-depth interview with male research participant, Palorinya settlement, November 2018.  
57 In-depth interview with male research participant, Palorinya settlement, February 2019.  
58 In-depth interview with female research participant, Palorinya settlement, November 2018.  
59 In-depth interview with male research participant, Palorinya settlement, November 2018

## Gender-specific aspects of social connectedness in Uganda

Women and men have different experiences and challenges when establishing social connections in Uganda. Many women fled South Sudan without male partners and found themselves as the sole providers for their children in the refugee settlements. Challenges experienced by women included limitations of human and financial capital. Some respondents, both male and female, described the specific challenges faced by single women of building shelters in the settlement. Women also faced barriers due to gender norms that govern what is considered acceptable interaction with men in public. For example, a male refugee in Rhino Camp explained that he drove a *boda-boda* [motorcycle taxi], and said that some women either would not ride on a boda or would not be picked up by a male *boda* driver.<sup>60</sup> A woman in Palorinya noted that fewer women than men were able to speak Arabic, the primary shared language among the diverse refugee population, and that this constrained women's social connectedness.<sup>61</sup> Others described the struggle within female-headed households to procure adequate food for their children or to cover expenses such as medical fees. Female respondents also appeared to be less likely than their male counterparts to establish often valuable connections within the host community.<sup>62</sup>

› *We come together like this because some of the women here in the camp commit suicide when they have problems. When we saw that, we said 'let us form a group where we can advise ourselves and share our feelings as women who are having problems.'*

—Female focus group participant, Rhino camp

While women who are unmarried or separated from their husbands face numerous challenges, they may be more adept than men at creating networks of other female refugees, particularly neighbors, who rely on each other for loans of small amounts of food. Female respondents discussed paying attention to the situation of other women and offering support—whether material or emotional—when people are in need. In a focus group discussion in Rhino Camp, women described collecting firewood in a group of single women, and then providing the proceeds from the sale of the wood to one specific group member.

This system worked in rotation and allowed one

woman at a time to meet her family's needs. The women formed the group in response to both economic and emotional needs. As explained by one respondent, "We come together like this because some of the women here in the camp commit suicide when they have problems. When we saw that, we said 'let us form a group where we can advise ourselves and share our feelings as women who are having problems.'"<sup>63</sup>

However, while women may be adept at forming social networks with other women, it can be difficult for single women to ask for assistance or to form relationships with men due to gendered constraints. A woman in Palorinya explained that suspicions of adultery underpinned many of these constraints: "It's very hard for women to approach men to give them support because people may take it differently...When a woman begins to receive support from any man here in the camp, the wife of the man will cause trouble which may lead to violence among the refugee community."<sup>64</sup> She added that only a man who is related by blood to a woman can

60 In-depth interview with male research participant, Rhino camp, November 2018.

61 In-depth interview with female research participant, Palorinya settlement, November 2018.

62 Research in other contexts, including Ethiopia, has examined the implications of gendered social networks and demonstrated that women's networks may "command fewer resources than men's and include more "strong" family and kin relationships that are less valuable than new connections in creating [business] opportunities." See: Campos, Francisco, Adriana Conconi, Aletheia Donald, Marine Gassier, Markus Goldstein, Zenaida Chavez, and Rachel Coleman. 2019. "Profiting from Parity: Unlocking the Potential of Women's Businesses in Africa." World Bank.

63 Focus group discussion with middle-aged women, Rhino camp, February 2019.

64 In-depth interview with female research participant, Palorinya settlement, November 2018.

provide her support without there being trouble. A man in Rhino Camp seconded this, saying, “It’s very difficult for women to go ask for support from men they don’t know...When other women see that particular women asking for help, they begin to suspect that man [of being adulterous]. Many women here in the camp left their husbands behind; it is really very difficult for them to get help from other men here in the camp.”<sup>65</sup> Hence, while women may be able to form supportive connections with other women, they face a range of challenges and obstacles to establishing a broader network and to engaging in a number of livelihood activities.

› *It’s very difficult for women to go ask for support from men they don’t know...When other women see that particular women asking for help, they begin to suspect that man [of being adulterous]. Many women here in the camp left their husbands behind; it is really very difficult for them to get help from other men here in the camp.*

—Male research participant, Rhino camp

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Social norms and capacities may also limit men’s abilities to access particular resources and relationships which are more readily available to women. For example, while female refugees may have limited access to cash, they tend to hold decision-making authority with regards to household food stocks in Uganda, including its allocation and decisions regarding its sale. Similarly, as discussed above, women may be more readily able to rely on others for emotional support in order to process grief and trauma. Thus, the normative, gender-based constraints that affect refugees’ social connectedness in Uganda are complex and affect both men and women in different ways.

In addition to constraints based on gender norms, male respondents also described gender-specific challenges associated with adjusting to life in Uganda. Some men complained of extreme idleness and an erosion of ‘typical’ male roles as providers for their households. A man in a focus group in Palorinya settlement explained, “We don’t do anything here as men, because we have nothing to do. Some of us just drink alcohol and sit without doing anything because we are not citizens of this country.”<sup>66</sup> However, social connections are formed in this leisure time, whether in drinking establishments, tea houses, or over card games. A female respondent described men as being “more flexible than women” in their activities. According to the woman, this flexibility enabled men to converse easily with people, giving them better “access to information, which in turn helps them get more connections and, in some cases, even jobs.”<sup>67</sup> The connections forged through social interactions can be particularly important for male refugees in making ties with host community members, as discussed further below.

### **Inclusion and exclusion as an aspect social connectedness**

A recurrent narrative among refugees in Rhino and Palorinya is of unity. Many respondents discussed the bonding experience of displacement and flight and explained that they were “all South Sudanese” and had to rely on each other. Many of the refugees in the West Nile settlements are members of minority groups from the Equatoria regions of South Sudan, and both Rhino Camp and Palorinya settlements are extremely diverse. The heterogeneous nature of many of the refugee settlements in West Nile differs greatly from the more ethnically segregated settlement pattern in South Sudan. Inter-ethnic relationships have been forged

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65 In-depth interview with male research participant, Rhino camp, November 2018.

66 Focus group discussion with men, Palorinya settlement, February 2019.

67 In-depth interview with female research participant, Palorinya settlement, November 2018.

between neighbors, age-based affinity groups, and in the process of flight. As illustrated by the findings in this study, cooperation and solidarity are central to the systems of mutual and reciprocal support that ensure daily survival. However, the narrative of cohesion and harmony likely masks a more complex social fabric that includes myriad tensions among and between individuals and groups. In addition, and as discussed above, a sense of collective unity is experienced differently by age and gender. The research conducted for this study is not sufficiently in-depth to reveal the extent of such fissures, but the data do include aspects that hint at areas of likely tension.

One area of possible tension relates to who is included or excluded from networks, activities, or support systems. While the initial description was one of broad inclusion, in further discussions some respondents mentioned exclusion along ethnic lines. Exclusion based on ethnicity was, according to respondents, often borne out in the distribution of humanitarian assistance. Ethnicity and corruption overlapped in many of the critiques, whereby a specific ethnic group was said to have engaged in favoritism in doling out assistance to those within their own ethnic group. Aid agencies often hire refugees on short-term contracts to serve as community mobilizers during aid distributions. Respondents explained that community mobilizers of a particular ethnicity frequently work to ensure that members of the same ethnic group are included on beneficiary lists and may divert additional in-kind assistance to their own ethnic group at distributions. As a result, members of the ethnic group in question were said, at the time of our fieldwork, to be intentionally barred from receiving assistance within the community as a sort of collective retribution for perceived corruption. While these complaints were not nearly as widespread as the claims of cross-cutting ethnic unity, the repeated mention of the same ethnic group and circumstances by various respondents implies that this had indeed been a problem.<sup>68</sup>



Uganda—Ezra Millstein, Mercy Corps

68 Notably, various social science studies demonstrate that research subjects are often reluctant to openly acknowledge “socially undesirable” beliefs and practices. Given the strong norms underpinning sharing and inclusivity, this phenomenon, known as social desirability bias, may explain respondents’ frequent insistence of cross-cutting ethnic unity in the settlements. See: Grimm, Pamela. 2010. “Social Desirability Bias.” In *Wiley International Encyclopedia of Marketing*. American Cancer Society.

Other areas of exclusion include language barriers, which, as discussed above, are particularly felt by women who may have fewer language skills than men and hence are less adept at forming social ties across the diverse refugee community. In addition, language barriers overlap with gender to curtail women’s interaction—when compared to their male counterparts—with members of the host community. As discussed below, host community interactions function as an important social connection for those refugees able to forge such ties.

## Relations with host communities

Relations with members of the host community are an important aspect of social connectedness for those refugees able to forge these links. Respondents detailed a variety of material and non-material assets provided through these networks. Material assets included land, employment, food, emergency transportation, and cash for medical or funeral needs. A male respondent in Palorinya spoke of the generosity his family had experienced: “My brother’s wife died and we did not have money to transport her body from the hospital to the place of burial so one of our host community friends gave him 80,000 Ugandan shillings (approximately 21 USD) so he could transport and bury the body.”<sup>69</sup>

At times, Ugandan hosts provide refugees with food or money without expectation of repayment; in other instances there is a reciprocal arrangement. As a young man in Palorinya explained, “When we get our [humanitarian food] ration we give [our friends in the host community] a little food. Then, when their vegetables are ready, they give us free vegetables like okra and sweet potatoes.”<sup>70</sup> Providing a portion of food aid to members of the host

community was common, as gifts, loans, exchanges with hopes of reciprocity, or as a means to an end. For example, a male 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.<sup>71</sup> This and other anecdotes illustrate that not all the power lies with the host community, and that refugees are able to use resources, particularly regular food deliveries, to leverage influence.

Research respondents also explained that they shared and received valuable non-material support with members of the host community, including information about life in the local area. In a focus group discussion in Rhino Camp, a woman explained:

I used to get support from natives in the form of ideas on how they live, survival means, and how they cope in situations where there is no rain to plant crops and poor harvest...Sometimes they can tell us ways of getting water by digging wells inside rift valleys, because one of the biggest challenges here is water.<sup>72</sup>

› *When we get our [humanitarian food] ration we give [our friends in the host community] a little food. Then, when their vegetables are ready, they give us free vegetables like okra and sweet potatoes.*

—Male research participant, Palorinya settlement

69 Focus group discussion with middle-aged men, Palorinya settlement, February 2019.

70 In-depth interview with male research participant, Palorinya settlement, February 2019.

71 In-depth interview with male research participant, Palorinya settlement, February 2019.

72 Focus group discussion with middle-aged women, Rhino Camp, February 2019.

Another male respondent explained that he was unable to get a Ugandan phone number because he did not have identity documents, and that a Ugandan national had registered for a number on his behalf. Having this number allowed the refugee to keep in touch with his family back home.<sup>73</sup>

The refugees most likely to have social connections with members of the host community appear to be men, especially those who experienced previously displacement to Uganda. These South Sudanese are more likely to speak a local language, such as Kakwa or Ma'di, and to have pre-existing social ties with people in the local community. One refugee in Palorinya had lived in the same area when he was a refugee as a boy; his father had been a minister and was well-known among the local population. This history was useful in enabling the refugee to secure a large portion of fertile farmland from a local landowner, and he had a successful farming operation which employed both Ugandans and South Sudanese workers.<sup>74</sup> As mentioned earlier, men have more regular contact with members of the host population than do female refugees. These interactions take place in markets, drinking establishments, tea shops, and elsewhere. One respondent explained that he had forged a relationship with the local elected leader (local chairman), which he felt was a valuable source of status and protection (from local harassment). They became friends over time by “just meeting around the market.”<sup>75</sup> This amount of leisure time in markets and ease of interaction would be much harder for a woman to come by. However, ties are also forged by intermarriage between host and refugee families, which built connections across both gender and generations.

Overall, the respondents describe success at forging new social connections among fellow refugees and, to a lesser extent, with members of the host community. Gender is an important determinant of the nature and utilization of these connections. Respondents’ new social networks are a critical source of material and non-material support; material support is given both out of altruism and expected reciprocity, depending on the nature of the need, relationship, and context. We can assume that many of these relationships and social



Uganda—Ezra Millstein, Mercy Corps

73 In-depth interview with male research participant, Palorinya settlement, February 2019.  
74 In-depth interview with male research participant, Palorinya settlement, March 2018.  
75 In-depth interview with male research participant, Palorinya settlement, November 2018.

connections mirror those that existed in communities of origin in South Sudan in terms of exchange, support, and differences by gender. A key difference is the predominance of proximity and experience rather than kinship and clan as the basis of refugees' social connectedness in Uganda. In the West Nile refugee settlements, people are forging ties based on their experiences during flight and after their arrival in Uganda. Support networks, particularly among women, are based not on kin, but on proximity.

In sum, humanitarian food aid is the primary form of exchange within the social networks in the refugee settlement. Respondents frequently described inclusive and cross-ethnic social networks (among the minority groups from the Equatoria region), although this may belie tensions, particularly relating to the distribution of humanitarian assistance. Men were more likely than women to have relationships with members of the host community, and some respondents were adept at bartering for access to assets controlled by the hosts, such as land.



Uganda—Ezra Millstein, Mercy Corps

## Cross-border connections

This section discusses the connections that refugees in West Nile maintain or do not maintain with those in South Sudan. The respondents in this study largely expressed a desire to return to South Sudan, though many remained reluctant to do so due to the ongoing violence in the Equatoria region at the time of the interviews. They could not anticipate with any certainty when they would be able to return. In this context, respondents overwhelmingly spoke of the importance of communication with relatives back home. The insecurity and associated displacement splintered families. Many people fled rapidly and in different directions, settled in different locations, and moved multiple times following the initial displacement.

### Communication by phone

Phone contact is the primary means by which respondents learned of the well-being of their relatives; this occurs through personal or borrowed mobile phones and, occasionally, public phones set up by ICRC to facilitate such communication. Those who are in touch with relatives back home describe speaking to them as often as possible, whether monthly, weekly, or even daily. A male respondent in a focus group discussion in Rhino Camp explained that the upheaval and uncertainty in South Sudan made communication particularly important:

It is very important to me because they are my parents, family always comes first. I have to be in touch with them to know about their situation...about daily changes in their lives because of fighting and killing happening back in South Sudan.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>76</sup> Focus group discussion with middle-aged men, Rhino Camp, February 2019.

However, numerous obstacles existed to regular contact. These included losing contact information, not having a Ugandan phone number, not having the money for phone credit, and the collapse of the South Sudanese mobile network for extended periods in certain areas.<sup>77</sup> If a relative relocated or changed numbers during one of these periods, people were unable to re-establish contact. Many respondents discussed the deep emotional distress caused by not knowing how their loved ones were doing or even where they were living. A woman in Rhino Camp explained that her connection to those back home “was lost completely” and said:

I am missing them and always thinking about them all the time and I guess they also think about me. When I remember the good times we had with them I feel like going back to look for them... Even my brother has disappeared with his children, and up to now I am looking for them, but I don't find any means of meeting them.<sup>78</sup>

The sense of helplessness expressed by this respondent was common among people who had lost their connections to those back home. Although situations vary from one respondent to the next, it seemed that many feared that the lack of contact meant that their relative had been killed. In contrast, hearing that someone was safe was a source of great relief to respondents.

## Material exchanges

The data for this study include accounts of material support exchanged within social and kinship networks both to and from South Sudan.<sup>79</sup> Funds coming from South Sudan into refugee households in West Nile are most often from relatives with jobs in Juba with NGOs or with the government. However, since the start of the conflict, the South Sudanese pound has depreciated greatly in comparison to the Ugandan shilling, and hence it is primarily those receiving salaries in United States dollars who are able to remit sufficient amounts. This money flows through different exchange mechanisms, including licensed money transfer operators or trust-based informal hawala-style systems,<sup>80</sup> but there are very few exchange offices in the refugee camps. Mobile money is expanding, but many of the agents lack liquidity. Therefore, recipients of remittances in the refugee settlements must usually pay the high cost of transport to Arua or Moyo towns in order to receive the funds.



Uganda—Ezra Millstein, Mercy Corps

77 Three of the main mobile providers in South Sudan, Zain, MTN and Vivacell, experienced financial difficulties following the intensification of fighting in 2016. There were also reports of damage to infrastructure and lack of fuel to run the transponders. See <https://radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/ikotos-authority-complains-over-lack-of-mtn-network>. The collapse of the cell network was sporadic and intermittent, with some areas losing coverage for months at a time and others experiencing outages of a few weeks. Zain reportedly limited coverage to major towns, such as Bor, Juba, and Yei, while allowing other areas to go without service. See <https://www.telegeography.com/products/commsupdate/articles/2016/08/30/zain-scales-back-operations-to-survive-south-sudan-crisis/>.

78 In-depth conversation with female respondent, Rhino Camp, February 2019.

79 There are also those among the refugee population receiving support from relatives living in third countries. These people, especially those with family members in western countries, are said to be significantly better off. None of the study participants reported receiving remittances from these locations.

80 UNHCR, “Uganda country assessment on affordable and accessible remittances for forcibly displaced persons and host communities.” June 2018. Available at: <https://responsiblefinanceforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/88713.pdf>. Hawala is a generic term to describe a system in which local agents help customers transfer money between two points. The hawala is typically unregulated and is a side-business of traders and merchants.

Goods, most often food items, also flow to South Sudan from Uganda. Select items—such as maize and sorghum at the time of our field work—were cheaper in Uganda than in South Sudan.<sup>81</sup> Refugees who were better off, such as those with businesses in towns, may send food north into South Sudan, especially if they have relatives living in the Protection of Civilian (PoC) sites.<sup>82</sup> Some who live in camps also allocate a portion of their monthly ration for relatives back home who

are struggling. While most people denied having the means to provide such support, a woman in Palorinya reported that it is a relatively common practice: “There are many people who send their families food stuff from here. Most people send cooking oil and beans...Since I came here, my husband [in South Sudan] has not sent anything to us. I have been the one catering for him.”<sup>83</sup> A South Sudanese trader in Koboko explained the practicalities of these exchanges: each month he puts his sister’s name and phone number on a parcel of food and sends it to Juba via bus or lorry. The driver calls his sister upon arrival and she picks up the food.<sup>84</sup> The system of sending food north operates entirely on trust. Respondents said that they would go to a bus or lorry driver they had used before if they saw him, but would also readily approach strangers to carry their items.

Within the study population, the cross-border exchanges described above were the exceptions as opposed to the norm. Many respondents neither receive nor send assistance of any kind due to lack of means or few social connections past their immediate neighbors or relatives within the camp. Most of the refugee participants in the study population were struggling to make ends meet and living from one humanitarian food distribution to the next, with small-scale exchanges within local social networks. A male respondent in a focus group discussion in Rhino Camp said, “The food rations we receive on a monthly basis are not enough—only 12 Kgs of maize. This is the only thing we have access to. We could not share with them [back home].”<sup>85</sup>

As noted elsewhere in this report, many of the respondents in Rhino and Palorinya settlements were among the last to flee their home areas in South Sudan. This was due in part to having limited or poor information about the conflict, but also—and relatedly—to having few resources, including both financial wealth and

» *Its only me and the person who is sent the money who know. We keep it a secret, so others won't know anything. If you expose that you have money, you would be robbed by thieves.*

—Male interviewee, Palorinya settlement

» *There are many people who send their families food stuff from here. Most people send cooking oil and beans...Since I came here, my husband [in South Sudan] has not sent anything to us. I have been the one catering for him.*

—Female focus group participant, Palorinya settlement

social connections. This same set of limited assets shapes their experiences in West Nile, and these respondents are unlikely to have family members working in Juba or elsewhere who are able to provide financial support. However, respondents may also be reluctant to disclose that they receive cash remittances. A young man in Palorinya settlement who has a Ugandan cell phone said that he was regularly asked by fellow refugees to accept mobile

81 Prices were also less prone to fluctuations in Uganda than in South Sudan. Food Security and Nutrition Working Group (FSNWG), “East Africa Crossborder Trade Bulletin,” Volume 21, April 2018.

82 As of November 2019, over 190,000 IDPs resided in South Sudan’s six Protection of Civilian sites (PoCs) within the confines of UN Peacekeeping bases across the country. The UN initially viewed the PoCs as short-term responses to the dire need for civilian protection upon the eruption of a conflict that observers hoped would be short-lived. However, in the six years since the outbreak of this crisis in South Sudan, the PoCs have become semi-permanent communities, home to tens of thousands of civilians and vast, complex and unique economies.

83 Focus group discussion with middle-aged women, Palorinya settlement, February 2019.

84 In-depth interview, South Sudanese trader, Koboko, March 2018.

85 Focus group discussion with elderly men, Rhino Camp, February 2019.

transfers from relatives in South Sudan. We asked if there were any tensions around the receipt of remittances, and he explained that this information was kept private: “Its only me and the person who is sent the money who know. We keep it a secret, so others won’t know anything. If you expose that you have money, you would be robbed by thieves.”<sup>86</sup> However, as described by young men in a focus group, there were other ways to tell who was receiving remittances, especially in larger amounts:

People who receive money from the USA and Canada don’t show it, but we just hear from others who they sometimes disclose their secrets to. Also [there are] ways their life styles change—such as wearing good clothes and eating good food. Sometimes they take their children to expensive schools, which shows that they are living a better life compared to the other people who are not getting any sort of support here in the refugee camp.<sup>87</sup>

› *It’s very hard for wealthy people to give support [in the form of cash] to their community, unless you know someone, then that person will give you loans. But back home [in South Sudan], the wealthy could support people any time they wanted.*

—Male interviewee, Palorinya settlement

Refugees’ desires to conceal information about the receipt of remittances may also stem from an overall reluctance to share cash outside of one’s immediate family or kinship network. Although respondents’ reluctance to discuss cash means that the data are lacking, we hypothesize that cash may have heightened value in the context of the uncertainty of displacement, and hence be more important to hold onto.<sup>88</sup> Indeed, while the exchange of food and other material and non-material support among refugees within the camps is reportedly widespread, cash does not appear to flow in the same manner. In terms

of a change brought on by displacement, respondents felt that those who were ‘wealthy’ were less likely to share with others in the camp than they had been in South Sudan. A young woman in Palorinya said that the wealthy in the settlement “only supported their relatives,” whereas “back home in South Sudan, the wealthy households always gave support to anybody in the community, not their family alone.”<sup>89</sup> A male respondent in Rhino Camp supported this opinion: “It’s very hard for wealthy people to give support [in the form of cash] to their community, unless you know someone, then that person will give you loans. But back home [in South Sudan], the wealthy could support people any time they wanted.”<sup>90</sup>



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86 In-depth interview, male youth, Palorinya settlement, February 2019.

87 Focus group discussion with male youth, Palorinya settlement, February 2019.

88 Notably, as discussed in other installments in the Currency of Connections series, respondents in the Protection of Civilian (PoC) site in Bentiu, South Sudan similarly described frequently sharing various forms of material and non-material support across clan lines but described a reluctance to share cash. They explained that this was often because of the perception that cash was uniquely valuable and difficult to come by in the context of displacement and uncertainty about the future. See: Krystalli, Roxani, Elizabeth Stites, Alex Humphrey, and Vaidehi Krishnan. 2019. “The Currency of Connections: The Establishment and Reconfiguration of Informal Livelihood Groups in Bentiu, South Sudan.” Mercy Corps.

89 In-depth interview, female, Palorinya settlement, November 2018.

90 In-depth interview, male, Rhino Camp, November 2018.

When asked why this change might have occurred, respondents largely agreed that the uncertainty of the duration of the conflict in South Sudan combined with the extent of need among refugees made those who had money hesitant to give too generously, especially to non- relatives. In addition, while respondents often emphasized refugees’ willingness to share certain forms of support across ethnic lines, some indications suggest that this may be less true in the case of cash. In South Sudan people normally lived among members of their clan or sub-clan, and hence any sharing was within a cohesive social network. As a male respondent in Palorinya put it, “here in Palorinya we are mixed tribes, whereby the people that are socially connected to you from before are too far from you.”<sup>91</sup> The uncertainty of conflict and the dispersal of pre-existing social networks means that cash is kept close at hand by the few within camps who may have or receive it.

In sum, this section illustrates the continued importance of cross-border social connectedness following displacement from country of origin. Not knowing the fate of loved ones is, not surprisingly, a particular emotional challenge for those who fled extreme violence and political upheaval. People who are in touch with family members prioritize remaining in contact and most described speaking by phone as often as possible. Those who are able, engage in cross-border exchange of food or cash, with goods moving in both directions via established, trust-based networks of transporters and money changers.



Uganda—Ezra Millstein, Mercy Corps

91 In-depth interview, male, Palorinya settlement, November 2018.

## Key Findings and Recommendations

**Social networks can serve as conduits for information. When this information is timely and accurate, it may allow people to make informed decisions about when and where to flee.** Being able to make informed and calculated decisions may limit the loss of life, livelihoods, and assets and thereby improve recovery. However, a variety of factors shape social networks and determine who is or is not included. The nature of these networks in turn affects the flow of information and means that information may reach some people but not others, even within the same communities. Many respondents in Palorinya and Rhino Camp settlements fled their homes at the last minute, often with few or no possessions, resulting in separation of families, loss of assets, and, often, death of family and community members. Some respondents explained that they had witnessed or been aware of other people in their area leaving earlier or making advance preparations to depart, such as sending women and children to Uganda or strategically relocating assets. In contrast, those who left later said that they were not privy to direct information about the conflict, the spreading insecurity, or the situation in Uganda; in other words, they lacked the social connections required to receive this critical information and take proactive measures to ensure their relative safety.

- › **Recommendation: Aid actors should disseminate conflict early warning data locally, through existing social networks and through information channels that are accessible to socially isolated groups.** Many households rely on their social networks for information about safety and protection in the midst of escalating violence. This reliance on own networks has implications for how humanitarian aid actors design and utilize conflict early warning systems. A common critique of these systems is that they are hierarchical and usually share information vertically to elite policy actors but not necessarily to conflict-affected communities.<sup>92</sup> As a result, early warning mechanisms may not translate into tangible civilian protection outcomes.<sup>93</sup> An understanding that potentially lifesaving information flows first and foremost through informal social networks points to the importance of disseminating early warning data locally and horizontally to the extent possible. Aid actors should aim for saturation of channels in the dispersal of conflict early warning information to ensure as broad and inclusive a reach as possible. Particular attention should be paid to the local context of vulnerability and how to reach groups likely to be marginalized due to location, cultural norms, ethnic dynamics, gender relations, and socio-economic status. These conduits could include, in addition to standard early warning committees, radio broadcasts, religious leaders, youth leaders, female representatives, respected elders, and local traders, among others.<sup>94</sup> Information should be shared in approachable and culturally appropriate formats.

### **Displacement destroys social connections, but refugees strategically build and leverage new ones.**

The Refugee respondents in West Nile settlements have experienced extreme social upheaval as a result of conflict and displacement. They were separated from their communities, their leaders, and their immediate and extended family members, many of whom were killed or disappeared during the conflict. Despite this fragmenting of the social order, respondents described strategic efforts to forge and leverage new connections during flight and after arriving in Uganda. Refugees built trust with and offered and received support from people they fled with, even when these people were strangers from different locations, clans or sub-clans. Refugee respondents described peer psycho-social support as being among the most important forms of support that they rely on from other refugees. While the fluid nature of mass migration means that some of these

92 Langberg, S. 2013. "Localized Early Warning Systems: From Natural Disasters to Human Security, Leveraging a People-Centered Protection Network." *The Sentinel Project for Genocide Prevention, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.*

93 Rohwerder, Brigitte. 2015. "Conflict Early Warning and Early Response." GSDRC *Applied Knowledge Services*, 1–13.

94 For more on this model: Rupasinghe, Kumar. 2009. "FCE Citizen-Based Early Warning and Early Response System: A New Tool for Civil Society to Prevent Violent Conflict." *Colombo, Sri Lanka: Foundation for Co-Existence*, 12.

relationships proved temporary, many respondents established lasting bonds with those with whom they fled. These new social connections may serve to assist refugees' coping, recovery, and resilience.

- › **Recommendation: Aid actors should take concrete steps to support, and at the very least not undermine, relationships that refugees forge during displacement.** This could include encouraging refugees of diverse backgrounds to come together at events such as trade fairs, extension programs, livelihood trainings, or NGO-supported VSLA meetings. The informal exchanges at such gatherings would allow refugees to forge new social connections and share information and advice regarding livelihood activities, host community relations, and conditions in South Sudan. Additionally, these gatherings might have psychosocial benefits for their participants, which respondents explained are among the most significant aspects of their social relationships in the settlements. As part of such gathering, aid actors could consider offering context-specific and culturally-relevant mental-health and psychosocial wellbeing (MHPSS) interventions, such as dramatizations and group-based discussions. A review of multiple studies and literature on MHPSS programs in a variety of contexts finds positive impacts for children, youth and adults.<sup>95</sup>

**The inclusion of local stakeholders in the allocation and distribution of assistance is critical to ensuring community ownership and sustainability of aid interventions. However, local hiring and appointments must be managed inclusively in order to prevent skewed power and authority dynamics which can drive social tensions.** Overall, respondents in the heterogeneous settlements of Rhino Camp and Palorinya spoke of relative unity across ethnic and linguistic lines, though this is unlikely to be representative of the experiences of all refugees. The instances in which respondents did admit to social tensions or exclusion along group lines often overlapped with the distribution of food aid and allocation of positions of authority. While it was not possible to verify details, allegations of ethnic exclusion in aid allocation illustrate the ways in which aid resources flow through specific social networks to the benefit of some and the exclusion of others.

- › **Recommendation: ensure that local hiring practices take into account the potential for resulting social tensions.** Hiring and appointments, including to volunteer positions, should consider power dynamics within and across groups and strive for balance and equity. By ensuring ethnically inclusive local recruitment and affirmatively hiring from within minority groups, aid actors might minimize exacerbation of social tensions. Doing so is also likely to reduce the prevalence of actual or perceived corruption and ethnic favoritism during aid distributions. Aid actors should proactively follow up with minority groups and others likely to be marginalized as part of post-distribution monitoring efforts to ensure that aid was allocated as intended.

**Refugees rely on food aid not only for nutritional support, but also to maintain and establish strategic social connections.** The role of food aid as an important resale commodity to generate cash, to allow for acquisition of non-food items and, often, to support broader markets is well known.<sup>96</sup> However, this study illustrates that sharing food aid also has important social functions. Refugees, particularly female food-preparers, share small amounts of food aid with other households on a regular and recurring basis. Some of these transfers are based on an expectation of reciprocity while others are purely altruistic. In addition, food aid serves as an important means through which people build new relationships, including with host communities. Refugees may also exchange food aid strategically, to enable access to future benefits. For instance, some refugees provide a portion of their rations to members of the local community and are repaid with fresh vegetables at the time of harvest. One entrepreneurial male respondent offered regular gifts of food aid to the

95 Mukdarut, Bangpan, Anna Chiumento, Kelly Dickson, and Lambert Felix. 2017. "The Impact of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Interventions on People Affected by Humanitarian Emergencies: A Systematic Review." Oxfam; Feinstein International Center; UKAID.

96 Buchanan-Smith, M., and S. Jaspars, 2007, "Conflict, camps and coercion: the ongoing livelihoods crisis in Darfur," *Disasters* 31 (S1): S57-S76

host community in the months before he requested access to land for farming. These examples illustrate both the agency of refugees and the ways in which food aid, when provided regularly, can become an important social commodity that allows recipients to build ties that potentially contribute to future resilience and livelihood strategies.

- › **Recommendation: When considering the phasing of types of assistance, aid actors should seek to ensure continuity in households' abilities to share food as a means of maintaining and building strategic social connections.** Promoting self-reliance should remain a priority for donors and aid actors. However, ending or reducing in-kind food assistance before households are equipped to pursue sustainable livelihoods may inadvertently undermine refugees' social connections and related local support systems, which are currently based on the sharing of food aid. When conducting food security and resilience assessments, aid actors should consider collecting information about whether households share food with others, and if so, the source of the food they share. Recipients may be reluctant to openly acknowledge sharing portions of their food rations out of concern that aid agencies might in turn reduce or terminate their benefits. As a result, this information should be collected with sensitivity and triangulated to the extent possible. This information should inform aid actors' decisions regarding the adjustments to the provision of in-kind assistance.

**Bidirectional cash and in-kind remittances flow between Uganda and South Sudan through established networks of trust.** Significant research exists on remittances in the context of humanitarian crises, and aid actors are increasingly seeking to leverage remittances in programming and as an alternative means of financing recovery.<sup>97</sup> However, existing research on this topic has overwhelmingly focused on cash remittances sent to crisis-affected populations from “outside” of emergency zones, most often from members of the diaspora residing in more developed countries. Conversely, refugee respondents frequently explained that remittances, both cash and in-kind, sent between conflict-affected populations—in this case, refugees in Uganda and their connections in South Sudan—are more common sources of support for refugees in the West Nile settlements. Indeed, refugees described receiving cash remittances from friends and relatives in South Sudan who were paid regular salaries. In other cases, refugees described sending material remittances, usually in the form of food, to their social connections who remained in South Sudan. In both cases, the transmission of remittances relied upon established networks of trust. While the prominence of “local” remittances may be explained in part by the fact that the South Sudanese diaspora residing in developed countries is relatively small, this finding nonetheless challenges the dominant characterizations of remittances as cash sent from afar to vulnerable and passive recipients in crisis-affected contexts.<sup>98</sup>

- › **Recommendation: When assessing household resilience, aid actors should account for remittances sent between conflict-affected populations, both in the form of cash and in-kind goods.** These transfers, which rely on relationships of trust, may be strong indicators of a household's ability to leverage social networks, for both material support and for information, advice, and other important non-material assistance. Accounting for “local” remittances sent between conflict-affected populations, including food and other in-kind goods, may therefore be an important step towards comprehensively understanding household resilience capacities. However, additional research is required in order to identify the extent of “local” remittances in the West Nile settlements, and the channels through which in kind goods flow.

97 Bryant, John. 2019. “Remittances in Humanitarian Crises.” Overseas Development Institute.

98 Data on the size of the South Sudanese diaspora is limited, and researchers often rely on migration stock data as an imperfect proxy. The World Bank's Global Knowledge Partnership on Migration and Development (KNOMAD) estimates that the South Sudanese migrant population at 759,000. Comparatively, the Somali migrant population is estimated at 1.92 million. See: “Emigration | KNOMAD.” n.d. Accessed January 8, 2020. <https://www.knomad.org/data/migration/emigration>.

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### About Mercy Corps

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



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