INFORMAL SOCIAL PROTECTION NETWORKS & RESILIENCE IN CONFLICT-AFFECTED CONTEXTS

Lessons from South Sudan and Yemen

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Introduction

Why do informal social protection networks matter for households in conflict-affected contexts?

Studies from a variety of contexts make clear that much of the assistance that crisis-affected households and individuals receive does not come from international aid agencies or governments, but rather from their own networks: neighbors, friends, relatives, and in some cases broader groupings of kin such as clans or ethnic groups.[1] In the face of a disaster, households' social connections and the resources available through their own networks are central to their capacity to endure and recover.[2] Local networks are often better able to quickly coordinate disaster response and post-disaster recovery than formal aid actors.[3] Whether the crisis is a natural disaster or man-made, informal social protection networks are powerful sources of resilience.[4] Indeed, much of the evidence base points to a reality in which communities are often their own first responders during and following crises.[5]

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1 Kim et al. (2022); Kim et al. (2020); Maxwell et al. (2016); Anderson et al. (2012); Greene et al. (2021); South et al. (2012); Dunlop & Ellina (2018).
2 Fontana (2020).
3 Aldrich & Meyer (2015); Wall & Hedlund (2016); Saferworld & Save the Children (2020).
4 USAID Center for Resilience (2018).
5 Aldrich (2012); Antequisa & Corbett (2018); Corbett et al. (2021); South et al. (2010); Berry & Reddy (2010).

> **Informal social protection** refers broadly to the "care and support...provided to family, community, and group members through social structures and social networks."[6] These networks may include international diasporas that maintain close links with home communities, but they may also be highly localized and cut-off from outside sources of support. It co-occurs alongside *formal* social protection—external interventions that are designed to help individuals and households cope with poverty, destitution, and vulnerability—but also in its absence. In protracted crises where formal governance structures are weak to non-existent, people rely heavily on informal social protection measures to get by.

However, to date, aid actors have paid little attention to the ways in which external assistance may either strengthen or undermine informal social protection networks. Despite the growing recognition of the critical role played by informal support systems and calls for more localized approaches to aid, the aid community continues to operate in ways that are largely externally designed and divorced from locally-led support networks. The aid community is currently contending with unprecedented need, funding gaps, and the compounding threats of climate change, conflict, and COVID-19. In this context, leveraging and strengthening informal support systems is an untapped opportunity and resilience imperative for aid actors to maximize impact, as they look to do more with less. The cost of continuing to do business as usual is too high to ignore. Working with and through informal support networks provide critical opportunities for aid actors to more effectively program their responses, particularly in complex environments like South Sudan and Yemen. However, there remains a limited understanding of how aid actors can work to strengthen informal support systems in their mandate.

SYNTHESIS OBJECTIVES

In this synthesis, we draw on two studies conducted to offer key lessons and recommendations for aid actors to better account for and help strengthen informal support networks. In South Sudan and Yemen, respectively, *The Currency of Connections* research initiative and *Sharing to Survive* study investigated the following research questions:[7]

1. **What is the nature of informal social protection networks in protracted crises? How have conflict and displacement affected these networks?**

2. **What role do these networks play in households' ability to cope and survive in the face of shocks and stresses?**

3. **How do external interventions interact with local systems of coping and recovery?**

While much work remains to assess how effectively the proposed recommendations work to leverage and strengthen informal support systems, they offer promising entry points for the aid community.

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6   [Calder & Tanhchareun. (2014)](#), p.4.
7   The studies also examined household- and community-level factors that determined the relationships people were able to form and the types of support they are able to share and receive through their connections. Due to the highly contextualized findings, we exclude this discussion from the synthesis but refer readers to *Currency of Connections* ([Kim et al. (2020)](#)) and *Sharing to Survive* ([Kim et al. (2022)](#)) reports for more information.

Figure 1: *Currency of Connections* Research Sites, South Sudan and Uganda
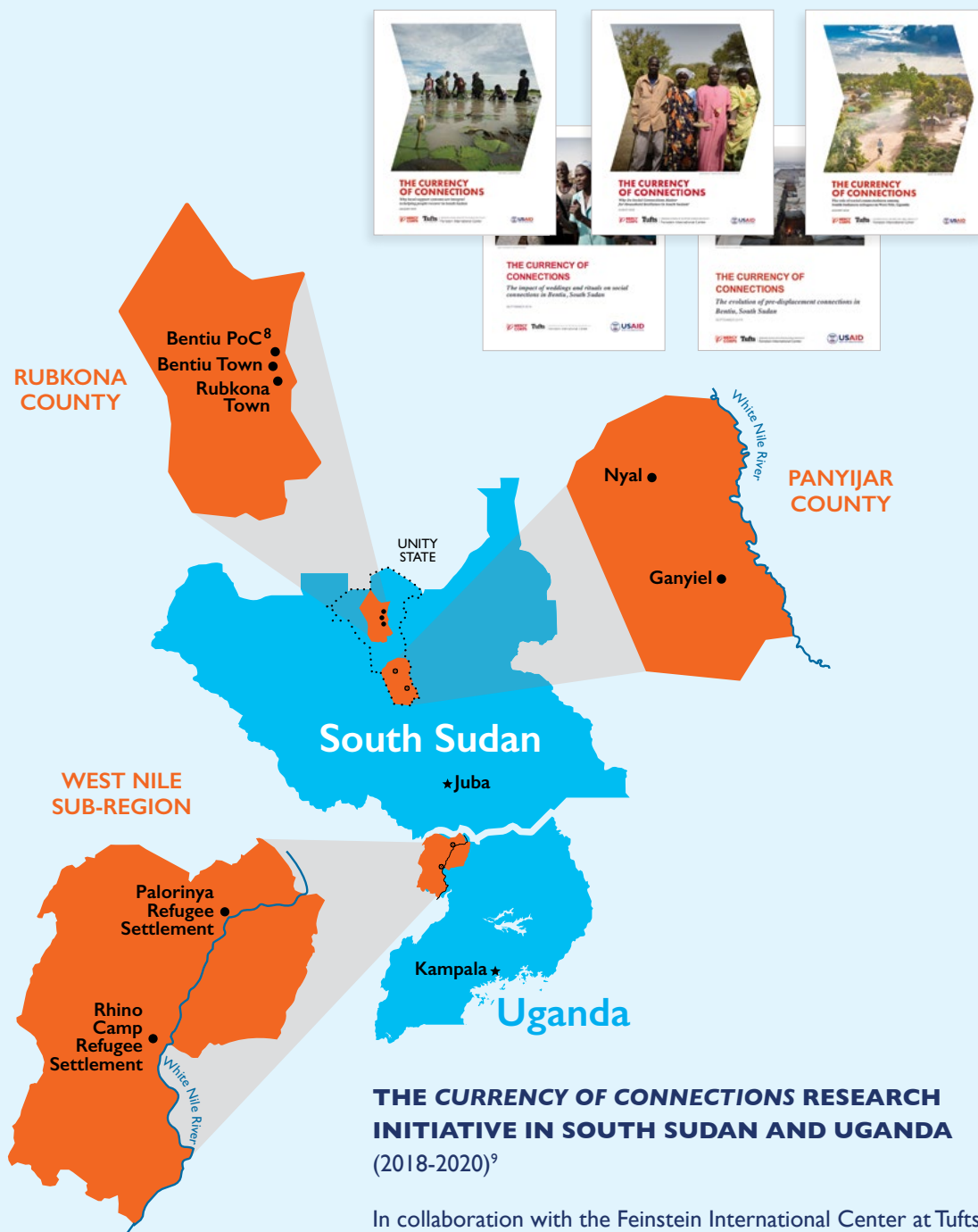
THE *CURRENCY OF CONNECTIONS* RESEARCH INITIATIVE IN SOUTH SUDAN AND UGANDA (2018-2020)[9]

In collaboration with the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University, Mercy Corps employed a mixed methods study design to investigate the research questions in Unity State, South Sudan and West Nile, Uganda. Panel surveys, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions were conducted with nearly 2000 respondents from diverse conflict and displacement settings.

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8   The Bentiu Protection of Civilian (PoC) site in Rubkona County was established in December 2013, when conflict broke out in South Sudan. 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 nine 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. Between 2020 and 2021, the UN Mission in South Sudan gradually reassigned peacekeepers from the PoC sites, **transitioning the Bentiu PoC into a camp for internally displaced persons**, with management authority handed over to the government of South Sudan.

9   This study was supported by USAID's Humanitarian Policy and Global Engagement Division from 2017-2019.
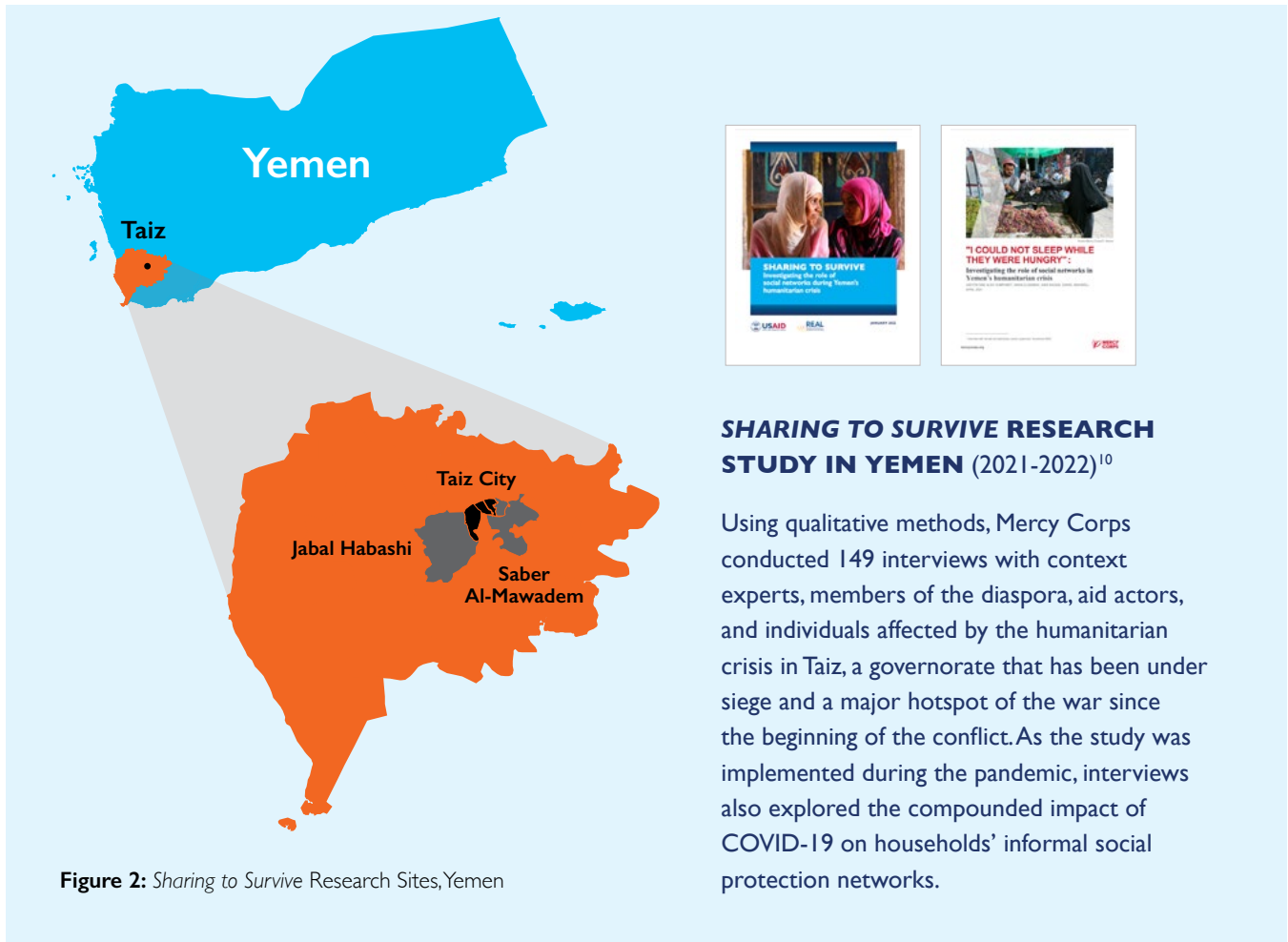
Figure 2: *Sharing to Survive* Research Sites, Yemen

***SHARING TO SURVIVE* RESEARCH STUDY IN YEMEN** (2021-2022)[10]

Using qualitative methods, Mercy Corps conducted 149 interviews with context experts, members of the diaspora, aid actors, and individuals affected by the humanitarian crisis in Taiz, a governorate that has been under siege and a major hotspot of the war since the beginning of the conflict. As the study was implemented during the pandemic, interviews also explored the compounded impact of COVID-19 on households' informal social protection networks.

We organize the synthesis around three key evidence-based lessons for aid actors to better account for and strengthen informal support networks. For each lesson, we cite examples from South Sudan and Yemen and corresponding recommendations for the aid community. While the synthesized findings and recommendations are from research conducted in South Sudan and Yemen, they are broadly relevant to other contexts similarly affected by protracted crises. Moreover, while both studies were conducted in emergency contexts where humanitarian assistance dominates the aid landscape, insights and recommendations remain wholly relevant for the broader aid community grappling with how best to design and implement longer-term interventions in protracted crisis settings.

Lesson #1

Measure informal social protection networks as a key outcome and trigger indicator.

To date, considerations of informal social protection networks have had little bearing on models of delivery or community engagement strategies employed by the aid community. When there is acknowledgement of these networks, discussions are often rooted in assumptions and anecdotes rather than analysis—leading at times to an unrealistically optimistic view of social solidarity in the context of protracted crises. To ensure that efforts to bolster resilience do not inadvertently compromise the very strategies that crisis-affected households rely on to cope and survive or reinforce existing exclusionary dynamics, the aid community must move beyond assumptions and work to better understand the nature and extent of informal support networks.

The international community does not know about the social puzzle that we live in.

— Female humanitarian worker, Taiz, Yemen

KEY FINDINGS

The breadth and depth of informal social protection networks, as well as the types of support and the norms governing them, are unique and context specific. In times of need, households rely on their informal social connections to mobilize a variety of resources, including food, money, labor, shelter, information about livelihood opportunities, emotional support, and advice (**Figure 3**). This tradition, which long predates aid actors' arrival, is often rooted in social and religious norms. Households rely on various types of social connections for support. In Yemen, participants largely turn to connections based on kinship, place of origin, place of residence, political affiliations, or those with whom they are casually acquainted to mobilize support. In South Sudan, we found that households' social connections

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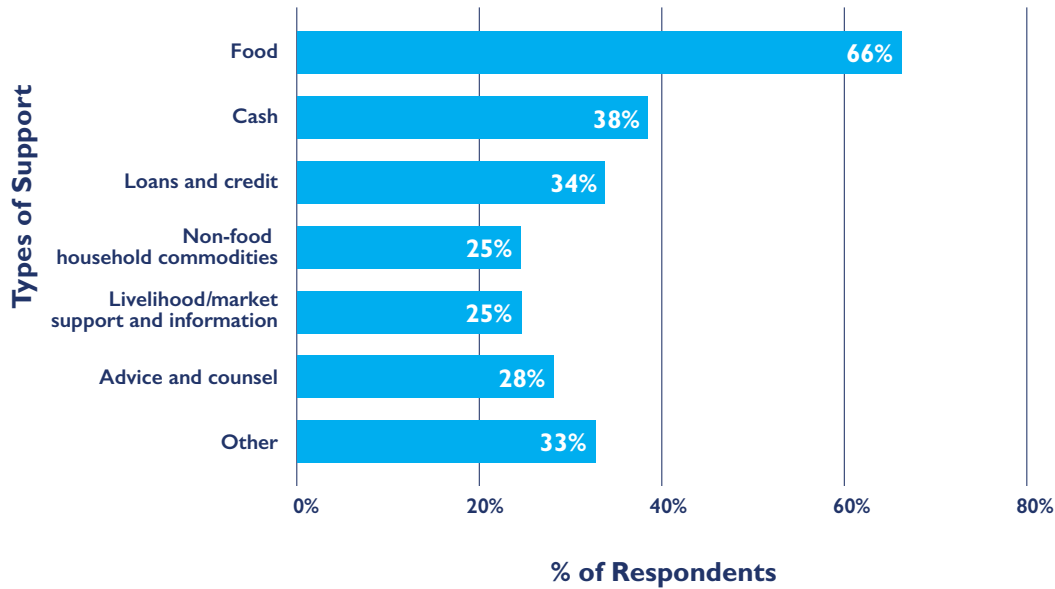

Figure 3: Types of Support Received from Social Connections, South Sudan (n 929)[11]

Informal social protection networks become especially important during crises and help to mitigate the effects of deterioration of humanitarian conditions for households. In conflict and displacement, the resources mobilized through one's social networks are essential to households' ability to cope and survive. They facilitate households' ability to stave off hunger, seek safe passage and refuge, and recover from conflict-related injuries. In South Sudan, we also found a robust positive quantitative association between households' social connectedness and their food security: households that were better socially connected were more likely to consume a diverse diet.[12] As productive livelihoods have collapsed, many households in South Sudan have become exclusively dependent on food aid. This aid is generally delivered as a single staple, usually sorghum. Households turn to their social connections, especially those who have continued to practice specific livelihoods during the course of the crisis (e.g. fishing, trading), to access more diverse food groups.

MAINTAINING AND EXPANDING SOCIAL NETWORKS IN DISPLACEMENT – SOUTH SUDAN

It is commonly assumed that conflict and displacement disrupt social relationships and support systems. Indeed, in both research contexts, violence, displacement, and family separation have disrupted certain social connections, especially those based on kinship. The majority of the internally displaced persons (IDPs) living

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11   Figure adapted from the *Currency of Connections* research initiative (**Kim et al. (2020)**). "Other" types of support include transportation and social function support.
12   In the *Currency of Connections* research initiative, we constructed an index to quantitatively assess households' social connectedness in South Sudan. The index was composed of six contextually relevant dimensions, which emerged during formative qualitative research: number, diversity, reliability, reciprocity, resources, and dynamics. For more information on these dimensions and their construction into an index, see **Kim et al. (2020)** and Annex.

inside the Bentiu Protection of Civilian (PoC) site (61%) reported that their network size has decreased since their displacement. Households that sought refuge from the outbreak of violence in the PoC were those separated from their kinship networks. While the conflict and the effects of displacement to PoCs have both disrupted and reconfigured bases of social organization and connectedness, households in the PoC also continue to forge new and diverse connections.

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

— Female research participant, Bentiu PoC, South Sudan

Our research in South Sudan shows that households are taking intentional steps to maintain and expand their social networks during conflict and displacement. In fact, the majority of IDPs living near the Bentiu PoC reported that their social network size has either stayed the same or increased since their displacement (**Figure 4**).
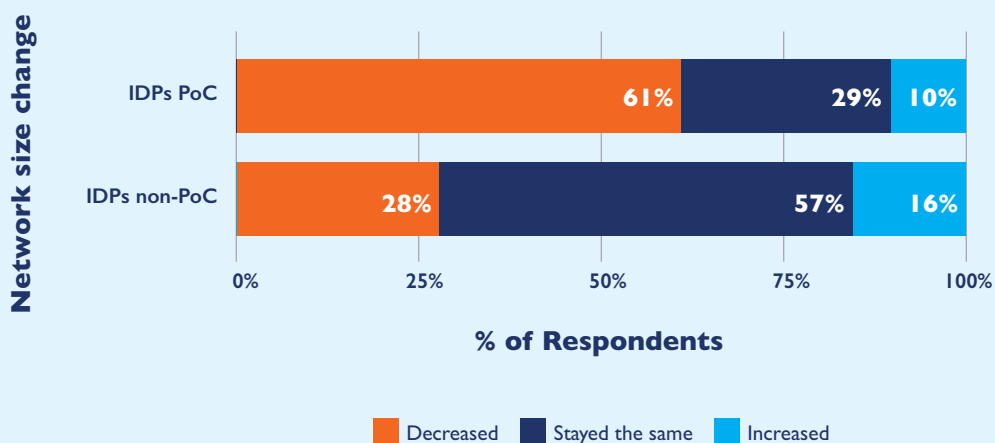

Figure 4: Changes in Network Size in Displacement, South Sudan (n 341)[13]

IDP participants in the study celebrated that the new relationships they have formed since being displaced extend beyond connections with people from the same county. A female-only focus group discussion (FGD) participant commented that "The PoC has brought many people together. […] It has mixed up people, but in a good way, which has brought people to love one another and help one another."[14] One businessperson echoed: "Before I started my business in the PoC, I only had a connection with people from my county, Koch. When I started my business, I was connected to many people from different counties, like Guit, Leer, Panyijar, and others."[15] These narratives and findings suggest that displacement is not inherently detrimental to social connectedness.

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13 Figure adapted from the *Currency of Connections* research initiative (**Kim et al. (2020)**).
14 Focus group discussion with female research participants, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.
15 In-depth interview with male research participant, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

In contexts of resource scarcity, external assistance can both strengthen and disrupt informal support networks. The protracted crises in South Sudan and Yemen significantly reduced local production capacities and livelihood opportunities, eroding households' ability to support their connections. In Yemen, the pandemic has created communication challenges and disrupted the social practices by which households maintain and build their connections. It has also exacerbated conflict-related resource scarcity, further limiting households' ability to share resources within their social networks. Households have become more dependent upon external assistance for their own consumption and for sharing. By sharing aid—including food, cash, and livelihood inputs—households are able to build safety nets of reciprocal support that they can turn to in the future.[16] However, aid actors' lack of transparency around targeting and selection processes— often based on definitions of need that do not align with local understanding of vulnerability—and inconsistent messaging about post-distribution aid sharing can work to disrupt informal support networks and fuel social tensions. In assessments and monitoring activities, however, aid actors do not inquire about the effect of external assistance on recipients' informal support networks. Moreover, given the narrow time frame and pre-defined outcomes of interest (e.g. consumption), aid actors also miss the opportunity to account for the potential longer-term effects their interventions may be having on households' informal support networks. Current assessments and evaluations also infrequently consider the agency of households to make decisions about their finite resources and trade-offs between current and future benefits.[17] In turn, aid actors are only able to glean a narrow snapshot of their program's impact with an incomplete understanding of why their program may be having limited impact.[18]

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16   Similar research conducted by ACAPS found that significant portions of cash assistance were used to pay off debts (often food-related), strengthening households' connections within their community and helping them secure future access to credit and in-kind support. (**ACAPS 2022**).
17   **Kim et al. (2020)**. These findings are echoed by a recent study conducted by ACAPS in Yemen, see **ACAPS (2022)**.
18   The combination of debt cycles and informal support practices means that assistance as it is currently designed by aid actors, especially cash programs, is unlikely to directly impact household wellbeing (**ACAPS (2022)**). These findings suggest that aid actors must do more to understand the timing and frequency of their assistance and recognize that the demands of households' informal support networks may blunt their programs' immediate impact. However, sharing of resources and repayment of debts strengthens households' relationships with those in their network and their ability to rely on their informal support networks for future reciprocal support (**ACAPS (2022)**).

SHARING AID NOW, TO ENSURE FUTURE RECIPROCAL SUPPORT

In contexts of limited resources, a households' social connectedness may also entail strong obligations to provide support to others, and such sharing obligations may at times negatively affect households' food security in the immediate term. In South Sudan, we found that households with larger social networks were more likely to experience greater hunger (using Household Hunger Scale), even after analyses controlled for a host of household- and community-level factors. At times, households are forced to make difficult choices: allocate limited resources to meet immediate basic needs while risking exclusion from reciprocal support networks, or share beyond their means and potentially go hungry in order to maintain and build social connections for future support. Indeed, a recent study conducted by ACAPS in Yemen found that households are often caught in some form of food-related debt, be it cash or in-kind. As reciprocity norms dictated that households repay their social connections immediately upon receipt of external assistance, programs—particularly cash assistance—failed to achieve the impact aid actors aimed to achieve.[19]

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

— Community leader, Panyjiar County, South Sudan

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Account for informal social protection systems in assessments and monitoring activities, ongoing crisis analysis, and early warning systems.** Aid actors should integrate questions about households' social connectedness into existing monitoring and assessment activities to gauge the extent and strength of this critical source of coping.[20] Such indicators can be straightforward. For example, programs could inquire about people's perceived ability to rely on their social connections in times of need as part of household-level assessments. Similar questions can be asked to community leaders and other locally-based key informants about the nature and limits of informal community safety nets. As humanitarian conditions deteriorate, the capacity to anticipate changes in informal support networks may prove crucial. Through real-time crisis monitoring activities, aid actors can monitor for signs that households' informal social protection networks are waning or nearing collapse. In contexts where remittances are a critical source of support, the aid community can monitor both formal and informal remittance flows in order to identify dynamics of the support being mobilized from the diaspora and reinforce this. As the collapse of social networks can be sudden and signify rapid deterioration of humanitarian conditions,[21] early warning that a key local coping strategy is eroding may help aid actors anticipate and proactively respond.

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19   **ACAPS (2022)**.
20   See Annex for illustrative questions and approaches to integrating questions about households' social connectedness into existing monitoring and assessment activities.
21   **Maxwell et al. (2016)**.

2. **When evaluating program impact and conducting context analyses, account for informal social protection systems and assess the effect of external assistance on these systems.** In contexts where households are making difficult decisions about their finite resources and debating how best to prioritize current versus future needs (e.g. sharing resources now to ensure future reciprocal support), aid actors can adapt existing assessments, evaluations, and context analysis activities (e.g. conflict analysis, Do No Harm analysis, and gender analysis) to better understand the effects of external assistance on recipients' informal support networks. Namely, aid actors should seek to understand the role assistance plays in households' capacity to build new connections or strengthen existing ones. Concurrently, evaluations should work to assess the potential inadvertent negative effects of program participation or aid distribution on recipient households. In other words, did households' receipt of external assistance give rise to any tensions with their social connections or lead to potential exclusion from their informal social protection networks? If so, why and how? The resulting evidence should be used to provide context and nuance to other measures of program impact, and should be integrated into future program design and community engagement strategies.

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Jennifer Huxta for Mercy Corps

Lesson #2

Design targeting and community engagement strategies in ways that support, and at the very least do not undermine, informal social protection networks.

By increasing transparency and community ownership during program design and implementation activities and ensuring that targeting criteria reflect local understandings of need, aid actors can strengthen informal social protection networks. In the absence of such measures, our research shows that external assistance can fuel tensions and exacerbate social exclusion. Resulting disruptions to local support systems may ultimately impede program impact and reverse development gains in the longer term. Ensuring that aid strengthens informal support systems is therefore a strategic priority for aid actors seeking to maximize the impact and sustainability of external interventions.

KEY FINDINGS

Failure to engage the community and transparently message about targeting of external assistance can inadvertently weaken social networks and undermine informal support systems. This is often a function of opaque recipient selection criteria, and a failure by aid actors to quickly and effectively address recipient communities' questions and concerns about targeting. In South Sudan, for example, recipients of unrestricted cash transfers reported experiencing exclusion from reciprocal support systems. They explained that other community members, who were not informed of program selection criteria, believed that recipient households had received more than their "fair share" and were therefore no longer in need of reciprocal support from their social connections.

Categorical approaches to targeting often fail to reflect local definitions of need, in that they do not account for informal dimensions of vulnerability, including the strength of social connections and access to informal networks of support. The use of categorical targeting[23] may also magnify differences between recipients and non-recipients, which would otherwise be immaterial to community members. For example, in Yemen, targeting based on displacement status created new bases of division and tension between IDPs and host community members who previously were well-integrated and mutually supportive. Moreover, inconsistent messaging and restrictions on sharing of external assistance are disrupting informal sharing practices which help households ensure future reciprocal support and fulfill their cultural and religious duties. As a result, categorical targeting may inadvertently sow divisions between households, encumbering recipients' ability to access resources through informal support networks.

[The cash] program has changed social connections between [recipients and non-recipients]. [Non-recipients] do not help the person who is benefiting because they think that the recipients are better off than those who are not benefiting. Some of my relatives are not as friendly as before because they wonder why I was chosen and not them. They think I don't need their help, and they won't help me anymore.[22]

— Female research participant, Panyijar County, South Sudan

Aid actors often rely on community committees for program targeting and coordination—and these committees can both support and harm local informal networks of support. These committees play an important role in representing local perspectives during the implementation of aid programs, and allocating greater authority and support to these bodies is a potential entry point for strengthening local support systems (see recommendations below). However, a major obstacle to doing so is the fact that committee members must navigate competing commitments to both international aid agencies and their local communities, often in the absence of any guidance or support from aid agencies. On one hand, committees are expected to comply with their obligations to implementing agencies and their standards of accountability. On the other hand, committee members report facing significant pressures from local elites and having to contend with partisan politics. In Yemen, for example, local authorities, including sheikhs and *aqils*,[24] sometimes compel committees to allocate assistance to their own constituents in order to consolidate power and influence. Stuck in the middle, with limited support from international actors, committees can therefore become conduits of elite capture and inadvertently exacerbate existing patterns of social exclusion.

People would force community committee members to register their names under the threat of the gun.[25]

— Community leader, Panyijar County, South Sudan

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22 In-depth interview with female research participant, Panyijar County, October 2018.
23 Categorical targeting involves "selecting individuals belonging to a certain category of people using observable characteristics that do not require the collection of a large amount of data" (Cirillo, Györi, & Veras Soares (2017) as cited in **Social Protection**). Such characteristics can include displacement status, women-headed households, and households that include persons with a disability.
24 Aqil al-haras (or simply "aqils") are unofficial neighborhood leaders to whom people can look to for information, financial and emotional support and guidance. Over the course of the crisis, in some areas, aqils have begun to play a more formal role in service delivery, particularly in the sale and distribution of cooking gas. This has largely occurred as a result of the breakdown of formal delivery service by the state and, in some areas, has helped to solidify the control of armed actors over local neighborhoods.
25 Key informant interview with female community committee member, January 31, 2021

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Increase support for community committees, and concurrently hold these committees accountable to transparency commitments.** As aid actors in protracted crises continue to rely on community committees to support program participant selection processes and coordinate distribution of assistance, aid agencies must equip committees with the resources necessary to navigate pressures from local elites and partisan political actors. Doing so is critical to ensuring that committees do not inadvertently facilitate elite capture. Such support may include the provision of conflict resolution and community-focused mediation trainings. Programs must also afford committees sufficient time to navigate complex local dynamics and to resolve community-level tensions that arise as a result of program activities. Concurrently, it is essential that aid actors institute checks and balances in order to closely monitor committee-led processes and hold members accountable to transparency commitments. With greater support and accountability, allocating greater decision-making authority to local committees is a promising entry point for ensuring that local priorities are reflected in various aspects of humanitarian responses and to pilot new community-led approaches to targeting.

2. **Prioritize transparency in all aspects of recipient selection, and work towards community-driven approaches to targeting, in order to ensure that the provision of aid does not inadvertently disrupt informal social protection systems.**

   a. *In the immediate term,* aid agencies need to more proactively and transparently communicate targeting criteria and the permissibility of aid sharing between households throughout program cycles. Simple measures such as erecting signage about program targeting criteria in highly-trafficked public areas and holding regular "drop-in" hours during which community members can approach agency representatives to seek clarification about targeting criteria are important first steps. Similarly, program staff can identify trusted community leaders to iteratively communicate targeting criteria and processes to households and to address social tensions that arise around targeting during program implementation. Notably, it is essential that aid actors' efforts to clarify targeting criteria to community members continue throughout a program's implementation, and not only at its inception.

   b. *In the longer term,* aid actors should pilot new approaches to targeting that empower local stakeholders to play more significant roles in the allocation of assistance, and carefully monitor the effects on informal social protection systems. This may help i) address tensions related to category-based targeting that risk undermining informal support systems, and ii) account for hard-to-measure and localized bases of vulnerability and resilience, including social connectedness. Innovations in community-based targeting will require the delegation of significantly greater authority to local decision-making structures. This could include the authority to determine selection criteria, populate recipient lists, and manage community-level communications about assistance. These decision-making structures should be identified and vetted through rigorous assessments that consider their representativeness and the potential for certain groups to be excluded from participation. It may also be possible to harness existing programming approaches, particularly in the development sector, as an entry point for strengthening and empowering community committees. For example, development programs that entail social mobilization, or employ committee-based models such as community-based disaster risk reduction (DRR) and disaster risk management (DRM) may be leveraged to prepare local committees to be positioned as more front-line structures in humanitarian response. As noted above, such pilots must be accompanied by monitoring and entrusted community accountability and reporting mechanisms to ensure that aid is being transparently allocated. Further research should also study the feasibility and advantages of community-based targeting approaches in contexts like Yemen and South Sudan.

Lesson #3

Seek out and invest in opportunities to partner with informal social protection efforts.

Communities experiencing crises are often their own first responders; yet external interventions rarely account for locally-led initiatives, with decision-making and resources remaining concentrated in the hands of international actors or local counterparts with similar incentives towards upward accountability. Moreover, as the aid community works to ensure that their efforts are more localized, informal social protection networks—and the role that they play in supporting households during protracted crises—have been largely overlooked. Evidence from South Sudan and Yemen underscores the opportunity for aid actors to partner with community actors and invest in informal social protection efforts that strengthen social networks.

The starting period of the war brought great social solidarity. People's true colors were revealed.

— Male journalist, Taiz, Yemen

KEY FINDINGS

Informal social protection efforts form and adapt in response to community needs, providing key entry points for external assistance. Local initiatives and community groups have proved to be a critical source of support for members and the wider community in crises. Studies by Mercy Corps and others have documented the reality that

communities are their own first responders.[26] They are often the 'first on the scene' and are present long after humanitarian actors have departed, providing a pivotal entry point for external assistance, which is often much slower to arrive. In

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some contexts, these informal social protection efforts arise in the aftermath of a crisis. At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Yemeni youth organized public information campaigns via social media to inform households on precautionary practices and encourage households to abide by public health measures. In others, they predate the crisis and may pivot to respond to increasing need within their communities. Fisherfolk livelihood groups in South Sudan, for example, which had long supported members of their group during times of need, welcomed displaced people who had fled the surrounding counties for the islands in Panyijiar. Through these informal protection efforts, newly displaced households were provided gifts of dry fish, canoe transportation, and even cash. These informal networks and the initiatives they facilitate offer opportunities for aid actors to work through or support locally-led responses to crises.

THE ROLE OF THE YEMENI DIASPORA

With a large diaspora community spread across the Gulf, Europe, and the US, support from social connections living abroad has long been critical to helping Yemenis meet immediate needs. Cash remittances from these connections in particular have been essential to helping households purchase food items from local marketplaces as prices surged due to conflict and blockades. As one member of the Yemeni diaspora remarked, "the luckiest people in Yemen are people who have someone outside of the country… All people living outside Yemen are sending money."[27] For households that have diaspora connections, remittances have been crucial to securing much needed resources that would have been otherwise acquired by taking on additional debt from nearby shop owners and grocers. Remittances are also frequently shared among social connections or used to contribute important social functions, such as weddings and funerals.

The luckiest people in Yemen are people who have someone outside of the country.

— Male journalist, Taiz, Yemen

Being able to count on support from social connections outside of Yemen is also an important source of coping. One member of the diaspora explained that "there is emotional support that comes with knowing that there is family abroad that will do everything in their power to support family in Yemen should anything happen."[28] As the conflict has continued, support from the diaspora has taken on a new urgency and played an increasing role in allowing households to weather multiple cascading shocks.

26 **Mednick (2022)**; **Bena (2020)**; **Aldrich (2017)**; **Kim et al. (2022)**; **Kim et al. (2020)**; **Maxwell et al. (2016)**.
27 Key informant interview with male member of Yemeni diaspora, October 10, 2020.
28 Key informant interview with female member of Yemeni diaspora, October 13, 2020.

LIVELIHOOD GROUPS IN SOUTH SUDAN

In South Sudan, certain livelihoods, including fishing, cattle keeping, and trading are often practiced in informal groups based on bonds of trust between members.[29] While informal livelihood groups predate the current crisis in South Sudan, they have become especially important sources of support in this context. These groups primarily exist to facilitate collective action and group member support. For example, group members share livelihood inputs, extend loans to one another, and band together in the face of security threats, such as cattle raiding. Members of cattle keeping associations will also redistribute livestock to other members whose herds have been depleted by raiding.

Strong informal rules and norms underpin the extension of support within livelihood groups, as well as the ways in which these groups interact with and support the wider community. In an effort to ensure that the groups are insulated from conflict or social tensions that have the potential to damage the viability of the group's common livelihood, groups may also adopt informal rules and norms that govern the ways in which members interact with the wider community. For example, trade and fishing associations often prohibit their members from drinking excessively, committing adultery, or engaging in intercommunal violence.

Informal social protection networks facilitate access to the timely, accurate, and trusted information that is crucial to households' capacity to make decisions and act swiftly in the face of rapidly deteriorating security conditions. In both Yemen and South Sudan, households rely on their social networks for information about safety and protection in protracted conflict and during displacement. Information often flows first and foremost through social networks, with better connected households able to make life-saving decisions—such as the decision to flee before violence arrives in their community—well in advance of more vulnerable households. The ability to make informed and timely decisions helps households limit the loss of life, livelihoods, and assets and thereby improve recovery. However, our studies find that households are not equally socially connected. Various factors, both at the household- and community-level, influence households' social networks and their connectedness. The nature of these networks in turn affects the flow of information, with information reaching some later than others (or even not at all). Households located in rural areas or belonging to socially isolated groups, for example, were often the last to flee, with little access to material resources during displacement. The nature of a households' social connections, therefore, has significant implications for its access to lifesaving information during periods of rapid change and deterioration.

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.[30]

— Male research participant, Palorinya settlement, Uganda

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29   **Humphrey et al. (2019)**.
30   Male research participant, Palorinya settlement, November 2018

SOUTH SUDANESE REFUGEES IN UGANDA

Social connections become especially critical sources of support in the context of forced displacement. For many South Sudanese refugees in West Nile, Uganda, the breadth, composition, and accessibility of their social networks influenced when, where, and under what conditions they fled. This was in part due to the fact that as violence escalated in South Sudan in 2016, peoples' social networks became critical sources of information about security and flight. Indeed, many refugees only fled after friends and relatives raised alarms and encouraged them to urgently move south across the border. In other cases participants described calling people they knew who had already fled to Uganda to consult them about life in specific settlements in order to decide where to flee.

However, not all households had access to this type of information, with implications for decision-making about migration. Participants 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."[31] Socially isolated groups, including households residing in extremely rural areas with limited connections to urban centers, were often unable to obtain timely information and frequently fled much later than other households living in larger villages or closer to major towns. As a result, they often fled with very little notice and with few or no possessions, resulting in the separation of families, loss of assets, and, often, death.[32]

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Identify and support existing informal initiatives that households rely on during times of need.** Locally organized groups and informal initiatives adapt and emerge in response to deteriorating conditions, distributing crucial resources to vulnerable neighbors and recently displaced households. These initiatives offer entry points for external support, and an opportunity for aid actors to directly support people living through and responding to crises. There are existing approaches that show strong promise and some evidence of contributing to social connectedness and resilience. For example, savings groups and self help groups are informal groups that are widely established and supported by aid actors. They offer a promising approach for aid actors to bolster social solidarity and locally-led responses to community needs.[33,34] Recent research has also showcased the potential role that local informal business networks can play in crises. In response to the Beirut port blast in 2020, aid actors tapped into business owners' informal support networks and extensive knowledge of the communities they operate in to identify vulnerable households and disseminate assistance.[35] Additional research is needed to determine the extent to which such

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31 Focus group discussion with female focus group participant, Rhino Camp, February 2019.
32 Research in camps in Jordan similarly found that Syrian refugees' abilities to access accurate and timely information, often disseminated through social networks, have important implications for their safety and security. See: Wall et al. (2017).
33 Cabot Venton et al. (2021).
34 Recently, CARE adapted its Village Savings and Loan Association (VSLA) model to respond to deteriorating conditions in Taiz, Yemen. Their support of the informal financial service groups helped to provide members with savings to smooth over fluctuations in income and access to credit streams for investments or income generating activities in a highly volatile context. The VSLAs also played an important role supporting community needs through their social funds, which redistributed resources to pay support to orphans, people who had been imprisoned, and those experiencing significant medical expenses. See FSN Network (2022).
35 Following the 2020 Beirut port blast, local business owners supplied aid actors with information to reach vulnerable households, such as demographic and population estimates, lists of businesses still operating, and the names of households in need of assistance. Their networks and long-time presence in their neighborhoods ensured that businesses had the "capacity to fill in certain gaps and provide the needed goods and services to restore disrupted pathways," making them essential partners in the recovery process (p.68). See Mercy Corps Lebanon (2021).

approaches may serve to strengthen the social connectedness of members of these types of informal initiatives, the mechanisms through which this can be achieved, and the impact such approaches may have for household resilience and livelihoods.

2. **Disseminate early warning data—including information on conflict and climate-related shocks—locally, through existing social networks and through information channels that are accessible to socially isolated groups.** A common critique of current early warning systems is that they are hierarchical and usually share information vertically to elite policy actors, but not necessarily to conflict-affected communities.[36] As a result, early warning mechanisms may not translate into tangible civilian protection outcomes.[37] An understanding that potentially lifesaving information flows first and foremost through social networks points to the importance of disseminating early warning data locally and horizontally to the extent possible. Aid actors should prioritize the local dissemination of early warning information through informal social protection networks. Along with early warning committees, radio broadcasts, religious leaders, youth leaders, female representatives, respected elders, and local traders can all serve as conduits for information. Given varying local contexts of vulnerability, aid actors should account for the factors that may inform inclusion and exclusion from social networks, such as location, ethnic dynamics, cultural norms, gender relations, and socio-economic status.[38]

Lindsay Hamsik, Mercy Corps

36 **Langberg (2013)**.
37 **Rohwerder (2015)**.
38 Social connectedness is inherently linked to social hierarchies, power dynamics, and inequity. "Connectedness" for some may imply marginalization or exclusion of others. Accounting for informal support networks as a critical resilience capacity can help aid actors identify sources of households' vulnerability, while also highlighting their coping strategies and sources of agency. See **Maxwell et al. (2016)** and **Aldrich (2012)**.

Cassandra Nelson, Mercy Corps

Conclusion

Significant work remains to be done to translate research on the role of informal social protection networks into practice. The proposed recommendations for the aid community, nevertheless, offer opportunities to ensure that external interventions work to strengthen key local sources of coping and survival for households living through and responding to crises. Such initiatives will have to be accompanied by further research to showcase their proof of concept and assess whether and how they work to strengthen informal social protection systems.

We also acknowledge and appreciate the challenges inherent to analyzing and programming around such networks and their dynamics in complex crisis settings. There may be risks inherent to aid actors directly inquiring about or designing programming around social identities and networks, particularly in conflict-affected contexts. Worse yet, if conducted hastily, a superficial accounting of informal support networks may overlook those who are excluded from them, further perpetuating local power dynamics.

However, the status quo also presents significant risks. There are concrete examples, highlighted in our studies and others, in which the aid community's failure to account for and proactively consider informal social protection systems has fueled social tensions and disrupted such networks. Given the unprecedented scale of humanitarian need and finite resources, the aid community's efforts to strengthen resilience must, at a minimum, avoid undermining the very strategies that households in protracted crises rely on to cope and survive. Ultimately, aid actors must understand informal social protection systems as a core resilience capacity that programs are intentionally designed to strengthen.

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Annex: Assessing and monitoring households' informal support networks

There is little consensus about how quantitative indicators can be used to effectively measure social connectedness and assess households' informal support systems. Previous efforts to quantify social connectedness, including those in the resilience field, have tended to cast their attention on the economic resources, which are mobilized during times of hardship through households' networks, narrowly defined by geographic proximity or other pre-selected socioeconomic characteristics. However, our and others' research on informal support networks make clear that such approaches do not adequately account for the nuances and dynamics of people's social connectedness, especially in terms of how they relate to coping and recovery during crises.

The table below includes an abbreviated version of a module developed as part of the Currency of Connections research initiative, which includes six dimensions: number, diversity, reliability, reciprocity, resources, and dynamics. The module consists of 11 questions, which can be plugged into existing monitoring and assessment activities, or similar questions can be asked to community leaders and locally-based key informants about the nature and limits of informal support networks.

While the dimensions and corresponding questions were informed by qualitative insights, rich literature, and consultations with key experts conducted through the research initiative, further validation is required to assess how the dimensions, questions, and overall module perform across and between contexts. The module must also be vetted against other indices and survey tools used in the literature to assess relative performance on both measurement validity and ease of use. Nonetheless, this Annex is intended to provide illustrative questions for aid actors who have an interest in assessing and monitoring social connectedness, in order to gauge the extent and strength of a critical local source of coping.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Table 1: Survey questions and responses by dimensions[39]

Dimensions	Measures	Questions	Responses[40]
		Preamble: We are trying to understand the ways in which households rely on their social networks during difficult times, who they can rely on to get what resources and how these factors may have changed over time. Now I would like to ask you some questions to understand your household's social support network. As we go through these questions, please note that we are interested in all forms of assistance—no matter how big or small—which come from all sources (not just aid agencies). For example, when we refer to assistance, we include a range of things such as advice and counseling, help finding work, livestock sharing/gifting, loans/credit, cash, and/or social function support. We iterate here again that all information you share with us is confidential and will not be shared with anyone outside our research team.	
	The number of people a HH can call during a time of need	**#1** If your household had a problem and needed help, how many people beyond your immediate family could you currently turn to who would be willing to assist you?	Integer
Number		**#2** In general, would you say that the network of people your household can turn to when you need help is:	**i** Large **ii** Average **iii** Small **iv** Does not exist (no network of people)
		#3 In general, since [event of interest/ reference time point], would you say that the number of people you could turn to when you need help has:	**i** Increased **ii** Stayed the same **iii** Decreased

39 Words that are included in square brackets [for example] indicate elements of the questions that will need to be adapted to the context and program by the user.
40 All responses should include "don't know" and "refused to answer" options.

Dimensions	Measures	Questions	Responses[40]
Diversity	The different types of social connections a HH can call upon or be called upon/during times of need	**#4** Since [event of interest/reference time point], who did you **turn to** for help in times of need?	**i** Friends and relatives **ii** [Clan elders] **iii** Local Councilors **iv** Church/faith community **v** NGOs **vi** Government **vii** [Mutual solidarity groups] **viii** Connections abroad (aka diaspora) **ix** Other (specify) **x** No one
		#5 Since [event of interest/reference time point], who did your household **provide** help to?	**i** Friends and relatives **ii** [Clan elders] **iii** Local Councilors **iv** Church/faith community **v** NGOs **vi** Government **vii** [Mutual solidarity groups] **viii** Connections abroad (aka diaspora) **ix** Other (specify) **x** No one
Reliability	The HH's confidence in its ability to rely on social connections to access resources in times of need	**#6** How confident are you that you will be able to get support from someone if you needed help in the next 12 months?	**i** Not at all confident **ii** Somewhat confident **iii** Very confident
Reciprocity	The HH's ability to provide help to its social connections in times of need	**#7** Since [event of interest/reference time point], has your household **provided** help to someone?	**i** Yes **ii** No, I was not able to **iii** No, I was not willing to **vi** No, no one asked for help in the last 12 months

Dimensions	Measures	Questions	Responses[40]
Resources	The economic and non-economic resources HH receives and/or provides to its social connections in times of need	**#8** Since [event of interest/reference time point], what kinds of help did you **receive** from someone? **#9** Since [event of interest/reference time point], what kinds of help did you **provide** to someone?	**i** Cash (with no payback expected) **ii** Loans (cash with repayment expected) **iii** Credit (i.e. in kind) **iv** Food **v** Non-food household commodities (e.g. clothing, bedding, cooking utensils, etc.) **vi** Livestock gift and sharing (e.g. lactating cows, calves, goats, sheep, chickens, etc.) **vii** Help finding work (e.g. wage labor, jobs) **viii** Livelihood inputs and information about livelihood strategies/techniques **ix** Market information (e.g. prices, where/who to sell goods) and support (e.g. selling things for someone else at a market or stall) **x** Labor exchange **xi** Transportation (of people or goods) **xii** Advice and counseling (emotional support) **xiii** Social function support (e.g. bride wealth, funeral, compensation support) **xiv** Other

Dimensions	Measures	Questions	Responses[40]
Dynamics	Changes to HH's ability to get and provide help to its social connections in times of need	**#10** Overall, since [event of interest/ reference time point], how has your **ability to get help** from someone changed?	**i** Increased **ii** Stayed the same **iii** Decreased
		#11 Overall, since [event of interest/ reference time point], how has your **ability to help those in need** changed?	

ABOUT REAL

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