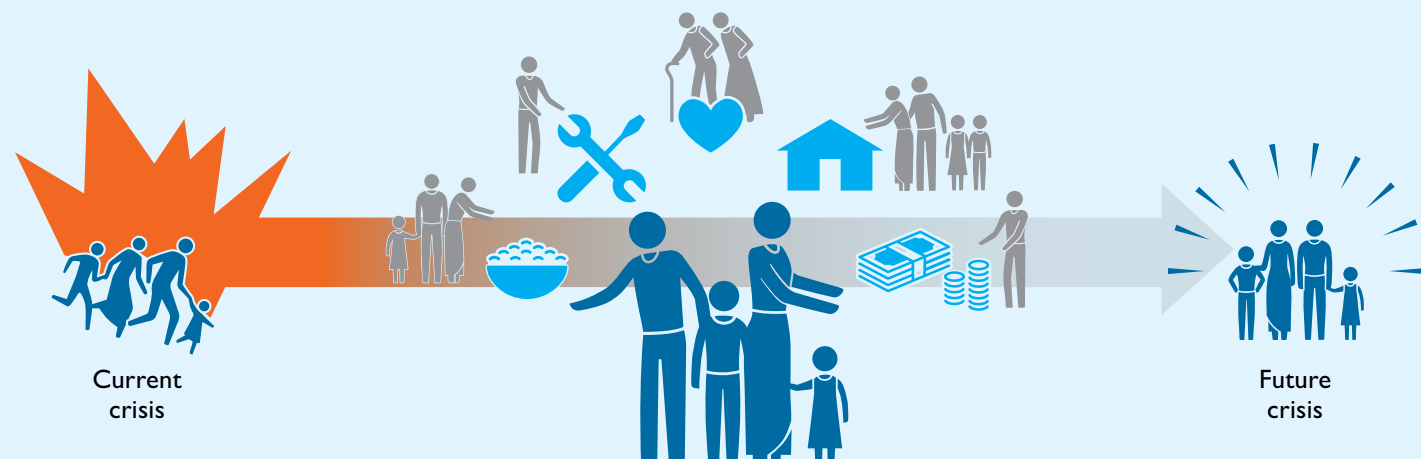# Supporting Informal Social Protection Networks During Protracted Crises
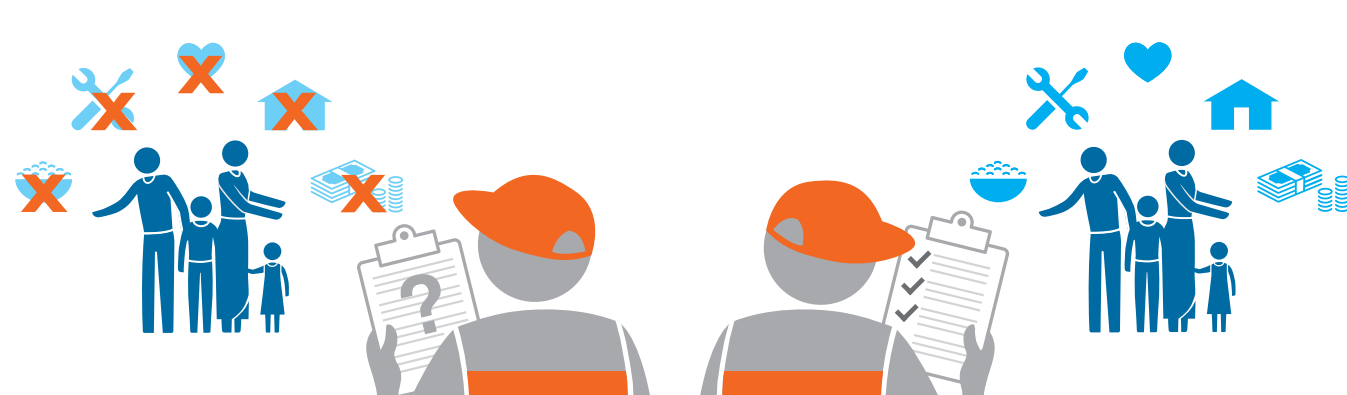
Three Lessons and Recommendations for Aid Actors

During protracted crises, including conflict, informal social protection networks are critical sources of coping and survival. Communities themselves are often the first responders in a crisis, reacting long before the arrival of external assistance. However, despite calls for more localized approaches to aid, the aid community continues to overlook, and sometimes inadvertently undermine these local networks. Given significant funding gaps and unprecedented humanitarian need, working with and through informal support systems is an untapped opportunity and an imperative for aid actors to maximize impact as they look to do more with less.

Current crisis

Future crisis

Informal social protection refers broadly to the support family, community, and group members receive through their social connections and networks. These networks may include international diasporas, but they may also be highly localized and cut-off from outside sources of support. It co-occurs alongside formal social protection activities implemented by aid actors 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.
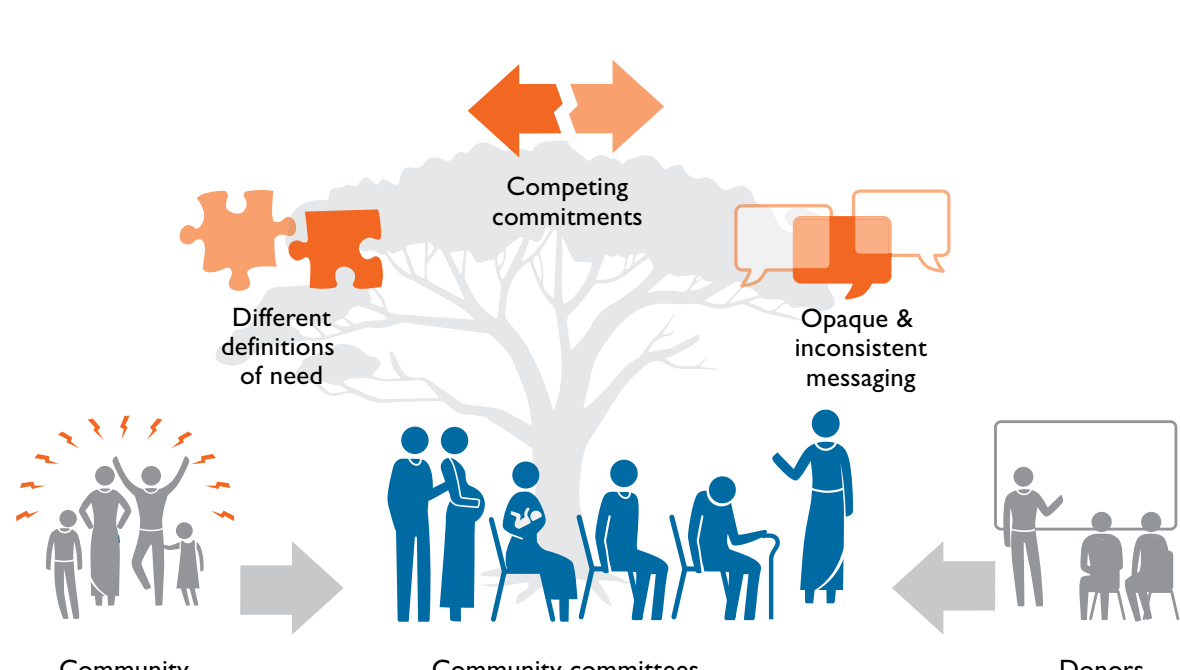
Based on research conducted in South Sudan and Yemen, the following three lessons and accompanying recommendations offer promising opportunities for the aid community to tap into and strengthen informal social protection networks.

When aid actors fail to consider and properly monitor informal support networks, they miss the opportunity to account for the potential longer-term impacts of their assistance.

LESSON #1: Measure informal social protection networks as a key outcome and trigger indicator.
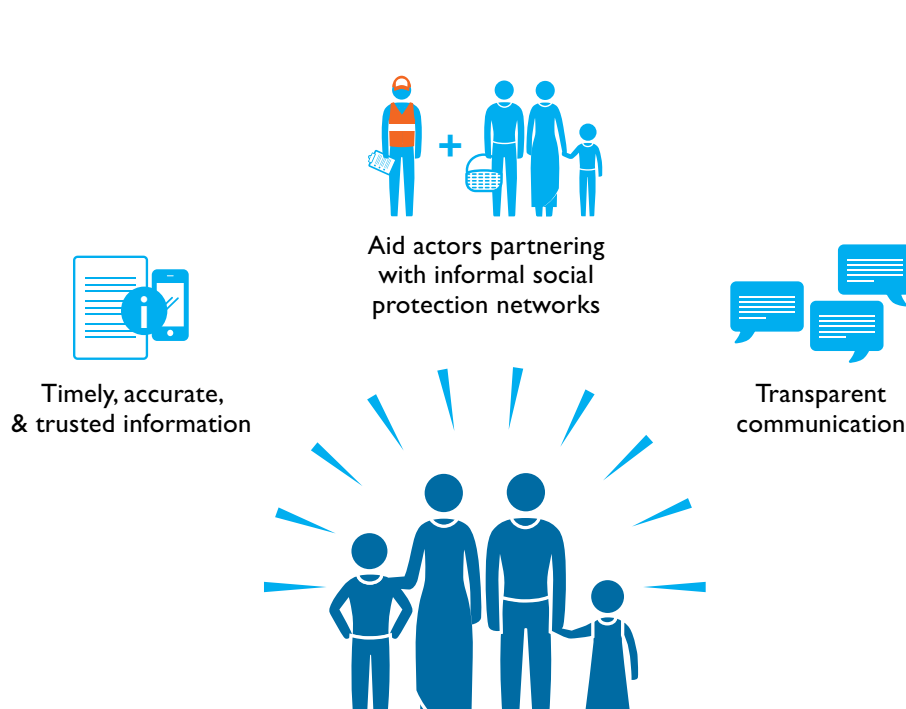
- **Account for informal social protection systems in assessments and monitoring activities, ongoing crisis analysis, and early warning systems.** As humanitarian conditions deteriorate, the capacity to anticipate changes in informal support networks may prove crucial. Through real-time crisis monitoring activities, aid actors can monitor for signs that households' informal social protection networks are waning or nearing collapse.

- **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 effect of external assistance on recipients' informal support networks.

Competing commitments

Different definitions of need

Opaque & inconsistent messaging

Community & local elites

Community committees & local leaders

Donors

When transparency, community ownership, and local definitions of need are missing from program design and implementation, external assistance can fuel tensions and exacerbate social exclusion.

LESSON #2: Design targeting and community engagement strategies in ways that support and at the very least do not undermine informal social protection networks.

- **Increase support for community committees and 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, they must equip committees with the resources necessary to navigate pressures from local elites and partisan political actors. With increased support and accountability, local committees are a promising entry point for ensuring that local priorities are reflected in humanitarian responses and to pilot community-led approaches to targeting.

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

Aid actors partnering with informal social protection networks

Timely, accurate, & trusted information

Transparent communication

Communities experiencing crises are often their own first responders and aid actors must partner with and invest in informal social protection efforts that strengthen social networks.

LESSON #3: Seek out and invest in opportunities to partner with informal social protection efforts.

- **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. Existing approaches, such as savings groups and self help groups, show strong promise and some evidence of contributing to social connectedness and resilience.

- **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.** 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 and account for the factors that may inform inclusion and exclusion on social networks, such as location, ethnic dynamics, cultural norms, gender relations, and socio-economic status.[1]