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THE CURRENCY OF CONNECTIONS

The reconfiguration of social connections in Bentiu, South Sudan.

The purpose of this brief is to provide donors and policy makers with selected thematic findings and implications from ongoing research that Mercy Corps and the Feinstein International Center (FIC) at the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University are conducting inside and adjacent to the Bentiu Protection of Civilian (PoC) site in South Sudan.[1] In a new three-part installment to the *Currency of Connections* series, Mercy Corps and FIC examine how communities in the PoC are socially connected; how they rely on their social connections during crises; and how these social connections are changing in the context of displacement. We hope that these reports, and others from this research initiative, will help donors and aid actors design and deliver programs that strengthen existing social support networks, and at the very least, do not undermine them.

Why do social connections matter?

In protracted crises in which formal governance structures are weak to nonexistent, people depend heavily on local systems—both social and economic—to get by, often more than they depend on external aid. Households and economic actors may rely on their friends, neighbors and extended families for food, access to economic opportunities, and negotiation of safe passage when fleeing from conflict. It is thus critical that aid actors understand how social connections help conflict-affected populations in South Sudan cope and recover. Research shows that when humanitarian actors fail to understand these existing local coping strategies, they risk inadvertently weakening reciprocal support structures during external interventions.[2]

South Sudan/Mercy Corps/D Nahr

[2] Daniel G. Maxwell and Nisar Majid, Famine in Somalia: Competing Imperatives, Collective Failures, 2011-12 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

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Key findings and Implications

Informal livelihood groups have emerged as critical sources of material support and wellbeing inside the PoC. These groups have become especially important to the abilities of their members to cope and adapt during crisis because displacement has weakened kinship networks and the reliability and extent of support between kin. In addition to the economic benefits that these groups offer their members, those who have to travel outside of the PoC (such as women and traders) also benefit from the safety, protection, shared trust, and information that these groups offer.

By channeling assistance through informal livelihood groups, aid actors may be able to maximize the effectiveness of their interventions and reduce the likelihood of doing harm. More specifically, before implementing livelihood interventions, aid actors should consider assessing which activities people undertake in groups and which activities they undertake individually. Where groups exist, aid actors should consider implementing livelihood interventions through existing groups to ensure that underlying protection, trust, and reciprocal support remains intact.[3] Additionally, to guard against inadvertently undermining group cohesion, when implementing livelihood interventions aid actors should ensure that they analyze market dynamics to ensure that a particular livelihood is capable of absorbing new participants. This is because group members' abilities to support each other is inherently tied to the economic viability of the group's livelihood and the strength of members' social connections. Over-crowding a specific economic sector could inadvertently weaken existing social support systems.

New relationships have formed within the PoC which cut across clan and geographical divides. Multiple research respondents, including women, report that these relationships are equally, if not more important than their previous kinship connections. Proximity and a shared sense of hardship and trauma have helped individuals forge new bonds of based on the provision of both economic and non-material support.

Given the extremely divisive nature of this conflict, aid actors should seek to strengthen existing people-to-people contact and collaboration across lines of divisions. Within the PoC this could entail working with specific Nuer clans and sub-clans that are divided by the political conflict. Aid actors may be able to help strengthen these relationships by bringing people from different clans and counties (and in particular women) together for shared food-based events or celebrations (a strategy that the Nuer communities frequently use to build new bonds), and/or by encouraging collaborative livelihood activities. Further research should be conducted to identify the potential for people-to-people contact between diverse populations to decrease prejudice and facilitate forward-looking, local peace initiatives.

In the PoC, people's social connections with their kin have been disrupted by displacement, and as a result they may lack access to trusted sources of information about safety and security outside. Further, they may struggle to diversify sources of support from kin outside the PoC, which are critical sources of economic and emotional wellbeing. While these lost connections are often due to displacement, PoC residents may also purposefully sever these relationships for fear of persecution resulting from communicating with relatives in their communities of origin who may be (actual or perceived) government loyalists, or with those living in government-controlled areas.

Aid actors should help people to re-build connections with trusted social networks in their communities of origin. Providing people with access to cellphones and airtime and reconnecting them with their kin through family reunification programs may have multiple benefits. Doing so may help households diversify their sources of kinship support outside the PoC, both now and in the future should they decide to return to their communities of origin. Additionally, reconnecting

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[3] As part of such efforts, it is important to be mindful that some individuals may be excluded from group-based sharing and support, either by design or by default, and as a result aid actors should make an effort to identify and support these individuals as well.

kin may improve households' access to information from trusted sources, and in turn may better enable them to make informed decisions about returns.

However, efforts to reconnect people with their kinship networks outside the PoC are likely to fail if people continue to fear the potential repercussions of such communication. Donors should continue to advocate that the Government of South Sudan fully implement the 2018 Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) and take concrete steps towards the formation of the transitional government. They should also advocate with the Government to support operationalizing existing telecommunication networks and infrastructure – a key communication medium for people's access to information – including in opposition-held areas. Finally, as part of such efforts, donor governments and the international community should monitor implementation of the UNMISS mandate and must ensure that any return or relocation of IDPs from the PoCs are safe, informed, voluntary, and dignified.

This brief is based on research presented in a three-part series examining the importance of social connectedness for communities inside and immediately adjacent to the Bentiu PoC. The detailed reports:

The Evolution of Pre-displacement Connections in Bentiu, South Sudan examines how social connections have changed in the PoC, and the strategies by which people establish new bonds with neighbors, friends, and those pursuing similar livelihoods. Our analysis sheds light on people's own strategies of forming, preserving, and shifting their types and sources of social connectedness. Understanding these tactics may help equip aid actors to implement interventions which reinforce existing coping strategies. Our analysis also highlights the need to understand the effects of humanitarian crises at multiple levels of local systems.

The Establishment and Reconfiguration of Informal Livelihood Groups in Bentiu, South Sudan discusses informal livelihood groups as a form of socioeconomic connectedness in the Bentiu PoC. This report explains various livelihood-based strategies that households rely on to cope and adapt during displacement and may help aid actors maximize the effectiveness of their interventions and support key sources of household resilience.

The Impact of Weddings and Rituals on Social Connections in Bentiu, South Sudan examines changes to the nature of marriages in the PoC. We discuss the long-standing importance of marriage as the foundation of kinship networks and related social support systems in South Sudan and examine how the shift from a cattle-based economy to one entailing greater use of cash has affected these life events. Examining weddings and marriages provides a useful lens for identifying the effects of cash on social connectedness, as well as the loss of assets such as cattle on new and existing relationships.

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