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THE CURRENCY OF CONNECTIONS

Why local support systems are integral to helping people recover in South Sudan

The purpose of this report is to give aid actors insights into localized social protection and support systems in South Sudan and the ways in which humanitarian aid, including cash transfer programming, can both complement and disrupt these systems. We hope that this report, and others in this series, will enable donors and aid actors to 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. In addition to social support networks, markets have been shown to play a critical role in enabling crisis-affected populations to cope with and recover from conflict, displacement and disasters.¹ Even throughout prolonged conflict, market activity is often persistent. Strong relationships and trust between individuals help crisis-affected households share knowledge, find income opportunities, borrow money and obtain other resources. It is thus critical that aid actors understand how social connections and markets interact and 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 undermining them.²

Why now?

In September 2018, leaders from South Sudan's government and various opposition groups signed a new peace agreement that promises to install a reconstituted transitional government in Juba by May 2019. While sporadic fighting continues in parts of the country, South Sudanese communities are cautiously optimistic about the prospects for peace. The agreement is an important step, but implementing it and maintaining peace will be the bigger challenge. Moreover, the country remains in the grip of a serious humanitarian crisis. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 7.1 million people, or around two thirds of South Sudan's population, require some form of assistance, and nearly 4.2 million people remain displaced. South Sudan must remain a priority focus for donors.

While the most recent peace agreement will not immediately reduce the extent of South Sudan's humanitarian crisis, the accompanying decline in violent conflict may in due course, lead to important changes to the ways in which humanitarian assistance is delivered. For example, if peace holds, aid actors in South Sudan may soon be positioned to begin transitioning from short-term emergency assistance to longer-term early-recovery programming. Donor priorities, assistance modalities, and beneficiary targeting strategies are all likely to evolve accordingly. We hope that this research will help ensure that this transition occurs in a way that complements, and at the very least does not undermine, the critical local support systems upon which South Sudanese communities rely to cope and recover from crisis.

¹ Hélène Juillard et al., *The Influence of Market Support Interventions on Household Food Security: An Evidence Synthesis* (Oxford: Oxfam GB, 2016); Margaret Buchanan-Smith and Abduljabbar Abdulla Fadul, *Adaptation and Devastation: The Impact of the Conflict on Trade and Markets in Darfur* (Boston: Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, 2008); Andy Catley, Jeremy Lind, and Ian Scoones, eds., *Pastoralism and Development in Africa: Dynamic Change at the Margins* (London: Routledge, 2013).

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

Findings

How have communities in Panyijar traditionally supported one another?

- › Socially connected households rely on one another for food, shelter and help with economic activities such as land clearing and cattle keeping. This support forms an important social and economic safety net for these households.
- › Strong informal rules and norms obligate households with kinship relationships to share with and support one another. Households without kinship connections voluntarily support one another as a means of broadening the sources of reciprocal support that they can rely on in times of need.
- › Economic actors form informal livelihood-based support groups. These groups mobilize based on trust and facilitate collective action in support of group members' economic or livelihood needs.

How has crisis affected local support systems and social networks in Panyijar?

- › Households are increasingly dependent on sharing humanitarian assistance, including food and cash, as a means of maintaining, strengthening and forging new social connections. This is especially true in the context of crisis-related declines in local agricultural and livestock production capacities.
- › During crisis, informal livelihood-based support groups have changed in terms of both group cohesion and the type and extent of support exchanged between members. Additionally, new groups have emerged during the crisis, including many composed of women and based on the provision of critical crisis-time support among members.
- › Households are relying more on marketplaces for financial and nonmaterial support, including loans, goods on credit, information and advice. Gender roles that predate the crisis dictate that men have more control over assets, such as cash or cows. As a result, men can more easily form and maintain social connections in the marketplace, and they are better positioned to negotiate with traders to obtain in-kind goods or cash loans.

How are cash-based interventions changing social connections and interacting with local support systems in Panyijar?

- › Household cash recipients often face significant pressure to share cash with nonrecipients. However, sharing cash may be a relatively unreliable means of accessing reciprocal support. This is likely a result of Panyijar's accelerating transition to a cash-based economy in which cash is in high demand but low supply.
- › Traders are often more willing to provide important financial assistance to household cash recipients than to nonrecipients because cash recipients are seen as particularly creditworthy borrowers.



South Sudan—Lindsay Hamsik

Recommendations

Aid actors should:

- › **Build in overlap between short-term emergency relief and early recovery interventions.** Doing so will ensure continuity in households' abilities to meet resource-sharing obligations and maintain access to reciprocal support systems. When implementing short-term emergency cash transfers, aid actors should consider new distribution modalities to better facilitate this transition. Cash distributions are most often designed to provide only short-term relief. Aid actors should consider providing higher-value transfers to help households restart food- and income-generating activities. Lump sum cash transfers, for example, have the demonstrated capacity to help households both meet their immediate needs and invest in small productive assets.⁴
- › **Consult informal livelihood-based support groups when designing and implementing livelihoods programming.** Programs that aim to support cattle keepers, for example, should be designed in consultation with the leaders of different cattle keeper groups. These leaders are well-positioned to provide guidance on the interventions or modalities that are most likely to strengthen group cohesion. Additionally, because assistance will likely be shared among group members in accordance with extant support norms, aid actors have the potential to reach numerous indirect beneficiaries. Their ability to do so is a function of the number of distinct groups they target. Because of this, aid actors should work to ensure that assistance is homogeneously distributed among individuals from as many different livelihood-based support groups as possible.
- › **Tailor cash distributions to meet the differing needs of men and women.** Involving local communities in developing program-targeting criteria will help ensure that interventions reflect local conceptions of vulnerability and address specific gendered impacts of crisis. This will improve the likelihood that cash distributions reach those in most need and that cash transfer values are tailored to meet the different needs of men and women. Female-headed households and internally displaced people who face specific barriers to accessing local support may need regular cash transfers over a relatively long period. On the other hand, men who are obligated to support large extended families may be better served through higher-value cash transfers.
- › **Improve women's perceived creditworthiness and capacity to form relationships of trust with marketplace actors.** Providing women with cash to help them purchase livelihood inputs from marketplace actors is an essential first step. Aid actors should concurrently help women hone their negotiation skills so that women can procure high-quality livelihood inputs at the right price. Additionally, aid actors should help women build trust and creditworthiness with marketplace actors by working to ensure that women repay all in-kind or cash loans in a timely manner.

Donors should:

- › **Provide aid actors with the flexibility to determine when and how to pivot from short-term emergency assistance to livelihood support.** Promoting households' self-reliance is a priority for donors and aid actors. However, unpredictable local externalities often influence households' adoption of sustainable livelihoods and may determine the appropriate time for aid agencies to transition from providing emergency relief to supporting early recovery. Ending emergency relief before households are equipped to pursue sustainable livelihoods may inadvertently undermine local support systems, which are currently often based on the reciprocal sharing of humanitarian assistance. Donors should give aid actors significant flexibility to determine when this transition should occur within a program cycle. To the extent possible, aid actors should also be allowed to ease this transition by incrementally reducing the value or frequency of cash transfers while scaling up early recovery programming.

⁴ Mercy Corps and Causal Design, *Beyond Meeting Immediate Needs: The Impact of Electronic Cash Transfer Approaches on Disaster Recovery and Financial Inclusion* (Portland, OR: Mercy Corps, 2015), 4, https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/TabangKO%20Impact%20Evaluation%20Report_Final.pdf. Single sum transfers, when compared with three payments of the same amount, resulted in increased ownership of small productive assets. John Farrington, *Cash Transfers: Lump Sums: Project Briefing No 28* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2009), 1, <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/4614.pdf>. Lump sums were found to perform better in post-emergency situations than in development contexts, especially where beneficiaries were familiar with the assets that had to be replaced (fishing boats, livestock, etc.) and where markets continued to function.

CONTACT

ALEX HUMPHREY
Research Manager | South Sudan
ahumphrey@mercycorps.org

JANARDHAN RAO
Country Director | South Sudan
jrao@mercycorps.org

JON KURTZ
Senior Director of Research and Learning
jkurtz@mercycorps.org

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Global Headquarters

45 SW Ankeny Street
Portland, Oregon 97204
888.842.0842
mercycorps.org

European Headquarters

40 Sciences
Edinburgh EH9 1NJ
Scotland, UK
+44.131.662.5160
mercycorps.org.uk