



South Sudan—Cassandra Nelson

# THE CURRENCY OF CONNECTIONS

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

JANUARY 2019



FRIEDMAN SCHOOL OF NUTRITION SCIENCE AND POLICY  
Feinstein International Center



## **Acknowledgments**

The authors wish to thank Daniel Maxwell and Elizabeth Stites of Tufts University's Feinstein International Center and Jon Kurtz and Alexa Swift of Mercy Corps for their invaluable guidance in the development of research tools and methods and their thorough technical reviews of this report. We would also like to thank Mercy Corps' South Sudanese research team members, who masterfully conducted over 100 hours of qualitative interviews for this report: Gatjang Gabriel Kai, Gateah Pakita Nyasunday, Nyuon Moses Gathuoy and Kuerdiil Maziaw Chuol. Finally, and most importantly, we thank the many South Sudanese respondents who willingly sacrificed their valuable time to tell us their stories.

This report is made possible by the support of the American People through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), with support from the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance. The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.

## **Citation**

Humphrey, A., Krishnan, V., Krystalli, R. (2019). *The Currency of Connections: Why local support systems are integral to helping people recover in South Sudan*. Washington, DC: Mercy Corps

Authors' affiliations:

Alex Humphrey, Mercy Corps

Vaidehi Krishnan, Mercy Corps

Roxani Krystalli, Tufts University

## Table of contents

<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>4</b>
Findings	5
Recommendations	6
<b>Introduction and overview</b>	<b>7</b>
Rationale for study	7
Key terms	9
Research site and methods	10
<b>I. Local support systems in Panyijar County</b>	<b>12</b>
Reciprocal support between households	12
Kinship-based support	13
Non-kinship-based household sharing	15
Livelihood-based groupings	16
Cattle keepers	16
Fisherfolk	18
Trader groups	19
<b>II. Changing local support systems during crisis</b>	<b>21</b>
Changing reciprocal household support	21
Changes within livelihood-based groups	22
The emergence of women’s livelihood groups during crisis	22
Trader groups	24
Cattle groups	24
Fisherfolk	25
Increasing household reliance on marketplaces during crisis	28
Financial and nonmaterial support	28
In-kind gifts to vulnerable households	29
<b>III. How do cash programs interact with local support systems?</b>	<b>30</b>
Humanitarian assistance and household sharing	31
Cash assistance: Implications for household reciprocity	32
Localized perceptions of vulnerability	33
The impact of cash aid on social connections among traders	35
The impact of cash aid on social connections between households and traders	35
<b>IV. Conclusions and recommendations</b>	<b>38</b>

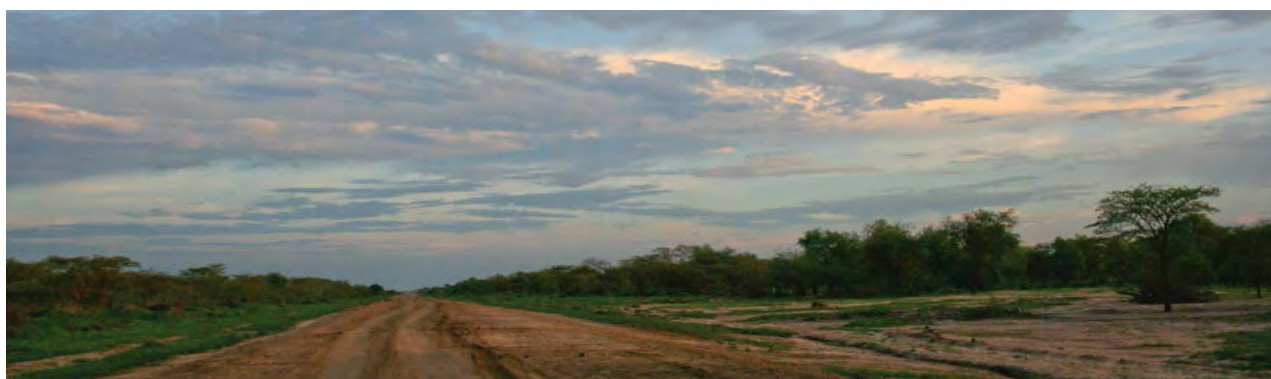
# Executive summary

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.<sup>1</sup>

## 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

This report describes variations in households' social connectedness and their related abilities to benefit from local support systems. Additionally, it considers the different obligations that households and economic actors have to support others in their communities and whether such support is reciprocal. Findings are based on 67 qualitative semi-structured interviews conducted in October 2018 in Panyijar County (southern Unity State). Respondents included a diverse sample of households, economic actors and key informants.



South Sudan—Christopher Rooks

- 
- <sup>1</sup> Forthcoming reports in this series will continue to focus on the role of social connections in coping and recovery among South Sudanese populations. They will consider the changing nature of social connections and local support systems in distinct displacement contexts, including Protection of Civilians sites (Bentiu) and cross-border displacement settings (West Nile, Uganda). The goal of the forthcoming reports is to provide evidence-based recommendations to help aid actors and donors engage with populations in crisis in ways that strengthen underlying social connections and local support systems.
  - <sup>2</sup> **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).
  - <sup>3</sup> **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—Jacob Zoeherman for Mercy Corps

## 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.<sup>4</sup>
- › **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.

---

<sup>4</sup> **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](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.



South Sudan—Mathieu Rouquette

# Introduction and overview

## Rationale for study

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. Communities themselves are often the first responders in a crisis, reacting long before the arrival of humanitarian actors. Research on resilience across a range of contexts demonstrates the importance of social connections, particularly in times of crisis, in enabling populations to manage shocks and stresses.<sup>5</sup> This social connectivity may manifest in many forms: Communities may rely on their immediate neighbors, extended family or clan chieftains for food, access to economic opportunities, or negotiation of safe passage when fleeing from a conflict.

In addition to social support networks, markets have been shown to play critical roles in enabling crisis-affected populations to cope with and recover from conflict, displacement and disasters.<sup>6</sup> Market systems may determine people's access to food and other necessities and often shape their livelihood options. Market activity is persistent, even when disrupted by war, violence and natural disasters; throughout prolonged conflicts, people find new ways to produce, exchange and consume. There is significant overlap between

---

<sup>5</sup> **Daniel P. Aldrich**, *Building Resilience: Social Capital in Post-disaster Recovery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); **Diane Coyle** and **Patrick Meier**, *New Technologies in Emergencies and Conflicts: The Role of Information and Social Networks* (Washington, DC: UN Foundation-Vodafone Foundation Partnership, 2009); **Daniel Maxwell et al.**, *Conflict and Resilience: A Synthesis of Feinstein International Center Work on Building Resilience and Protecting Livelihoods in Conflict-Related Crises* (Boston: Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, 2017); **Mercy Corps**, *What Really Matters for Resilience? Exploratory Evidence on the Determinants of Resilience to Food Security Shocks in Southern Somalia* (Portland, OR: Mercy Corps, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> **Juillard et al.**, *Market Support Interventions*; **Buchanan-Smith** and **Fadul**, *Adaptation and Devastation*; **Catley, Lind**, and **Scoones**, *Pastoralism and Development*.

social connectedness and market access and functioning. Strong relationships and trust between individuals help crisis-affected households share knowledge, find income opportunities, borrow money and obtain other resources. Similarly, local businesses faced with crisis rely on their networks to gather market information; exchange goods, services and financing; and anticipate shifts in the operating environment.

Existing research in the region and elsewhere highlights the importance of viewing resilience through a social connectedness lens. In his seminal work on social capital and disaster recovery, Daniel Aldrich emphasized that doing so can shed light on factors that exacerbate vulnerability, influence coping strategies and affect access to resources.<sup>7</sup> As both existing research and this report show, a framework that examines social connectedness is applicable not only in the context of disasters and recovery but also in the context of armed conflict, with a focus on social connectedness *during* conflict and its immediate aftermath.<sup>8</sup>

Three aspects of a social connectedness lens are key to this analysis. First, research from Mercy Corps and Feinstein International Center in the Horn of Africa underscores that a social connectedness approach highlights not only the vulnerability of populations to crises but also their coping strategies and stories of agency.<sup>9</sup> Second, as Daniel Maxwell and Nisar Majid's research on famine in Somalia has demonstrated, when humanitarian actors fail to understand how individuals cope during crises, they risk undermining their coping strategies.<sup>10</sup> Mercy Corps' research in Syria has echoed this finding and further illustrates the many ways that social networks are reconfigured during war, with implications for individuals' livelihoods and relationships to the state, humanitarian actors, and other members of their household and community.<sup>11</sup> Third, rather than maintaining a singular focus on one sector or dimension of life, a social connectedness lens is necessarily multisectoral, with a scope that ranges from investigations of markets and trade to inquiries about social trust, rites of passage, and analyses of gender and youth dimensions.<sup>12</sup> Social connectedness, therefore, requires examination of not only individual identities, vulnerabilities and coping strategies but also relationships, power dynamics and the social structures that affect them.<sup>13</sup>

Mercy Corps, in collaboration with Tufts University's Feinstein International Center, is undertaking research to better understand these dynamics in South Sudan and their implications for humanitarian actors. This report is the first in a series that not only will explore how social connectedness links to resilience, livelihoods and physical safety in a context of protracted conflict and instability but also will examine how external interventions influence social connections and local systems of coping and recovery.

---

7 **Aldrich**, *Building Resilience*.

8 **Nat J. Colletta** and **Michelle L. Cullen**, *Violent Conflict and the Transformation of Social Capital: Lessons from Cambodia, Rwanda, Guatemala, and Somalia* (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2000).

9 **Jon Kurtz** and **Kate McMahon**, *Pathways from Peace to Resilience: Evidence from the Greater Horn of Africa on the Links between Conflict Management and Resilience to Food Security Shocks* (Washington, DC: Mercy Corps, 2015); **Elizabeth Stites** and **Kristin Bushby**, "Livelihood Strategies and Interventions in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Areas: Assessing Trends and Changes from 2012 to 2016," Working Paper 57 (London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium, 2017).

10 **Maxwell** and **Majid**, *Famine in Somalia*.

11 **Kimberly Howe et al.**, *The Wages of War: Learning from How Syrians Have Adapted Their Livelihoods through Seven Years of Conflict* (Portland, OR: Mercy Corps, 2018).

12 **Margie Buchanan-Smith** and **Susanne Jaspars**, "Conflict, Camps and Coercion: The Ongoing Livelihoods Crisis in Darfur," *Disasters* 31, no. S1 (March 2007): S57–S76; **Cathy McIlwaine** and **Caroline O. N. Moser**, "Violence and Social Capital in Urban Poor Communities: Perspectives from Colombia and Guatemala," *Journal of International Development* 13, no. 7 (September 2001): 965–984.

13 **Gurung** and **Shean**, *Social Capital*; **Helen Young et al.**, *Risk, Resilience and Pastoralist Mobility* (Boston: Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, 2016).



## Key terms

**Social connectedness:** The sum of people’s social linkages, including the social networks on which they can draw; the extent and strength of those networks and their ability to mobilize resources; the nature of obligation that such networks carry; and the reciprocity presumed in terms of collective risk and mutual support. Social connectedness sounds like a “positive” thing—that is, the greater the connectedness, the better. However, social connectedness is inherently linked to social hierarchy in the larger sense, such that “connectedness” for one group may well spell marginalization or exclusion for another. Factors that either contribute to or differentiate the strength of connectedness may include gender, age, lineage of clan, ethnicity, social class, political interests and business partnerships, among other factors.<sup>14</sup>

**Social capital:** The networks and resources available to people through their relationships with others. Existing literature focuses primarily on three forms of social capital: (a) bonding social capital, which refers to “horizontal relationships in a homogenous group, such as within a peer group, family, culture, religion, gender, or ethnicity,” (b) bridging social capital, which refers to “horizontal relationships between heterogeneous groups from different geographic locations, ethnicities, religions, genders, or other identity groups,” and (c) linking social capital, which refers to “vertical relationships between social networks with differing levels of power or social status.”<sup>15</sup>

**Social networks:** A web of socially connected households, which may be composed of a combination of family members, friends and economic ties.

**Market:** A set of arrangements whereby buyers and sellers are in contact to exchange goods or services. It is the interaction of demand and supply through both commercial and noncommercial means.<sup>16</sup>

**Marketplaces:** The physical spaces in which buyers and sellers meet to exchange goods and services.

**Economic actors:** All people or groups engaged in income-generating livelihood activities. In this report, these include cattle keepers, fisherfolk, traders and firewood collectors.

**Traders:** In this report, traders are considered to be economic actors who operate permanent or semipermanent shops in local marketplaces and who most often import goods from external markets.



South Sudan—Cassandra Nelson

14 Daniel Maxwell et al., “Facing Famine: Somali Experiences in the Famine of 2011,” *Food Policy* 65 (December 2016): 63–73.

15 Sanjay Gurung and Allison Shean, *Social Capital and Good Governance: A Governance in Action Research Brief* (Portland, OR: Mercy Corps, 2017), 2, <https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/Social-Capital-Good-Governance-Mercy-Corps-2017.pdf>. Mercy Corps defines social capital as “the networks and resources available to people through their relationships with others.”

16 Definition from <http://www.springfieldcentre.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/2015-09-M4P-Op-Guide-Sept2015.pdf>.



South Sudan—Cassandra Nelson

## Research site and methods

Panyijar County, in southern Unity State, is in an opposition-controlled region and home to an almost exclusively Nuer population. The region has remained relatively stable throughout South Sudan's civil war, in large part because of its geographic isolation and the natural barrier provided by the Sudd, a vast swamp that encompasses the area. As a result, the county hosts a large number of internally displaced people, estimated at 74,888 individuals in August 2018.<sup>17</sup> Most internally displaced people in Panyijar are thought to be displaced from neighboring Leer and Mayendit counties, which have been home to some of the conflict's most intense fighting. The vast majority of internally displaced people in Panyijar report having strong social connections in the county that predate their arrival and have informed their decisions to relocate to the region.

Although Panyijar may provide a degree of refuge to those fleeing violence, displaced and host populations still face several other shocks and stresses, including drought, food insecurity, revenge killings and cholera. In April 2018, Panyijar County was classified as Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) Phase 3 food insecure (with the caveat that it would likely be IPC Phase 4 in the absence of humanitarian programming), and adjacent Rumbek Center, Twic East and Duk counties were categorized as IPC Phase 4.<sup>18</sup>

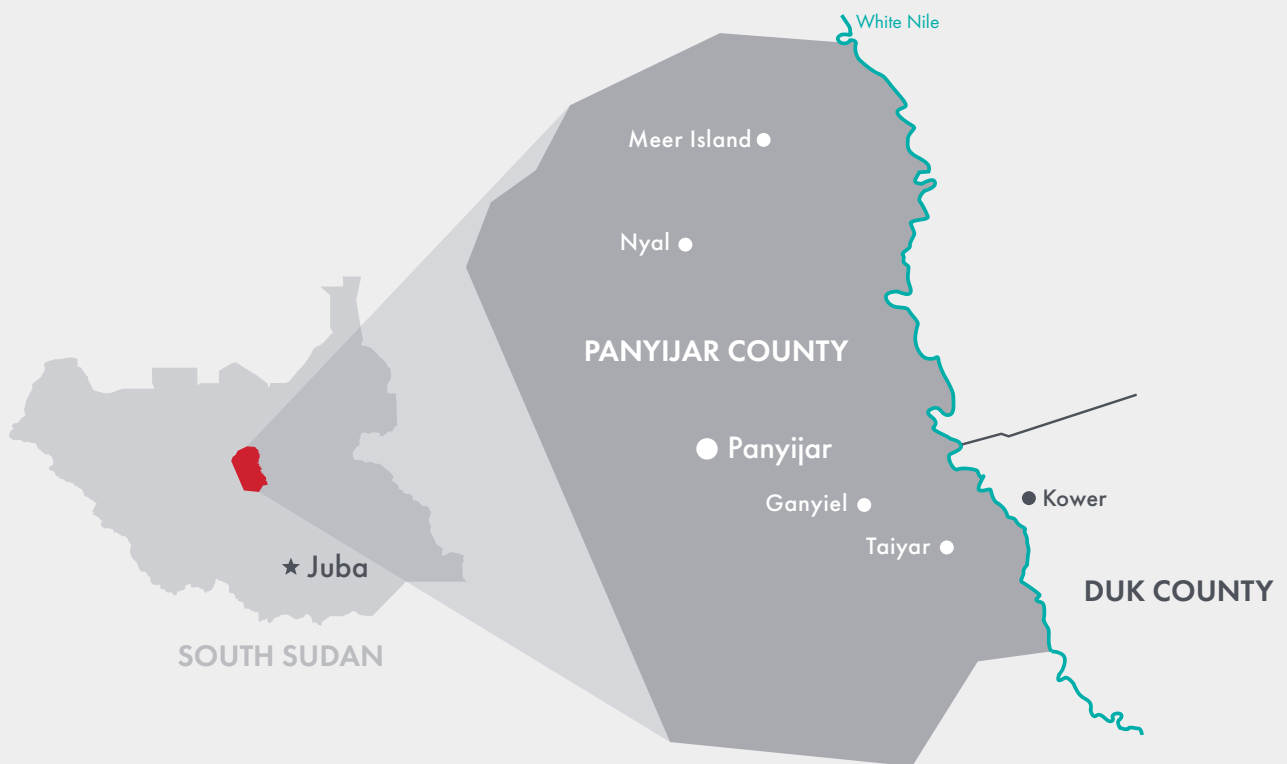
**Methods:** The findings in this report are based on qualitative research in Panyijar County, southern Unity State, South Sudan. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted to identify the key dynamics that informed social organization in Panyijar; the related systems of local support that households and economic actors rely on during crisis; and the effects that humanitarian interventions have on these systems. Questionnaires were developed in consultation with both local Mercy Corps staff and international experts.

17 "South Sudan—Biometric Registration Update—Panyijar (July 2018)" The International Organization for Migration's Displacement Tracking Matrix, August 8, 2018, <https://displacement.iom.int/reports/south-sudan-biometric-registration-update-panyijar-july-2018>.

18 For detailed IPC data, see the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations website: <http://www.fao.org/emergencies/resources/maps/detail/en/c/1104317>.

**Sample:** A total of 67 qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted in Nyal, Ganyiel and surrounding “payams” (administrative subunits below counties). Interviews were conducted with a diverse sample of respondents. These included male and female internally displaced people and host community members, recipients and nonrecipients of Mercy Corps cash transfers, traders in local marketplaces, and key informants, including members of Mercy Corps’ national staff based in Panyijar and members of various informal livelihood- based support groups, including fisherfolk, cattle keepers and firewood collectors.

**Process:** All interviews occurred in September and October 2018. Interviews were conducted in local languages (Nuer and Juba Arabic) by Mercy Corps research staff. The research team was composed of four South Sudanese interviewers (three male and one female) who worked under the guidance of two expatriates (one male and one female). Interviews were recorded and English transcripts were written by the South Sudanese interviewers. In turn, the interviews were coded and analyzed by the expatriate researchers.



South Sudan—Lindsay Hamsik





South Sudan—Mathieu Rouquette

## I. Local support systems in Panyijar County

Households and economic actors in Panyijar have a long history of providing one another with various forms of material and nonmaterial support. While these systems of localized support predate South Sudan's current crisis, they have become especially critical elements of household coping and recovery in the context of conflict and its related insecurity, shocks and stresses. The following section of this report describes two key elements of local support and social protection in Panyijar: the reciprocal support between households, and the provision of support between members of livelihood-based groups. **Reciprocal support between households** may be based on (1) kinship relationships, often cemented in strong norms surrounding the exchange of cattle-based bridewealth payments, a process that underpins obligatory sharing and support across vast and complex social networks, or (2) traditional practices of sharing between nonkin that, although voluntary, are critical to mobilizing reciprocal support between households. **Livelihood-based groups**, including cattle keepers, fishermen and traders, play a critical role in providing material and nonmaterial support not only to their members and their households during crisis but also, indirectly, to the wider community.

### Reciprocal support between households

In South Sudan, the sharing between households of resources such as food, assets and, to a lesser extent, cash, as well as the sharing of labor-intensive economic and noneconomic activities, is a critical component of local social protection, coping and recovery. Such sharing occurs between both kin (households that share a familial tie, whether by blood or marriage) and nonkin. Sharing between kin, whose relationships are cemented in the exchange of cattle as bridewealth payments, is governed by a sense of obligation and enforced



by strong cultural norms. Sharing between nonkin, including friends and individuals of the same age set,<sup>19</sup> is considered a voluntary practice. While not enforced by the same strict norms as sharing between kin, sharing between nonkin is a critical means of mobilizing reciprocal support in times of need.

### “The crisis”

In South Sudan, people commonly refer to “the crisis” in conversation, but their definitions of the phrase often vary, including by geography. In Panyijar, the phrase usually refers to the effects of violent conflict and the resulting displacement—often specifically to government soldiers’ 2015 attack on Taiyar, the main river port supplying marketplaces throughout the county. This attack was followed by several government advances on Panyijar’s largest villages, which, though quickly repelled, forced many households to temporarily flee to surrounding islands. Others took shelter in nearby swamps, where they submerged themselves in water for safety and protection and subsisted on wild food for days on end.

The Taiyar Port attack continues to affect households in Panyijar. Households fear another such attack and therefore are reluctant to invest time and labor into restarting livelihoods, such as farming. Indeed, in the aftermath of the attack, many households permanently abandoned their farms in the far reaches of the county and moved to more densely populated payams, including Nyal and Ganyiel, in an effort to ensure safety in numbers.

› *Before the Taiyar Port attack, we used to farm on a large scale, which would prevent our families from starving. Since the attack, we’ve lost the morale for farming because we fear we’ll be attacked by government forces. We’re now fully reliant on WFP food assistance and wild foods, like waterlilies, and sometimes we get fish from the swamps using the fishing gear we get from the NGOs.*

—Female respondent, Nyal

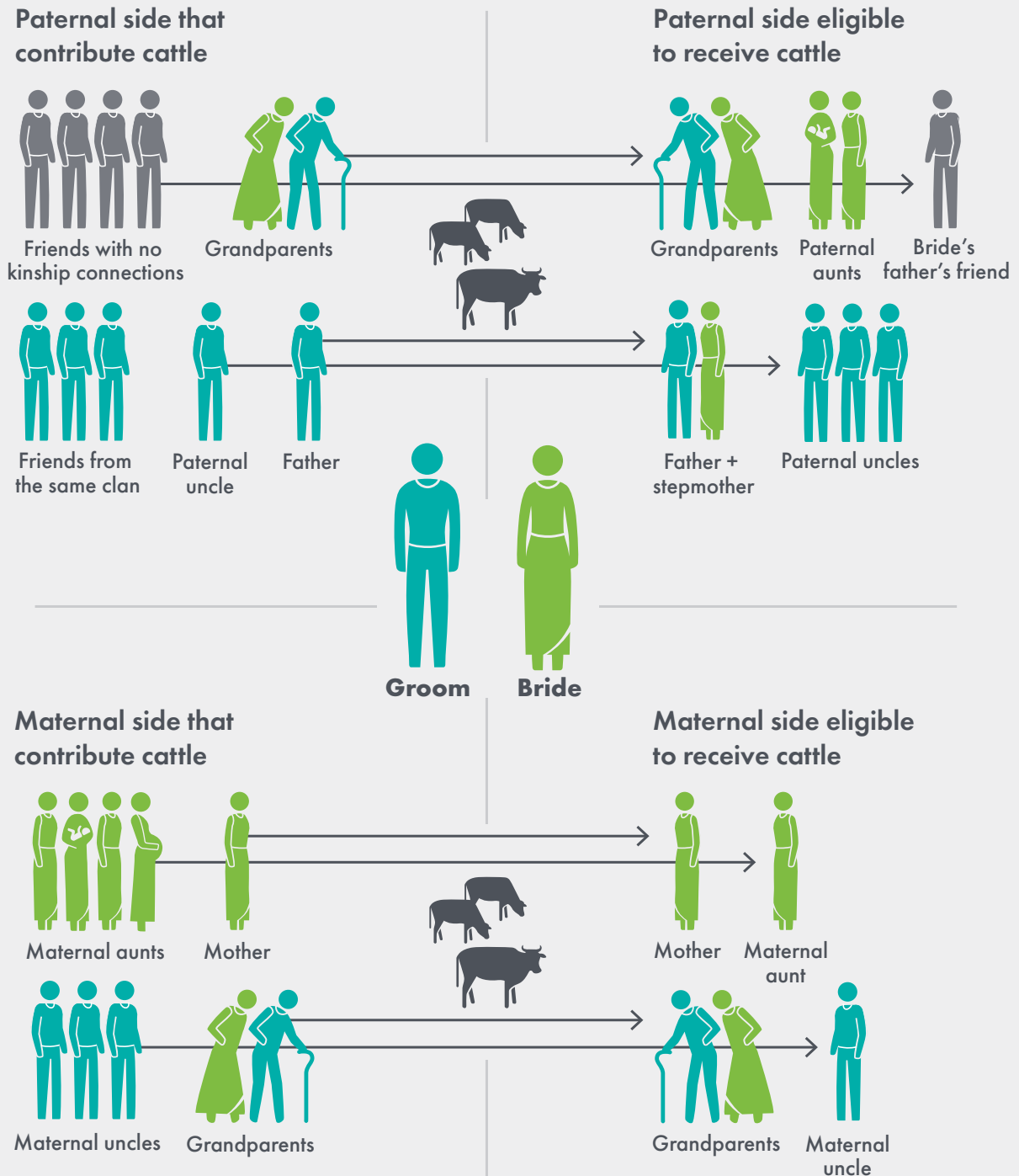
### Kinship-based support

Kinship-based support between households related by blood or marriage is a critical component of local coping and social protection systems in South Sudan. Kinship networks are strengthened and expanded primarily via the exchange of cattle as bridewealth. Bridewealth is paid according to a nuanced system whereby members of the groom’s immediate and extended family, on both the maternal and paternal sides, offer a negotiated number of cattle to the equivalent members of the bride’s family. Additionally, the groom may invite friends, often from the same age set, and other nonkin relations to contribute cattle to the bridewealth. Receiving this invitation is considered an honor, and it indicates an especially strong bond between the giver and the recipient.<sup>20</sup> (See Illustration I: Bridewealth Cattle Exchange)

19 In Nuer society, an “age set” is composed of males born within one or two years of one another. Individuals in the same age set form strong bonds and participate together in coming-of-age ceremonies involving scarring rituals that result in distinct facial markings known locally as “gaar.” Households that include men in the same age set are expressly forbidden from intermarrying. Because of this, members of the same age set rarely share kinship relationships.

20 For more on the practice of bridewealth in South Sudan, see **Heather J. Sharkey**, review of *Nuer Dilemmas: Coping with Money, War, and the State* by **Sharon E. Hutchinson**, *African Studies Review* 41, no. 1 (April 1998): 160–161, <https://doi.org/10.2307/524689>; **Sharon Hutchinson**, “The Cattle of Money and the Cattle of Girls among the Nuer, 1930–83,” *American Ethnologist* 19, no. 2 (May 1992): 294–316, <https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.1992.19.2.02a00060>.

## Bridewealth Cattle Exchange



The groom's family members—both paternal and maternal—are the primary cattle contributors in bridewealth cattle negotiations. Similarly, both the paternal and the maternal sides of the bride's family are eligible to receive cattle. The groom may also invite his male friends to contribute cattle toward his wedding. The groom may or may not share clan-based kinship connections with these individuals.

During the bridewealth negotiation, members of the groom's family negotiate with their equivalents in the bride's family. For example, the groom's father negotiates with the bride's father about the number of cattle that will be provided, and the groom's maternal uncle or aunt negotiates with the bride's maternal uncle or aunt, respectively.

Informal rules and norms dictate many aspects of the cattle exchange, including the particular members of the bride’s extended family who are eligible to receive cattle, the number of cattle certain individuals receive, and sometimes even the color and type of cattle (e.g., bulls, cows or heifers) to which particular relatives are

› *Some relatives may receive a cow; some may get a spear. The spear signifies the end of that relationship—either in terms of degrees of separation or in terms of your lack of eligibility to receive material support anymore—a calculation based on your willingness to extend support in times of need.*

—Male key informant, Ganyiel

---

entitled. This is determined in part by the proximity of an individual’s relationship to the bride, as well as by the extent of the support an individual may have previously provided to the bride’s immediate family.

The exchange of cattle is initiated in a formal ceremony that brings together key members of the bride’s and groom’s families as well as other important community leaders. At the ceremony, the cattle exchange is carefully negotiated, and both the individuals who will give cattle and the individuals who will receive cattle are identified. Subsequently, the individual givers and receivers meet separately to examine the specific cattle, conduct further one-on-one negotiations as necessary, and ultimately

complete the exchange. Respondents report that in the course of this protracted process, new relationships are established between the giving and receiving parties, leading to strong bonds between households and new, diversified and lasting sources of support long after the marriage ceremony has ended.

### **Non-kinship-based household sharing**

While kinship connections are a critical source of support for households in Panyijar, relationships between nonkin—friends, neighbors, age set members and others—are also of great importance to local social protection systems. This is especially true for internally displaced people in Panyijar, who may not have any relatives residing in the area. While sharing and support among nonkin are strongly rooted in Nuer culture, the practice is entirely voluntary (unlike kinship-based sharing, which is enforced by strong informal rules and norms). Nonetheless, such sharing is widely practiced, primarily because it allows households to seek and receive reciprocal support in times of need. Importantly, households that willingly share even meager resources with others are more likely to receive support from the wider community, and not only from those whom they have directly supported. Reciprocity, in this sense, is not a one-to-one transaction.

› *Before the crisis, people supported each other in many ways. We all shared food and helped with activities like clearing land to cultivate food. We still support each other in these ways, but the crisis has made doing so more difficult.*

—Male respondent, Nyal

---

Respondents widely regard food as one of the most important things exchanged between households that do not share kinship relationships. Indeed, in Panyijar and other parts of South Sudan, individuals commonly describe their most vital social connections as people who “eat from the same cooking pot” as they do, and these people can include both kin and nonkin. Sharing food has historically served as an important source of community cohesion and as a means of building trust and strengthening relationships between households.

That is, food is not only shared out of necessity or exclusively with households that are going hungry. Rather, the widespread practice, rooted in traditions that predate the current crisis, serves a distinct social purpose. However, the extent to which households can share food has changed during crisis. These changes, as well as their implications for community cohesion and social protection during crisis, are discussed in Section 2 of this report.

Notably, sharing between households is not limited to food. It also includes helping with labor-intensive economic and noneconomic activities, such as clearing farms and gardens for cultivation and building or rebuilding shelters; borrowing and gifting household goods; and sharing assets, such as lactating cows, in times of need. Households also share important advice about livelihoods and provide emotional support to each other during funerals and other times of distress.

## Livelihood-based groupings

Informal livelihood-based groups of cattle keepers, fisherfolk and traders have a long history in Panyijar that predates South Sudan's current crisis. These groups primarily serve to facilitate collective action and group member support, and they also provide important direct and indirect benefits to the wider communities in which they operate. Each type of group functions according to distinct informal rules and norms that govern membership and the types of support that members are expected to provide to one another. While the cohesion of these groups, as well as the extent and type of support shared among members, is changing in the context of South Sudan's crisis (see Section 2), livelihood-based groups remain a critical pillar of local social protection systems in Panyijar.

### Cattle keepers

Locally known as "guiwich," cattle keeper groups are generally composed of four or five male herders who tend 1,200-1,500 head of cattle. Herds usually combine cattle owned by the guiwich members with cattle belonging to members of the wider community, who appoint the group members as caretakers.





Guiwich groups mobilize around a common livelihood and shared resources (including water and grazing lands), and they help ensure safety and protect herds against cattle raiders. In Panyijar, the threat of cattle raiding is especially prevalent in the dry season, when cattle herders are forced to travel long distances to access water and grazing land for their animals. Concurrently, the dry season enables easy overland mobility, making these groups an easy target for cattle raiders from neighboring counties.

Guiwich members are exclusively male. During the dry season, they establish cattle camps near water and grazing land. Members often leave some female kin behind to take care of their homestead and farms while other women (including members' wives and sisters) and children accompany them at the camp. At the camp, women perform domestic duties, such as gathering firewood, cleaning and cooking.

**›** *When my group member gets into a problem that requires cattle, I do give one of my cattle as part of the contribution to him. I do this because I want to protect his cattle from being finished by problems.*

—Kwor wich, Ganyiel

---

Guiwich groups may or may not be made up of blood relatives, and although they are exclusively composed of Nuer members, they often include individuals from diverse Nuer subclans, such as the Chieng Nyawaar, Nyaal, Gaakal and Luok. Guiwich members appoint a leader, locally known as the “kwor wich,” who has numerous responsibilities related to ensuring group cohesion and the sharing of support, all of which are steeped in centuries of tradition. The kwor wich plays an important role in resolving conflicts among group members or with other guiwich groups, and he works to foster a sense of belonging and group identity among members. He also enforces informal rules regarding group members' obligations to one another, coordinates with other guiwich groups, and negotiates access to desirable grazing land.

Guiwich members provide both material and nonmaterial support to one another. If a member's herd is reduced by raiding or disease or if he encounters a social problem that requires payment in cattle to resolve, all guiwich members are obligated to redistribute a few of their own cattle to him to ensure that his herd is not significantly depleted.

Notably, the guiwich members may also elect to extend support to group members' kin and nonmember friends. For example, the guiwich members may lend a vulnerable household a lactating cow to meet that household's food needs. This is an example of the important role that guiwich groups play in wider communal social protection systems. Group members also help one another clear and cultivate farms, build shelters, and perform other domestic activities. In terms of nonmaterial support, members offer one another emotional guidance when a death occurs and share practical livelihood advice. Additionally, the guiwich members fight side by side when cattle raiders from neighboring Dinka communities threaten their herds.

**›** *If a group member refuses to help another, we let him stay within guiwich but clearly explain that if he happens to face a problem in the future, no one will bother to support him at all. We the people who support one another will continue giving that support among ourselves, but he will be excluded because he has failed to extend the support.*

—Kwor wich, Nyal

---

While guiwich members may share both kinship and nonkinship relationships, group norms dictate that all are obliged to support one another. If a cattle keeper fails to help a fellow group member in need, the kwor wich summons the cattle keeper to appear before the guiwich to explain his actions. If the cattle keeper demonstrates that he cannot provide such support because of personal hardship, he is excused and forgiven. However, if he continues to refuse to share without good cause, the kwor wich instructs the other members to withhold support from the cattle keeper until he agrees to adhere to the group’s sharing norms. In some extreme cases, the kwor wich may permanently banish the transgressor, forcing him to seek membership in a new guiwich.



› *Traders in the market value profit more than anything else. But fishermen always contribute cash when one of us needs help. Sometimes he pays us back if he is able to, but sometimes we give cash as a gift. Traders don’t support one another like we do.*

—Fisherman, Meer Island

## Fisherfolk

Like cattle keepers, fisherfolk operate in informal groups. Fisherfolk groups, called “balang-kal,” reside in fishing camps headed by an appointed leader, the “kwor balang-nyi.”<sup>21</sup> In Nuer contexts, fisherfolk are considered relatively poor compared with the rest of the community because traditionally they have not owned cattle. Because of this, fisherfolk have historically been unable to marry into the wider community. Thus, fisherfolk often do not benefit from important kinship-based support stemming from cattle exchange and bridewealth negotiations, which, as discussed in previous sections, are important means of mobilizing localized support and diversifying one’s social network in Panyijar. While the exclusion of fisherfolk has decreased in the past decade, especially during the current crisis (see Section 2), fisherfolk continue to live largely detached from the rest of society, in isolated, ethnically homogenous groups on remote islands or on floating homes made of bamboo reeds.

Given fisherfolk’s geographical isolation from the wider community, fishing group members are especially reliant on one another for support. While fishing is predominantly conducted by men in Panyijar, female members of fishermen’s families may conduct their own business in the swamps—for example, selling or bartering locally made alcohol. Male fisherfolk from various fishing camps hold regular meetings at which they resolve disputes within their groups and discuss personal or livelihood-related problems. In turn, attendees offer one another advice and emotional support as needed. In some cases, attendees even take up collections on behalf of members facing particular hardships, such as debt or illness.

21 In Panyijar, people fish as both a primary livelihood activity and a subsistence activity to fill gaps in household food needs. Here, we refer to the former group.

Key informants explain that fishermen are more willing to share cash among themselves than are members of mainland community groups, especially traders. This cash sharing is likely due to the fact that fisherfolk do not depend on markets for food; they enjoy reliable access to fish as a function of their livelihood. Fisherfolk's reliance on markets for livelihood inputs (fishing nets, hooks, etc.) is also considerably lower because some humanitarian actors provide these for free. Fisherfolk are relatively protected from cattle raids and other asset depletion stemming from displacement or insecurity and hence may not face the same level of crisis-related economic hardship that pastoralists or farmers face. Further, dried fish is one of the few commodities that remain in high demand throughout the year. It is frequently exported from Panyijar to distant markets, including Juba and Khartoum, and can potentially generate consistent and significant cash income. All of these factors likely result in fisherfolk being more willing and able to share cash with one another in times of need.

**›** *We have supported several displaced families when they come to the islands. We give them dry fish, cash and mosquito nets and transport them with our own canoes from islands like Meer to Nyal for free.*

—Fisherwoman, Meer Island

Besides supporting one another, fisherfolk provide important assistance to especially vulnerable members of the wider community. During the crisis, for example, many internally displaced people from neighboring counties fled to islands in Panyijar for protection. Fisherfolk welcomed these new arrivals, providing them with canoe transportation, gifts of dry fish and even cash. When visiting the mainland, fisherfolk also support vulnerable members of the host community with similar gifts of dry fish,

sorghum from their World Food Programme (WFP) rations and, on occasion, cash. Fisherfolk, as well as other household respondents, explain that their motivation to share such support with others—including during times of crisis, when their resources may be limited—is rooted in centuries-old Nuer traditions around sharing. Notably, such sharing among households and livelihood groups is not accompanied by an expectation of repayment.

## Trader groups

In Panyijar's various marketplaces, traders often form support groups of 10-15 members each. These groups are exclusively male. Although women conduct small-scale business in Panyijar's markets (e.g., selling tea or firewood), only men run the permanent, well-established shops. Trader groups are self-mobilized and form on the basis of trust and members' perceived business acumen. While some group members may be related, many share no kinship ties. Trader groups are governed by informal rules that are meant to maintain group cohesion and ensure that members retain positive reputations within the market and wider community. For example, members are prohibited from drinking alcohol, committing adultery, and becoming involved in revenge killings or other community disputes.<sup>22</sup> If a trader violates these rules, his fellow members may expel him from the group. Unlike other livelihood-based support groups, trader groups do not appoint leaders. Rather, all traders are required to join a local trade union, the leadership of which is elected. The trade union leaders are primarily charged with resolving disputes within the marketplace.

22 Cattle raiding—i.e., the act of stealing someone's cows (most often from a rival tribe or faction)—is a culturally acceptable practice that is part of a young male's initiation into adulthood. Cattle raiding is one way men prove they are brave and eligible to marry. While men have raided cattle using their spears (which are more likely to injure than to kill) as weapons, with the proliferation of guns, cattle raiding has taken a far more serious turn. When a male member of a household is killed during a cattle raid, whether by design or default, members of his household will then seek to kill a male relative or several male relatives of the offender in revenge, setting off a chain of incidents.

› *In the group, we're not age-mates, not related—some are just friends. We come together entirely because of one thing in common, which is business.*

—Male trader, Nyal

---

type of support they are willing to provide. These criteria are based on two key considerations: (1) whether the trader in need is seeking assistance in response to a business-related hardship (as opposed to a personal household matter) and (2) if he *is* seeking support in response to a business-related hardship, whether he is perceived to be a reliable businessman who will likely leverage the support to the ultimate benefit of the entire marketplace.

Traders make a clear distinction between what they consider a group member's livelihood-related needs and what they consider his personal or household-related needs. If a group member requests assistance in response to a household hardship (for example, to pay for medical assistance, household food or his child's education), his peers will likely willingly provide him with material support—for example, by giving him cash or lending him a lactating cow. Traders, however, are unlikely to use their own business revenue to assist fellow group members in such scenarios. Rather, traders say that when they provide such support, they use only their own household assets.

On the other hand, if a trader faces a business-related hardship, his fellow group members may be willing to support him by sharing business revenue or even giving him goods from their own shops to sell. Traders strictly reserve such support for successful traders with demonstrated business acumen who, through no fault of their own, are facing isolated livelihood-related challenges (such as a shop burning down or the loss of goods during transport).

The clear delineation between the types of support that traders are willing to share within business spheres versus social spheres suggests that the norms and traditions that govern and enforce the provision of support between households are not present in the marketplace. Importantly, this observation implies that humanitarian interventions, including cash-based programming, are likely to affect social connectedness and local support systems differently in the marketplace than in the social sphere. This phenomenon is discussed in more detail in Section 3 of this report.

Like members of other livelihood groups, trader group members provide one another with both material and nonmaterial support; for example, they share assets and advice and assist in one another's shops. However, while the members of other livelihood-based groups often base support on a particular member's perceived vulnerability, traders employ strict criteria when determining whether to assist a fellow group member and when deciding the

› *In my group, we help one another by pooling assets in order to afford transportation costs. We all pool our assets together in order to hire a boat.*

—Trader, Katieth market

---





South Sudan—Mathieu Rouquette

## II. Changing local support systems during crisis

In the context of South Sudan's ongoing humanitarian crisis, local social protection and coping systems are changing. This is true in terms of the type and extent of support available within communities, the relative importance of the different sources of local support and social protection, and the social connections that underpin the provision of such support.

### Changing reciprocal household support

In Panyijar, relationships between households are changing because of the crisis. Similarly, the extent and types of support exchanged between both kin and nonkin are evolving. For example, because of rampant crisis-related food insecurity, economic stagnation and cattle depletion, households in Panyijar are finding it increasingly difficult to provide material support to one another. Nonetheless, the strong sharing norms that predate South Sudan's current crisis remain largely intact. Households continue to voluntarily share their own meager resources—including humanitarian aid, such as food or cash—with one another.

*› The diversity and number of social connections are more important to me than the strength of my connections. Having people in different places in South Sudan means that I can travel anywhere freely and feel safe.*

—Male respondent, Nyal

› *Before the crisis, people supported one another in many ways: from sharing food and other basic needs to helping with activities like clearing land to cultivate food. Now people's relationships are still the same, but people cannot offer as much support for free. Now, no one has much, so this type of support is waning. People do not have enough for themselves, so they are not able to share with others as much as they want to.*

—Male respondent, Nyal

Notably, in response to crisis-related shocks and stresses, many households are strengthening and growing their networks in an effort to expand their social safety nets. They do so with the explicit intent of mobilizing new sources of support and security in geographically dispersed areas. In the context of this crisis, households consider the breadth and diversity of their social networks to be more important than the depth of specific relationships. For example, many members of the host community in Panyijar report actively seeking to establish relationships with recently arrived internally displaced people from neighboring counties, including Leer and Mayendit. To develop these connections, host community members share food and shelter with internally displaced people with whom they have no prior kinship bonds. Households' efforts to broaden their social

networks are not new; however, in the context of crisis, households may perceive this network diversification as a means of guaranteeing a reliable safety net of support in the event that they become displaced.

Although households facing forced displacement during a violent crisis prioritize proximity and safety when determining relocation patterns, their secondary considerations do include geographies where they have social connections to draw upon for (albeit) short-term support. It is important that aid actors know who supports displaced populations and that they understand the nature and sustainability of the localized support such populations can rely on. Prioritizing the provision of humanitarian assistance, such as food or cash, to host members who provide crucial support to displaced households may help preserve and strengthen these underlying social support systems.

## Changes within livelihood-based groups

In the course of South Sudan's protracted crisis, the nature and extent of support shared within groups of cattle keepers, fisherfolk and traders have changed to varying degrees. So, too, has the cohesion of these livelihood-based groups. Additionally, new livelihood-based groups have emerged during the crisis, primarily among women involved in small-scale livelihood activities, indicating the importance of critical crisis-time material and nonmaterial support among members. Finally, livelihood groups in Panyijar have, on at least one occasion, played pivotal roles in developing localized peace agreements, such as the Duk Agreement (see pages 26 and 27), with neighboring, and previously warring, Dinka-populated communities. The Duk Agreement allowed traders to gain access to a key alternative market in Juba. This greatly improved their ability to bring goods via the Nile and to resupply the local markets in Panyijar to the benefit of local communities.

### The emergence of women's livelihood groups during crisis

In Panyijar, men are the default heads of the household and generally control household assets, such as cash and cattle. In this context, women in Panyijar have historically relied on male household members to obtain in-kind food or other goods, as well as cash loans and credit, from traders in local marketplaces. In the midst of South Sudan's civil war, however, many men in Panyijar have left their families to join the ranks of opposition forces, and many have been killed, leaving women as heads of household. While male relatives on the absent

**›** *During the crisis, we women collect firewood together and form small groups. These groups are in all of the communities and are usually composed of around eight to 10 people. If a member of our group can't go with us to collect firewood for some reason, we each contribute some of the money we earn for the day and buy her food.*

—Fisherman, Meer Island

or deceased husband's side traditionally inherit responsibility for widows and their children, the capacity of these men to shoulder the financial burden of their extended families has considerably eroded in the context of South Sudan's protracted crisis. As a result, many women have been left to fend for themselves.

In addition to taking on new cash-generating responsibilities, women have been thrust into male-oriented functions, including negotiating credit with traders. In this context, female heads of household are forming new livelihood-based self-help groups to mitigate the effects of the absence of their husbands.

The members of these groups, which include firewood collectors' groups and tea sellers' groups, save small amounts of money through a rotating savings and credit association (ROSCA).<sup>23</sup> They also support particularly vulnerable members by taking up cash collections for them. Group members share food with one another and band together for safety and protection. For example, when traveling to remote locations in search of wood, firewood collection groups often move together in hopes of deterring attacks from roving criminal elements.



South Sudan—Henry McInnes for Mercy Corps

23 A "ROSCA" is a community-based savings mechanism. Each group member saves on a weekly or monthly basis, and the collective savings are given to one member as credit. Importantly, the money does not have to be paid back. All members can access this important cash source, which can help address household or livelihood needs.



## Trader groups

Trader groups have been especially affected by crisis-related shocks and stresses. Informal taxation and escalating insecurity along trade routes have placed heavy burdens on Panyijar traders. Traders report that it has become far more difficult to provide material support to fellow group members during the crisis, in large part because of the depletion of their stocks and revenue. Traders also say that because of the crisis, they have lost confidence in their fellow group members' ability to repay loans and thus are increasingly reluctant to provide them with material support.

Trader group cohesion has also eroded during the crisis because of disruptions in members' participation in social functions that have historically served as bases for maintaining group cohesion. For example, traders explain that the voluntary contribution of cattle to fellow traders' bridewealth payments has long served as an important means of building trust and cohesion among group members. During the crisis, however, many traders have lost their cattle to raiding and therefore can no longer participate in the ritual. Some group members say that because of this, the trust among members and the strength of members' relationships have deteriorated. In turn, traders are less willing to provide support to their fellow group members, and in some cases, members have even left their group.

› *Support within our group is going down because we don't have as many cows now. When traders can't give cattle for one another's marriages, their trust goes down. When you don't have cows, you need to leave the group and struggle hard to get some. Only then can you return to the group, and you will be trusted and respected again. You will again be able to contribute when your friends are marrying, and this makes your connection to the group very strong again.*

—Trader, Nyal market

## Cattle groups

While guiwich groups have not been entirely immune to the economic impacts of the crisis, group cohesion and members' trust and willingness to support one another during this time have reportedly remained relatively strong. Cattle keepers say that they continue to redistribute (albeit smaller numbers of) cattle within their groups to especially vulnerable members. Respondents, including members of guiwich groups and other community members such as traders, ascribe cattle groups' sustained cohesion in large part to the strong traditions, rooted in centuries of practice, that govern group norms and behavior. Respondents say that these norms have remained largely intact because influence from outside actors on guiwich groups has been minimal. Further, guiwich members report being somewhat insulated from the crisis-related marketplace fluctuations and related shocks and stresses that exert significant hardship on other livelihood-based groups, especially traders. This may be in part because guiwich members largely subsist on the milk, blood and meat of their cattle and therefore are relatively less reliant on the marketplace for immediate household food needs.

This finding demonstrates that cattle keepers' system of social organization and collective action—the sharing of food and the redistribution of cattle when a member's herd is depleted—shelters them from crisis-related marketplace volatility. This has important implications for aid actors that aim to strengthen both the physical marketplace and the underlying markets (economic activity) that support livelihoods. First, individuals' reliance on marketplaces to meet essential household and livelihood needs is not homogenous and varies considerably based on seasonal highs and lows and levels of political and social unrest.



Interventions that strengthen marketplaces should do so with the implicit goal of providing a safeguard in times of heightened need. Additionally, it is important that aid actors, in particular ones that design and deliver economic recovery programs that work with specific livelihood types, understand localized systems of coping and work to preserve and strengthen them.

**›** *Cattle camp groups are the only groups that have not been changed by the crisis. This is because there has never been an outside influence that has changed the group—like what happened to the traders. The cattle camps have been in existence for centuries among the Nuer, so the external influence has no influence.*

—Male respondent, Nyal

---

Despite remaining relatively more cohesive than other livelihood groups, guiwich groups have nonetheless experienced some marked changes that have mostly stemmed from the loss of social connections with cattle groups in other geographical locations. Cattle keepers say that this loss is largely due to political fragmentation during South Sudan's crisis, which has resulted in the emergence of numerous new local administrative units.<sup>24</sup> In this context, new guiwich groups have formed that are exclusively composed of members from new payams. Respondents say that this has weakened the relationships that cattle keepers and their leaders have enjoyed with their previous counterparts, bonds that have been crucial when

negotiating access to prime grazing lands and water. Notably, based on a common economic goal of accessing grazing lands and water, pre-crisis cooperation with cattle keepers from different geographies has cut across tribal lines and extended to Dinka cattle keeper groups. Now, because of the crisis, resulting insecurity and new geographic delineations, guiwich groups cannot move as freely as they used to, and they struggle to forge social connections with new groups in their vicinity. While guiwich group members enjoy the same degree of cohesion and sharing within their groups, the type of support they share externally has now become more geographically insular. This is further evidence of the crucial interplay between social connections, trust and economic resources.

## **Fisherfolk**

Fisherfolk have historically experienced a degree of stigmatization and exclusion from wider society in Panyijar. Although they have gained some acceptance prior to South Sudan's current crisis, specific crisis-related changes have likely dramatically accelerated the process. During the crisis, many households in Panyijar have, for the first time, adopted fishing as their primary livelihood activity and as an adaptive strategy. This is largely because fishing has remained a viable and high-value alternative livelihood in the current crisis, for the reasons discussed in Section 1 of this report. As Panyijar households diversify their livelihoods and adopt fishing, the stigmatization and historic marginalization of fisherfolk have continued to erode. This is an important example of the bidirectional relationship between the social and economic spheres. Although previous examples have demonstrated how social connections are the primary source of economic resources, in this instance, it is the rising importance of an economic resource (fishing) that is helping to break down exclusionary social stigma.

In this context, aid actors should be aware that “social cohesion” and “economic recovery” goals may overlap and interact in nuanced ways and often have the potential to influence one another both positively and

---

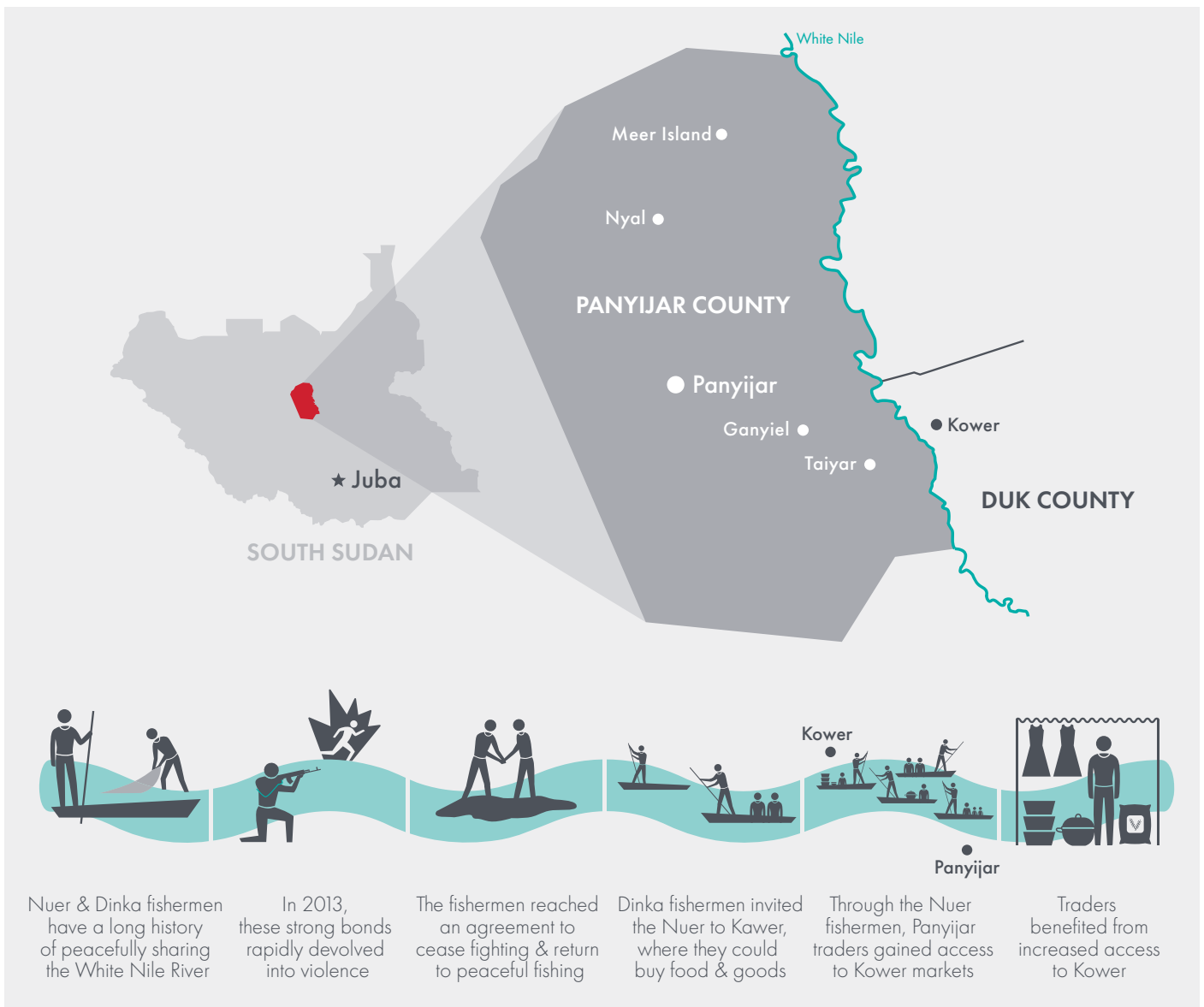
24 South Sudanese administrative subunits include counties, “payams” and “bomas,” in decreasing order of size.

negatively. Humanitarian programming that targets “excluded” households and improves the economic viability of traditionally stigmatized livelihoods may indirectly facilitate increased acceptance of those households in the wider community and, as a result, increase their ability to access crucial sources of local support.

An additional factor contributing to the growing integration of Panyijar’s fisherfolk during the crisis may relate to their pivotal role in facilitating a crucial arrangement between Dinka traders from neighboring Duk and Bor counties and Nuer traders in Panyijar County. This informal treaty, known locally as the Duk Agreement (See Illustration II), has evolved as a result of interacting economic and social dynamics and has helped keep critical goods flowing into Panyijar’s marketplaces during crisis.

The Duk Agreement is an important example of how social and economic connections interact—in this instance, they support marketplace functionality to the benefit of the wider community.

**ILLUSTRATION II: The Duk Agreement**



## The Duk Agreement

As the Nile River winds through the heart of South Sudan, it forms a natural border between Nuer-majority Unity State and Dinka-majority Jonglei State. Nuer and Dinka fishermen in Unity State's Panyijar County and Jonglei State's neighboring Duk and Bor counties have a long history of peacefully sharing the waters, and over generations, the fishermen have formed strong social relationships, sometimes even intermarrying.

However, as South Sudan's political conflict took on an increasingly ethnic tilt in 2013, the strong bonds between Nuer and Dinka fishermen rapidly devolved into violence. Equipped with light weapons, the two communities fought each other over river access, and soon fishing on the Nile and its tributaries in the area ground to a standstill. But the fishermen quickly wearied of the disruptive consequences that such insecurity was having on their traditional livelihood. So they decided to meet on a neutral island, and it was there they reached an informal agreement to cease fighting and return to peacefully fishing the waters between Duk and Panyijar counties.

As a gesture of good faith, and out of respect for the strong pre-crisis social connections between the two communities, Dinka fishermen subsequently invited the Nuer fishermen to visit Kower, Duk County's largest river port, to purchase food and other goods. Meanwhile, Panyijar-based traders were struggling to restock their own shops because the Sudan People's Liberation Army had imposed blockades on supply routes to opposition-held areas. Thus, on learning of the fishermen's arrangement, Panyijar-based traders enlisted local Nuer fishermen to purchase goods on their behalf in Kower, and traders used these goods to restock their own shops in the various Panyijar marketplaces.

As Panyijar's traders became increasingly reliant on this new arrangement, they soon sought to establish a direct partnership with the Dinka traders in neighboring Duk County to more efficiently facilitate restocking. Trade union leaders from the two counties, once embattled rivals, met at a neutral fishing point on the Nile, where they agreed to the terms of a highly localized trade deal. Panyijar's traders were guaranteed safe passage and soon began sailing directly to Kower to restock.

The Duk Agreement was critical in enabling traders to access important alternative markets requiring passage through government-controlled territory. It greatly improved traders' ability to resupply the local markets in Panyijar, thus benefiting the local communities. In turn, aid actors were able to provide financial support to the traders to mitigate the higher cost of the alternative supply route. Importantly, the Duk Agreement was the product of an entirely localized process of negotiation and an important example of the interaction of social and economic connections—in this instance, they supported marketplace functionality to the benefit of the wider community.



South Sudan—Lindsay Hamsik

## Increasing household reliance on marketplaces during crisis

While marketplaces have long played an important role in local social protection and coping strategies in Panyijar, they have become especially important during South Sudan's current crisis. Indeed, in the context of declining local production capacities (in part due to perceived insecurity in Panyijar's outskirts, which prevents households from accessing farmlands), households have turned to markets for food and other basic needs. Generally, households rely on markets for two types of support: (1) financial and nonmaterial support, including loans, information and advice and (2) in-kind (nonrepayable) gifts of food or nonfood items, which go to the most vulnerable households. Notably, traders often provide small in-kind gifts indiscriminately to the community's most vulnerable households, while a household's eligibility to receive financial and nonmaterial support often depends on its social connections with market actors.

### Financial and nonmaterial support

Traders may extend credit, in the form of goods or cash loans, to some households, with the explicit expectation of repayment. Traders tend to be highly selective when choosing the households that will receive such support. This is especially true for cash loans (as opposed to the provision of goods on credit). Indeed, only households with reputations for trustworthiness and known capacities to repay loans can access financial support from traders. Additionally, traders often favor their own friends and kin or others in the community with whom they share strong social connections. In other words, a household's vulnerability alone is not enough to ensure access to credit from market actors. Instead, a household's reputation in the community for repaying debts—or its prior social connections, which act as a proxy for its ability to repay—inform traders' calculus for determining who receives this support.

*› Yes, we still give them what they want, but we don't give cash; we only give goods like soap, oils, clothes, sugar, and sorghum, with an agreement between you and that customer.*

—Trader, Katieth market

Critically, however, it is difficult, if not impossible, for female-headed households to access economic support in marketplaces by engaging in trust-building efforts with market actors. This is in part due to strong gender norms that preclude women from informal social interactions in the marketplace. Male community members, on the other hand, may strike up new relationships with traders and build the trust and confidence necessary to receive financial support.

Traders' reluctance to provide loans to women may also be due to the perception that men are more creditworthy because they control household assets and/or can more easily borrow from other households as a means of repayment. While women and female-headed households often attempt to address this gendered disadvantage through the formation of self-help groups and by supporting one another financially, the extent of this support is limited. In this context, aid actors that work with women and female-headed households should prioritize efforts to facilitate key economic linkages with traders. By doing so, aid actors can help improve perceptions of women's creditworthiness and thus their ability to access support in Panyijar's marketplaces.

Additionally, in the course of the crisis, many vulnerable individuals initiate temporary businesses in the marketplace as coping or adaptive strategies after their traditional livelihood activities collapse. Such temporary traders operate informally on a small scale and, as such, face few barriers to establishing short-



› *When I was starting my new business, I got advice from other very successful traders in the market on what types of food to buy. These were mostly people I had known before, and also members of my own family. They were all people living here in this payam. I was also a customer of theirs in the past.*

—Male trader, Nyal

term enterprises. In such cases, they rely on various sources of startup capital. Some households may receive a loan from a friend or relative with a reliable income source, often a nongovernmental organization salary. In other cases, households facing food shortages may sell a cow and then use half the proceeds to purchase food and the other half to purchase stock to sell in the market in hopes of raising enough capital to replace the cow. During periods of crisis-related insecurity or lean seasons, other households, often farmers, will temporarily abandon their plots and sell a cow so they can buy goods to sell in the marketplace. These farmers then

return to their plots to continue farming when conditions allow. In this sense, local markets have emerged as an economic safety net for many of the community's most vulnerable members.

When attempting to initiate short-term businesses, prospective traders turn to established market actors for support. Importantly, these established traders are more likely to offer critical information and advice to households that they already have a close social connection with. Their advice may include information about procurement, pricing and interacting with customers. In some cases, established traders may even invite new traders, usually those with whom they share a kinship-based connection, to sell goods out of their shops.

### **In-kind gifts to vulnerable households**

In addition to supporting one another within trader groups, businessmen in the market also play an important role in providing assistance to the wider community. The households of vulnerable individuals, such as newly arrived internally displaced people, single women, people with disabilities and the elderly, are increasingly looking to the marketplace for help. Traders often readily provide small quantities of food and nonfood items, such as soap, to these households for free, without any expectation of reciprocity or indebtedness. Traders base such support solely on an individual's vulnerability, and they do not restrict this help to only their friends or kin. Traders do, however, limit such assistance if its provision creates a hardship for their own business.





South Sudan—Mathieu Rouquette

### III. How do cash programs interact with local support systems?

Humanitarian actors, including Mercy Corps, are using cash transfer programming as a promising means of supporting household coping during a crisis and strengthening marketplace actors' capacity to resupply the essential goods and services that households rely on.<sup>25</sup> There is now a growing recognition that beyond this, cash can also be used to strengthen the underlying markets that support household recovery in the longer term.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, to enable longer-term household recovery, Mercy Corps and others are leveraging cash transfers as a means of developing the wider market systems that people engage with during crises. Cash transfer programming is flexible, has the potential to enable recipients to make their own consumption choices, and, in comparison with traditional aid modalities—including direct distributions—is unlikely to undermine local market actors.<sup>27</sup>

However, in South Sudan to date, little attention has been given to understanding the effects, both positive and negative, that cash transfers may have on the social organization and related coping and recovery capacities of the communities where they are conducted. Humanitarian actors certainly stand to benefit from

<sup>25</sup> Cash transfer programming accounts for nearly 50 percent of Mercy Corps' global humanitarian aid spend.

<sup>26</sup> **Alison Hemberger, Sasha Muench, and Dave Algoto**, *Beyond Cash: Making Markets Work in Crisis* (Portland, OR: Mercy Corps, 2018).

<sup>27</sup> High Level Panel on Humanitarian Cash Transfers, *Doing Cash Differently: How Transfers Can Transform Humanitarian Aid* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2015), <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/9828.pdf>.

learning more about how local social dynamics may be influencing the extent to which cash transfer programs are advancing desired programmatic outcomes, as well as the degree to which such programming may be influencing local social dynamics. Understanding local social dynamics can also help inform implementing agencies about the secondary, sometimes unintended, impacts of cash transfers at the local level.

The remainder of this report considers the nexus between humanitarian cash transfer programming and local support systems and social organization in Panyijar. Consideration is given to the impact of cash transfer programming as an aid modality writ large and in terms of targeting cash to specific people and groups. The following analysis is largely based on a consideration of Mercy Corps' own RECOVER program. The four-year project, funded by the U.K. Department for International Development, included the provision of cash transfers to both households and traders in Panyijar.

### **Resilient Communities Through Viable Economic Recovery (RECOVER)**

In an attempt to improve marketplace functionality—and with a view to supporting households coping during crisis—Mercy Corps' RECOVER program provided concurrent cash transfers to households and traders in Panyijar. While household recipients included both men and women, trader recipients were male—no women operated established businesses in Panyijar's markets. Cash, in local currency, was distributed to recipients in seven installments between May 2017 and April 2018. RECOVER's dual targeting strategy was designed to support both market supply and demand and, in the longer term, to improve food security outcomes for especially vulnerable households. While cash was provided to household recipients unconditionally and without restrictions, traders were restricted to using it for restocking essential supplies and for business-related expenses.

Cash was provided to traders based on a pre-intervention market assessment demonstrating that traders were facing considerable financial burdens in bringing goods from distant alternative markets. They urgently needed support to resupply local marketplaces and absorb fluctuations in household demand.

## **Humanitarian assistance and household sharing**

As discussed in previous sections, households in Panyijar have historically shared their livelihood outputs, especially food, as a means of maintaining and strengthening their social connections. However, because South Sudan's crisis has significantly curtailed local production capacities, households have become increasingly reliant on sharing humanitarian assistance, including cash, food and nonfood items, as a primary means of maintaining their existing social connections and building new connections. Notably, these dynamics have been observed before. In a review of the WFP's food distributions during Operation Lifeline Sudan, which started in 1989, Maxwell and Burns reported that households in South Sudan frequently shared their food aid with other community members as a means of maintaining "reserve social capital."<sup>28</sup>

---

28 Daniel Maxwell and John Burns, *Targeting in Complex Emergencies: South Sudan Country Case Study* (Boston: Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, 2008), 15.

› *We share our cash and food so we can strengthen our relationships. When internally displaced people or other people in need in the community come to us, we must welcome them well and share what little we have. This way, we also make new connections. This is important because it means I can expand the number of people I know. Tomorrow I can go to Leer or Mayendit and I will know people there. I can travel there without fear and know that when I go there, there will be people with whom I have connections and from whom I can get support.*

—Male respondent, Nyal

---

In Panyijar, sharing food aid—and cash, to a lesser but still important extent—has taken on particular significance in the context of internal displacement. Members of the host community say that they actively share their aid with internally displaced people (including those with whom they share no kinship-based relationship) to diversify their own networks and build relationships with households from new geographies in South Sudan. Hosts say they look forward to these internally displaced people eventually returning to their communities of origin because the hosts will in turn be able to benefit from access to the geographically expansive support network. The same host community respondents explain that their new social connections with internally displaced people residing in Panyijar will later facilitate travel to new communities and create a wider safety net to fall back on during future instability. Conversely, internally displaced people in Panyijar explain that they share humanitarian aid with members of the host community as a means of building strong reciprocal relationships with them.

## Cash assistance: Implications for household reciprocity

Many cash recipients say that within their communities, there is a particularly strong expectation that they share portions of their cash with nonrecipient households. (One Mercy Corps cash recipient in Nyal said that if he had refused to share his cash, it would “likely have destroyed [his] relationship with [his] friends.”) Respondents also note that cash is a particularly desirable commodity for sharing because it allows more choice and flexibility in meeting household expenses. Additionally, cash—unlike food aid, which all households in Panyijar are eligible to receive—is highly targeted and provided to only a select number of households.<sup>29</sup> As a result, cash aid is a more sought-after shared resource than food aid. Overall, recipient households willingly comply with the expectation to share cash, given the importance of sharing as a means of maintaining critical reciprocal relationships in the Panyijar context. However, it is important to note that male and female recipients generally share cash in distinct ways. While women tend to purchase food using humanitarian cash and share portions of this food with other households, men are more likely to share cash directly. This is because men generally command control over household finances, including decisions regarding cash sharing, while women enjoy far more autonomy with respect to decisions regarding food.

Critically, initial findings suggest that for some recipients, sharing cash may be less reliable than other types of sharing as a means of guaranteeing reciprocal support. In fact, there are some indications that certain cash recipients risk being actively excluded from local support systems because of their participation in such programming. Some recipient respondents say that despite sharing, they have struggled to mobilize reciprocal support from nonrecipient households.

---

<sup>29</sup> The WFP, though its implementing partner German Agro Action, conducts blanket food distributions in Panyijar.



**›** *[The cash] program has changed social connections between beneficiaries and nonbeneficiaries. Nonbeneficiaries do not help the person who is benefiting because they think that the beneficiaries 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.*

—Female cash recipient, Nyal

This phenomenon is best understood in the context of Panyijar's accelerating transition from a primarily nonmonetary, cattle-based system of barter and exchange to an increasingly cash-based economy. This transition is not limited to Panyijar's marketplaces. Cash is beginning to play an important role in various social functions, including the payment of bridewealth, in which case cash may even be preferred to cattle.<sup>30</sup> As a result, demand for cash (as opposed to food, cattle and other traditionally shared items) is increasing, and cash transfer recipients, who are among the few households with reliable and regular access to currency, often face heightened expectations to share portions of their assistance. However, because households in possession of cash, even in small amounts, are widely perceived to be better off than those without, cash sharing is less likely than other

types of sharing to guarantee reciprocal support. Thus, Panyijar's accelerating transition toward a cash-based economy may be fueling subtle but important changes in the local understanding of vulnerability and the related norms and traditional practices that govern the provision of reciprocal support between households.

Respondents also note that the difficulty that some cash recipients encounter in mobilizing reciprocal support is due to interhousehold tensions and resentment based on unclear or disputed recipient-targeting criteria. This in turn fuels a perception that cash recipients have received their "fair share" and thus do not need reciprocal support from nonrecipient households. Importantly, these tensions and the resulting exclusion of some cash recipients from reciprocal support networks are understood to be a function of opaque or disputed targeting practices rather than an inherent inevitability of cash-based programming.

## Localized perceptions of vulnerability

These findings support a growing recognition of the often considerable tension between local understanding of vulnerability and the targeting principles frequently employed by external humanitarian actors, including those in South Sudan.<sup>31</sup> Typically, humanitarian actors rely on various socioeconomic vulnerability criteria when identifying households eligible to receive targeted assistance. For example, women, female-headed households, elderly people, disabled individuals, or families hosting several children are often automatically included on beneficiary lists. In many South Sudanese communities, however, conceptions of vulnerability are in large part based on nuanced local dynamics related to social organization, social networks and norms for provision of support between households, and these dynamics predate the arrival of external humanitarian actors.

This discrepancy is clearly demonstrated when comparing the targeting criteria outlined by the RECOVER program with local perceptions of household vulnerability. At the outset of the RECOVER program,

30 See also **Edward Thomas, Ranga Gworo, and Kiden Grace Wani**, *Cash-Based Programmes and Conflict: Key Areas of Interaction and Options for Conflict-Sensitive Programming in South Sudan* (Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility, 2018), <https://www.southsudanpeaceportal.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/CSRF-Research-Cash-based-programmes-and-conflict.pdf>.

31 Mercy Corps' research in different conflict contexts, including Syria, demonstrate similar "targeting tensions" resulting from discrepancies between local and external understanding of vulnerability. See **Howe et al.**, *Wages of War*.



South Sudan—Jacob Zoeherman for Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps communicated specific targeting criteria to community leaders in Panyijar, who were in turn charged with developing household beneficiary lists. These criteria were based on households’ “level of poverty and living conditions,” and specific priority was given to women-headed households, child-headed households, internally displaced people and returnees. However, when selecting recipients, community leaders relied on local understandings of vulnerability, which were based largely on the often-gendered consequences of crisis-related disruptions to a household’s social connections and the related barriers to accessing local support systems. When asked why they believed they had been selected as cash recipients, many respondents expressed their own perceived vulnerability in similar terms.

Male recipients, for example, often reasoned that they had been selected because of the loss of many of their male relatives in the crisis. Such losses meant that the recipients could no longer rely on these men to share the financial burden. Additionally, these recipients were responsible for caring for their deceased male relatives’ wives and children. In other cases, male recipients based their vulnerability on their status as widowers. After the death of their wife/wives, they were forced to take on traditionally female-oriented tasks, such as farming and taking care of the children.<sup>32</sup> In another case, a male recipient believed that he had been selected to receive cash because of his reputation for sharing resources and supporting many households in his community.

Female recipients similarly explained their own vulnerabilities and eligibility for cash assistance in terms of hardships caused by the death of men and male relatives and the resulting erosion of social networks. For example, numerous female respondents explained that the death of a male caregiver was preventing them

---

32 In South Sudan, women traditionally perform labor-intensive tasks, including land clearing, weeding and harvesting. That said, women’s control over the harvest produce is limited to cooking and providing for their families. Men, on the other hand, are generally responsible for selling excess grain in the marketplace for cash or bartering grain for livestock.

from benefitting from important marketplace interactions traditionally carried out by men, such as the negotiation of access to food and goods on credit.

In all of these cases, vulnerability and eligibility to receive cash assistance are understood in terms of a household's social connectedness and various implied cultural dynamics that determine whether individuals may benefit from locally available assistance. An important takeaway here is that humanitarian actors must prioritize for a community-led interpretation of "vulnerability" during program design and recipient targeting. A failure to do so risks undermining reciprocal support systems that are fundamentally important elements of household coping and recovery.

## **The impact of cash aid on social connections among traders**

Generally, RECOVER cash transfers did not seem to impact traders' social connectedness or the nature of the support shared among them. Indeed, the pool of trader respondents, which included both recipients and nonrecipients of the RECOVER program, did not report any significant tensions between the two groups. This lack of conflict was probably due to local trade union leaders' management of recipient identification. All trader respondents reported satisfaction with the eligibility criteria employed by the trade union.

While household cash recipients were selected by community leaders who based their choices on localized interpretations of Mercy Corps-provided socioeconomic vulnerability criteria, the trade unions' selection criteria were different. The unions based their selection explicitly on traders' perceived business acumen and, most importantly, the likelihood that recipients could effectively leverage cash transfers to improve overall marketplace functionality to the benefit of the wider community. Notably, these criteria were aligned with the calculus employed by traders when determining whether to support members of their own trader groups (see Section 1). This complementarity likely contributed to traders not reporting any specific targeting tensions between those in their group who were selected to receive cash and those who were not.<sup>33</sup>

## **The impact of cash aid on social connections between households and traders**

In South Sudan, the practice of borrowing goods on credit from traders in the marketplace is common and predates the current crisis. Traders have been known to use the provision of credit as a means of gaining customer loyalty. That said, traders do employ relatively strict criteria in determining a household's eligibility to receive such support. This is true regarding the provision of in-kind food and nonfood items on credit, and even more so for cash loans. Whether a household can secure either cash or in-kind goods on credit from traders depends largely on its perceived creditworthiness as well as its assets, such as cattle or grain, that it may use as guarantees. Additionally, as discussed in the first section of this report, many households in Panyijar rely on their social connections to particular traders to access both goods on credit and cash loans from market actors.

In the context of humanitarian cash transfers, including those provided by Mercy Corps, these dynamics began to change. Many traders came to see cash recipients as especially creditworthy borrowers. Because traders knew that recipient households enjoyed reliable access to regular cash installments from aid actors, they felt far more comfortable lending goods on credit and cash to them than to nonrecipient households.

---

33 For more information about alternative targeting strategies, see Paolo Verme and Chiara Gigliarano, "Optimal Targeting under Budget Constraints in a Humanitarian Context," *World Development* (forthcoming); and Maxwell and Burns, *Targeting in Complex Emergencies*.



Traders explained that their preference for assisting cash recipients had been fueled in part by the eroding reliability of traditional asset-based measurements of household creditworthiness, a phenomenon resulting from the depletion of cattle during the crisis. Notably, displaced households that did not receive cash transfers were more likely to face barriers to accessing goods on credit or cash loans from traders. This was exacerbated by the fact that internally displaced people were seen as higher-risk borrowers because they often lost their cattle assets during flight.

› *[Mercy Corps] cash strengthened the relationship between beneficiary households and traders. The communities that received cash came to borrow from us and then returned the loans when they got the cash from Mercy Corps.*

—Male trader, Ganyiel

Nonetheless, not all cash aid recipients proved to be as creditworthy as traders had assumed. In some isolated cases, traders said, household recipients grew “reckless,” taking advantage of their perceived creditworthiness to the extent that they were unable to repay their loans on time. According to one respondent, this overextension created considerable tension between lending traders and defaulting recipient households and led to a breakdown in household-trader trust. Traders attributed recipients’ occasional “reckless” borrowing to the fact that

many households in Panyijar were not sensitized to the power of cash and market engagement and failed to appreciate the negative consequences of defaulting, which included loss of trust and loss of creditworthiness among marketplace actors.



South Sudan—Jennifer Huxta



Improving recipients' access to credit and loans is a favorable objective of cash transfer programs. It has the potential to facilitate the growth of new relationships between market actors and households and to strengthen existing ones. In the longer term, these relationships of trust may accelerate the recovery of crisis-affected populations.<sup>34</sup> Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that improving recipient households' access to credit may inadvertently make it more difficult for nonrecipient households to access the same support. This is a particular risk in contexts such as Panyijar, where few households have reliable access to cash and where cattle and other noncash assets that have traditionally served as the basis of household "credit scores" are declining. In such contexts, external humanitarian actors are often among the few providers of sustained cash, whether in the form of local staff salaries or the provision of cash transfers. Humanitarian aid can thus play a significant role in accelerating the monetization of local economies.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, as described above, it is important to recognize that in contexts such as Panyijar, where financial literacy is low, such interventions may have negative secondary consequences and, in some cases, may even lead to a long-term decline in trust between households and market actors. Humanitarian actors must be aware that despite the demonstrably positive direct impacts of cash programming, these interventions may be indirectly changing and, at worst, undermining the wider community's ability to positively interact with marketplaces during crisis, especially in traditionally nonmonetary contexts.<sup>36</sup>

› *When people received cash, they would frequently take things on credit and promise to pay us back. I accepted because I believed they would pay as soon as they got the [Mercy Corps] cash distribution. People became reckless and began taking too many things on credit. Then sometimes they wouldn't be able to pay me back within the agreed-upon time. This really damaged the trust between some traders and the community. I really regret giving so many things on credit to [Mercy Corps recipients].*

—Trader, Katieth market, Nyal



South Sudan—Jacob Zocherman for Mercy Corps

34 For more information about the role of credit in longer-term recovery, see **Luis A. Camacho** and **Merle Kreibaum**, *Cash Transfers, Food Security and Resilience in Fragile Contexts: General Evidence and the German Experience* (Bonn, Germany: German Development Institute, 2017), [https://www.die-gdi.de/uploads/media/DP\\_9.2017.pdf](https://www.die-gdi.de/uploads/media/DP_9.2017.pdf); **Olga Petryniak** and **Sasha Muench**, *Can Market Systems Development Build Resilience in Fragile Contexts? Lessons from a Comparative Three-Country Analysis in South and Southeast Asia* (Portland, OR: Mercy Corps, 2017), [https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/Learning%20Brief\\_Can\\_MSD\\_Build\\_Resilience\\_Mercy\\_Corps.pdf](https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/Learning%20Brief_Can_MSD_Build_Resilience_Mercy_Corps.pdf).

35 **Thomas, Gworo**, and **Wani**, *Cash-Based Programmes and Conflict*.

36 **Shannon Doocy** and **Hannah Tappis**, "Cash-Based Approaches in Humanitarian Emergencies: A Systematic Review," *Campbell Systematic Reviews* 17 (2017).



South Sudan—Mathieu Rouquette

## IV. Conclusions and recommendations

To cope and recover from crisis, individuals, households and economic actors in Panyijar rely on social connections to access local systems of support. These systems predate South Sudan’s current crisis and have existed well before humanitarian actors’ arrival in Panyijar. External aid interventions are likely to impact these long-standing systems of coping and support either positively or negatively. Importantly, while the implications and recommendations that follow are based on research conducted in Panyijar, they are relevant to other contexts in South Sudan and beyond.

**Households share humanitarian aid—both food and cash—to maintain, expand and diversify their social connections and to create a safety net of reciprocal support.** The crisis in South Sudan has significantly reduced local agricultural and livestock production capacities. As a result, households’ abilities to support each other have eroded significantly. However, they continue to willingly share even meager resources with others in their communities. These shared resources often include humanitarian aid, such as food and cash. In accordance with long-standing norms and traditions, households share aid to maintain, expand and diversify their social connections and to ensure access to critical reciprocal support systems.

› **Aid actors should build in overlap between short-term emergency relief and early recovery interventions to ensure that households can continue to meet their sharing obligations.**

Additionally, when implementing short-term emergency cash transfers, aid actors should consider new distribution modalities to better facilitate this transition. Cash distributions are usually of small value (often calculated based on a household’s minimum expenditure basket) and 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.<sup>37</sup>

- › **Donors should provide aid actors with the flexibility to determine when and how to pivot from short-term emergency assistance to livelihood support.** Unpredictable local externalities often influence households' adoption of sustainable livelihoods and may determine the appropriate time for aid agencies to make this transition. While promoting households' self-reliance should remain a priority for all aid actors, this transition should not be rushed. 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.

**During South Sudan's current crisis, some livelihood activities, including ones that were historically stigmatized, have become increasingly economically viable.** As a result, some traditionally marginalized communities, such as fisherfolk, have become more integrated into wider communities. This is evidence of the two-way relationship between the social and the economic spheres, and it has important implications for aid actors that design interventions aiming to promote economic recovery and/or social cohesion.

- › **Aid actors should consider designing economic recovery interventions with the additional purpose of improving social cohesion.** Besides assessing the economic or market viability of a specific livelihood, aid actors should consider prioritizing individuals or groups that are somewhat excluded from the wider community. Doing so can help alleviate notions of stigma and improve historically marginalized households' social connections with the rest of the community.

**Livelihood groups, including ones composed of cattle keepers, fisherfolk, and traders, are not immune to insecurity or crisis-related economic shocks. However, each group's capacity to cope is bolstered to varying degrees by unique systems of self-organization and related strategies for maintaining group cohesion during crisis.** Understanding the ways in which livelihood-based groups are self-organized, as well as the types of support that group members provide one another, can help aid actors design early recovery interventions that strengthen intragroup sharing norms and achieve scale.

- › **Aid actors should design and implement livelihoods programming in direct consultation with existing informal livelihood-based support groups.** Doing so will help aid actors maximize the impact and sustainability of their support. 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.

**In Panyijar, communities consider two types of households to be especially vulnerable: those that lack the social connections necessary to access local systems of support, and those that are obligated to support large kinship networks.** The former may include female-headed households as well as internally displaced people. The latter may include men who support large extended families and face heightened obligations to share household resources during crisis. By considering local understandings of vulnerability, aid actors can gain important insight into underlying social support systems and specific gendered impacts of crisis within target communities.

---

37 **Mercy Corps** and **Causal Design**, *Beyond Meeting Immediate Needs*; **Farrington**, *Cash Transfers: Lump sums*.



- › **Aid actors should, whenever possible, involve local communities in developing program-targeting criteria that reflect local conceptions of vulnerability and address specific gendered impacts of crisis.** Doing so will help ensure that cash distributions reach those in most need and that cash transfer values are tailored to the different needs of men and women. In Panyijar, female-headed households and internally displaced people face specific barriers to accessing local support. Aid actors should consider supporting these households with regular cash transfers over a relatively long period. Similarly, when providing higher-value cash transfers, aid actors should consider prioritizing men who are obligated to support large extended families.

**Gender roles that predate the crisis dictate differences between men’s and women’s control over household assets. This has caused the economic effects of crisis to impact men and women differently.** Traditionally, male household members have more control over assets, such as cash or cows. As a result, men can easily share such assets to form and maintain social connections with other households, and they are better positioned to negotiate with traders in the marketplace to obtain in-kind goods or cash loans. On the other hand, women have control over food-sharing decisions. While sharing food is an important means of mobilizing reciprocal support between households, it is a comparatively less viable means of accessing critical support from marketplace actors.

- › **Aid actors should consider expanding on existing local coping strategies by encouraging female cash recipients to form self-help groups.** In Panyijar, women who have become primary household income earners are forming self-help groups to overcome gender-related barriers to accessing local support. These women rely on their fellow group members for important financial and nonfinancial support. Aid actors can expand on this local strategy by encouraging female cash recipients to form similar support groups. Self-help models such as Village Savings and Loan Associations have demonstrable economic benefits and also have the potential to increase women’s social connectedness.<sup>38</sup>
- › **Aid actors should seek to increase women’s perceived creditworthiness and capacity to form relationships of trust with marketplace actors.** These objectives can be addressed as part of interventions that support income-generating opportunities for women. Providing women with cash to help them purchase their livelihood inputs from marketplace actors is an essential first step. Aid actors should concurrently help women hone their negotiation skills—so that woman can procure high-quality livelihood inputs at the right price—and encourage women to establish trust and build creditworthiness with marketplace actors through timely repayment of all in-kind or cash loans.



South Sudan—Cassandra Nelson

38 Lauren Hendricks and Sybil Chidiac, “Village Savings and Loans: A Pathway to Financial Inclusion for Africa’s Poorest Households,” *Enterprise Development and Microfinance* 22, no. 2 (2011): 134–146.



## 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

### 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.



#### Global Headquarters

45 SW Ankeny Street  
Portland, Oregon 97204  
888.842.0842  
[mercycorps.org](https://mercycorps.org)

#### European Headquarters

40 Sciences  
Edinburgh EH9 1NJ  
Scotland, UK  
+44.131.662.5160  
[mercycorps.org.uk](https://mercycorps.org.uk)