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The COVID Pandemic and Social Networks in South Sudan

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Strong, positive social bonds, both within and between communities, are a foundation for building peace. Ensuring that aid programmes do not erode these bonds is fundamental to conflict sensitive programming. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on South Sudan's social networks is yet unknown. Drawing on research conducted by Mercy Corps and Tufts University in Unity State, this paper explores the role of social networks in South Sudan and how they could be impacted by both COVID-19 and agencies response to the pandemic. It argues that by better understanding how these networks function in South Sudan, agencies can help to ensure that their programmes are sensitive to the implications of their breaking down, and design COVID-19 response interventions in a way that minimizes disruption to them.

Background

Although South Sudan has so far recorded a limited number of cases of COVID-19, over a hundred people who had come in contact with those confirmed cases are being monitored. The country has put in place several measures including the now nearly universally recommended practices of personal hygiene, curfews, "social distancing," and self-isolation after coming in contact with the virus. Still, many observers are very concerned about the potential consequences of an outbreak in South Sudan—only just beginning to recover from six years of conflict.

Much of the attention has focused on the fragile public health infrastructure in South Sudan (International Rescue Committee, 2020). But a factor that has been largely overlooked is the role of people's social networks—and how those networks might be affected by an outbreak. In crises, whether the threat is severe drought, conflict, or displacement, people often turn first to their own social networks for assistance and information.

While the impact of the novel coronavirus on local support systems remains to be seen, this brief paper draws on the research conducted in the Unity State of South Sudan to discuss some of the likely impacts on people's social networks. Understanding how social networks both provide support but also represent a risk is critical to not only unpacking the impact of this pandemic but in planning the response. The paper suggests a few things that can be done to approach this pandemic with a social connectedness lens, in order to enhance the positive roles of networks, and minimize the potential negative impacts.

Role of Social Networks

Research across a range of contexts demonstrates the critical importance of these local support systems. People depend on their social connections, often more than they depend on external aid, during crises to get by, cope, and recover. During the Somalia famine in 2011, aid agencies were restricted in accessing affected populations and, as a result, most of the formal assistance that could have averted the crisis was very late to arrive; people had to rely on themselves and their own social networks. Those with stronger social networks, particularly with people in the diaspora who were able to send remittances, were better able to cope with the crisis than those whose networks were mostly local who were suffering the same fate. The latter types of networks soon

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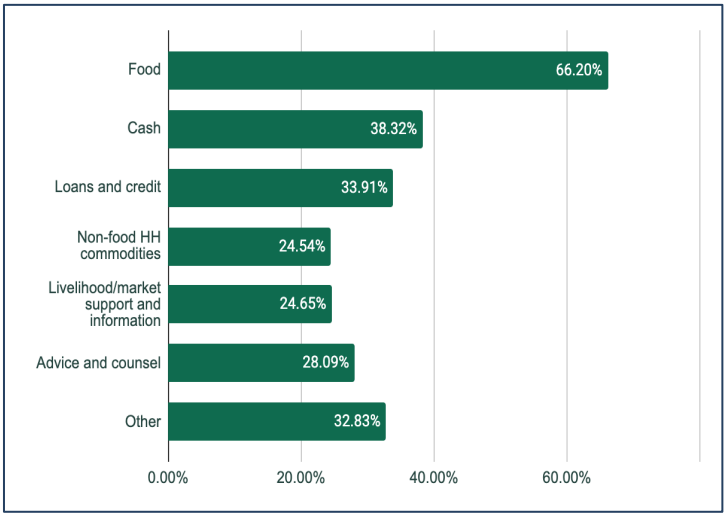
ran out of resources to share, and could no longer support people (Maxwell et al, 2016). In Syria and other contexts, households' social connections were also found to be critical for successful coping and livelihood adaptation during crisis or conflict (Howe et al. 2018).

Recent research by Mercy Corps and Tufts University demonstrates the importance of social connections in South Sudan and among South Sudanese refugees in Northern Uganda (Humphrey et al. 2019; Stites and Humphrey 2020)[3]. Localized support systems long predate the current humanitarian crisis in South Sudan. These systems are governed by a sense of obligation and enforced by strong cultural norms and traditional authorities, such as chiefs' courts (Pendle 2018). While the conflict, displacement, and family separations disrupted households' support systems, new forms of social connectedness emerged in the context of the crisis. Households report that the crisis depleted the amount of material support they are able to share. But the reciprocal support between households remains a critical factor in households' abilities to cope and recover in the context of resource scarcity, insecurity, and displacement. Households reported sharing a variety of material and non-material resources with one another (Figure 1).

Figure 1: *Types of Support Mobilized through Social Connections (n 929)*[4]

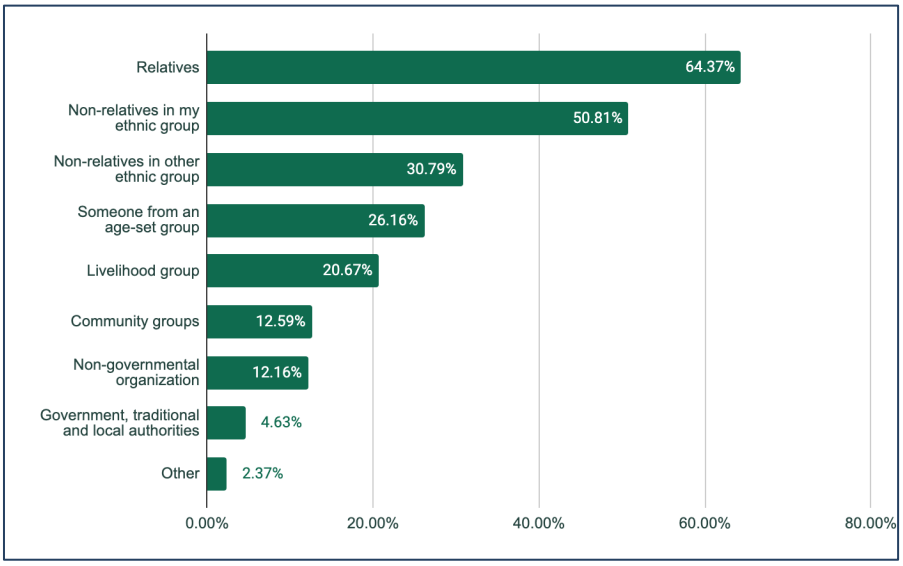


[3] The findings discussed in this short paper are based on qualitative and quantitative research conducted as part of the Currency of Connections program, a research initiative between Mercy Corps and the Feinstein International Center at the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy, at Tufts University with support from the Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA). The research -- conducted in Panyijar and Rubkona Counties, including the Bentiu Protection of Civilian site, as well as in Rhino Camp and Palorinya refugee settlements in West Nile, Uganda -- offers aid actors insights into localized social protection and support systems in South Sudan and the ways in which humanitarian aid can both complement and disrupt these systems. It should be noted that in South Sudan, this research was conducted in communities that are predominantly ethnically Nuer, and many of the narratives presented in the series are deeply rooted in this unique context. The goal of the Currency of Connections program is to 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.

[4] Figure 1 summarizes the proportion of households who reported that they received these types of support households through their social connections in the past 12 months at their place of residence. The 'other' category includes livestock gift and sharing, labor exchange, transportation, social function support. The household survey was conducted as part of the Currency of Connections research program between April and May 2019 with 929 respondents in the Unity State of South Sudan.

During this crisis, households mostly turned to their relatives, neighbors and friends, informal livelihood and community groups in times of need -- more often than they relied on external assistance from NGOs, government, or traditional or local authorities (Figure 2).

Figure 2: *Sources of Support*[5] *(n 929)*



When food distributions are delayed, households in the Bentiu Protection of Civilian (PoC) site shared that they would go to their friends and relatives for support to make ends meet (McLaughlin and Scalo, 2018).

Fisher(wo)men would provide fish to their social connections and a trader would give sugar on credit to help households diversify their diet that is largely dependent on single-staple food assistance. Women also described members of their informal group gathering together to provide emotional support and counsel when a member was going through a difficult time. Households who are more socially connected also shared that they could bounce back from any challenge that life threw at it, change their primary income as necessary, and find a way to get by even if threats become more frequent and intense.[6]

But what happens when these social connections—a major survival resource for people caught in a crisis—become a liability? What happens when a threat is not just natural disasters or violent conflict, but in fact is a virus that may be spread by that social network? People catch viruses from someone with whom they have close and frequent contact—in a nutshell, their social network. The usual source of support runs the risk of becoming the means of spreading the disease in this case. And further, what happens to the kinds of support that social networks can provide to people, when everyone in the network may be affected?

[5] Figure 2 summarizes the proportion of households who reported that they relied on these types of social connections that households reported that they can rely on for help in the past 12-months at their places of residence. The household survey was conducted as part of the Currency of Connections research program between April and May 2019 with 929 respondents in the Unity State of South Sudan.

[6] Statistically significant associations using fixed effects and the random effects models which controlled for a host of household- and community-level factors (e.g. asset wealth, age and gender of household head, access to money senders and market functionality etc.). Results presented in detail in forthcoming final report in the Currency of Connections research program.

Potential effects of the pandemic on social networks

The pandemic and the public health measures to stop the disease's spread in South Sudan will disrupt social functions and public gatherings that bring people together to build new relationships, strengthen existing ties, and to exchange information and provide support. There are anecdotal reports of church services, football games, and parties being cancelled in an effort to curb the spread of the virus.

Such measures are also likely to undermine productive livelihoods, which are often practiced in close physical proximity by groups and informal associations. Social distancing measures and mobility restrictions, for example, may disrupt fishing and cattle keeping associations in rural parts of the country. As a result of the disruptive effect that violence and displacement have had on other traditional bases of social connectedness, these groups have become a crucial vector of socioeconomic connectedness and offer extensive material and intangible benefits to their members during South Sudan's pre-pandemic humanitarian crisis (Krystalli et al., 2019a). Traders and other informal business operators may no longer be able to sell their goods in typically congested local marketplaces. In fact, the High-Level Taskforce mandated that all tea and shisha stalls, bars, and restaurants be closed immediately on April 28th.[7] Beyond their immediate economic implications, these disruptions also have the potential to weaken social connections and limit the extent to which households are able to support one another.

This is especially true in South Sudan, as people rely on their ability to strategically share material resources, including livelihood outputs and household assets such as cattle and cash, with others in their communities as a means of forging new relationships and maintaining existing connections. These social connections can subsequently be called upon for reciprocal support during difficult times in the future. Such strategic sharing is often a particularly important source of resilience for especially vulnerable households during a crisis. Internally displaced people (IDPs), for example, often proactively share assets including food and livelihood inputs, with host community members as a means of establishing bonds in their new communities and in order to access reciprocal support in the future. In other cases, sharing may be considered mandatory and subject to strong norms; failing to share with others can result in a household's exclusion from communal social functions and support systems. The extent to which COVID-19 will negatively affect households' livelihoods and abilities to proactively share with others remains to be seen. However, it is likely that social support systems will be undermined, household bonds weakened, with new potential bases of social tension and exclusion emerging in a country which only recently found its fragile peace.

In addition to these localized effects, the global reach of COVID-19 may disrupt livelihoods in the South Sudanese diaspora, and in turn reduce their ability to provide financial and in-kind support to their connections. In contrast to other contexts where diaspora support is a critical lifeline, there is a limited understanding about the South Sudanese diaspora and the extent of their support to connections back home. In turn, the effect of the likely depletion of the diaspora's support on households' ability to get by, adapt and cope during the pandemic remains to be seen (Barnes et al. 2018).

Role of social connectedness in South Sudan's experience of the pandemic

The relationship between COVID-19 and social connectedness in South Sudan will likely be bidirectional. On one hand as discussed, the disease and its secondary effects are likely to disrupt important bases of social connectedness and support with implications for household

[7] Republic of South Sudan. "Communication from the Presidency No. 40: The High-Level Taskforce on COVID-19 Pandemic" April 28th, 2020. Juba, South Sudan.

resilience during the crisis. On the other, social connectedness is likely to influence the ways in which the pandemic affects households and the extent to which the disease can be contained. An important example of this is the role that information plays in times of crisis. Social connectedness can influence whether information is trustworthy and acted upon, as well as whether information can be accessed in the first place.

Mercy Corps research found that social connectedness plays an important role in determining households' abilities to access information that they trust and are willing to act upon during times of crisis (Krystalli et al., 2019b). IDPs, for example, explained that when weighing whether to return to their communities of origin, they depend first and foremost on their own social connections, including relatives and trusted community leaders, for advice and guidance about safe routes of passage, sources and prices of food, and information about the availability of humanitarian assistance. Further, when hearing reports on the radio or from NGOs about conditions in their communities of origin, some respondents shared that they would follow up by calling their relatives or other trusted connections to verify the information. Only then would they consider it trustworthy and actionable. However, six years of conflict in South Sudan have disrupted social networks and the flow of information between households, leaving some in an information vacuum. Households who were separated from their extended families and community leaders during the conflict for example, especially those residing in the Bentiu PoC, were significantly less likely to report having access to information they considered reliable and trustworthy, and similarly reported being far less likely to migrate than other households.

Not all households are equally connected. A household's social connectedness may determine whether its members are able to access critical and actionable information or if they are left in the dark. South Sudanese refugees in Uganda, for example, suggested that the breadth, composition, and accessibility of their social network influenced when, where, and under what conditions they fled their homes (Stites and Humphrey, 2020). In rural communities, households who knew people in Juba who could convey information about the evolving nature of the conflict, for example, were better informed than others. Single women, on the other hand, whose male relatives were absent, described an information vacuum and lamented the fact that gender norms precluded them from approaching men in marketplaces and other public settings to seek out information. Such social disconnection often had dramatic consequences for a household's safety and wellbeing. Those who were unable to obtain timely information from trusted sources were frequently among the last to leave their communities and risked exposure to extreme violence.

In the context of COVID-19, households are likely to turn once more to their own social connections for information and advice, and to verify what they are hearing from aid actors and other formal sources. Their ability to do so is likely to influence the extent to which information is trusted and acted upon. Information that flows through existing trusted social networks, as opposed to top-down messaging from formal aid actors, for example, may be more likely to inspire positive behavior change needed to combat the pandemic. As COVID-19 spread in South Sudan, it will be critical to consider both the ways in which households rely on their social connections for trusted information, as well as the extent to which some households may be excluded from the social networks within which critical information is shared. The social gathering and mobility restrictions imposed by the pandemic may further limit households' abilities to access trusted and reliable information to act upon during the pandemic, especially in some rural parts of the country where there are limited connectivity and few technological alternatives.

Adopting a social connectedness lens to the pandemic response

In the context of COVID-19, aid actors should consider social connectedness in order to identify and proactively seek to mitigate emerging sources of household vulnerability that may otherwise go overlooked. COVID-19 and the measures to curb its spread are likely to disrupt social networks and may in turn, erode the support that households can typically rely on from their own connections. Such an erosion of people's networks will create new sources of vulnerability, particularly for households who are especially dependent on such support, including the nearly 2 million individuals who remain internally displaced (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, n.d.)

Around the world and in South Sudan, aid agencies are leveraging cash transfer programming as a means of efficiently delivering assistance to vulnerable households during the pandemic (Jerving, 2020).[8] Indeed, cash transfer programming is a promising means of supporting household coping during crises and strengthening the underlying markets that support household recovery in the longer term (Mercy Corps, 2017). However, if aid actors do not account for social connectedness, such interventions may risk doing harm by inadvertently further undermining social networks and related support systems. Mercy Corps research in Panyijar County, for example, found that cash transfers disrupted some recipients' social networks, and that these households risked facing difficulties mobilizing support from their social connections due to inter-household tensions and resentment based on unclear or disputed targeting criteria (Humphrey et al., 2019). This in turn fueled a perception that cash recipients had received their "fair share" of help and thus did not need reciprocal support from non-recipient households. Notably, respondents described such tensions and exclusion to be a result of opaque or disputed targeting practices rather than an inherent inevitability of cash-based programming. Therefore, while cash transfers may well be a highly effective means by which to deliver assistance to the most needy in the context of COVID-19, they should be implemented with careful consideration of their potential secondary effects on household social connectedness.

Lessons from previous epidemics, including the recent Ebola pandemic in West Africa and outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo, demonstrate that the ability to access trustworthy and accurate information is critical to ensuring behavior change needed to mitigate spread (Krenn, 2019). Understanding the perceptions of COVID-19, and the kinds of information that are circulating about the disease, its causes and the prevention methods, is critical. And this information flows through social networks. Radio can broadcast information, but it is critical that information carried in "one-way" mass media such as radio must address the perceptions, the fears and beliefs that people have about the disease.

Tapping into social networks may be an effective way to gather this information, and efforts are already on-going in some places to try to understand people's knowledge, beliefs and perceptions--as well as their sources of information. The World Bank Group includes the building of a real-time community-based disease surveillance and citizen engagement as a major strategy in their 160 billion USD effort to contain the spread and impact of COVID-19 (World Bank Group, 2020). In places such as Somalia where a large proportion of the population has cell phones and access to cell phone coverage, groups like Africa Voices Foundation are using simple SMS technology to rapidly gather the perceptions about COVID-19, and who they trust as sources of information (Africa's Voices

[8] In South Sudan, the Inter-Agency Cash Working Group released guidance in March on cash and voucher programming in the time of COVID-19, calling on partners to "scale-up...social assistance systems, and cash transfer programmes with complementary livelihood assistance" (CWG, 2020)

Foundation, 2020). This will be more difficult in rural South Sudan where cell phone coverage is less widespread. More tried and true methods including field volunteers will be needed to rapidly and safely gather and process this information, so that communications and messaging can be tailored to local needs and perceptions. In a country only just beginning to recover from six years of conflict, humanitarian actors must approach this pandemic with a social connectedness and conflict sensitivity lens that enhances the positive roles of people's networks and at the very least, does no additional harm.

Recommendations:

The current pandemic creates an unprecedented situation where a major source of support - people's social networks - will not only be compromised but become a source of an additional risk. Anecdotal reports are beginning to shed light on the potential consequences of the pandemic on these networks; the virus and the efforts to mitigate its spread will likely undermine social support systems.

Aid actors need to quickly understand the full impact of COVID-19 related disruptions on social networks and related support systems in the communities where they operate: Reciprocal support between households will remain a critical factor in households' abilities to cope and recover in the context of resource scarcity, insecurity, and displacement. Understanding how these support systems work will be crucial for agencies to design programmes that reinforce, rather than erode, these networks. Existing understanding based on local relationships, current programming and experience should be leveraged and built upon.

Interventions should be based on a nuanced consideration of the potential secondary impacts of the pandemic on households in South Sudan. This should be done in consultation with community leaders, national staff in sub-offices, and other key informants. The extent to which COVID-19 will negatively affect households' livelihoods and abilities to proactively share with others remains to be seen. However, it is likely that social support systems will be undermined, household bonds weakened, with new potential bases of social tension and exclusion emerging.

Utilize existing trusted social networks to disseminate information: Top-down messaging from formal aid actors, for example, may be less likely to inspire positive behavior. In the context of COVID-19, households are likely to turn once more to their own social connections for information and advice, and to verify what they are hearing from aid actors and other formal sources.

Ways to support physical distancing rather than social distancing should be investigated: Integrated methods which seek to slow disease transmission while at the same time enabling social connections to continue should be used as much as possible, for example building on existing networks and community leadership. More positive interventions may also support other elements such as community-based disease surveillance, building sustainable health approaches, and long-term peacebuilding.