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THE CURRENCY OF CONNECTIONS

The establishment and reconfiguration of informal livelihood groups in Bentiu, South Sudan

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Introduction and Overview

Rationale for study

This briefing paper explores the establishment and reconfiguration of informal livelihood groups and associations as a form of socioeconomic connectedness in the Bentiu Protection of Civilians site (PoC) and adjacent areas of Rubkona and Bentiu towns in South Sudan. By considering these dynamics, aid actors can better understand various livelihood-based strategies that households rely on to cope and adapt during displacement. This understanding may help aid actors to maximize the effectiveness of their interventions and to avoid inadvertently undermining key sources of household resilience. We draw from interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted between December 2018 and March 2019 with displaced residents in the Bentiu Protection of Civilians site (PoC) and with residents in the adjacent towns of Bentiu and Rubkona to shed light on the various forms of support that these groups offer to members and non-members.

Livelihood groups, which may be composed of traders, fisherfolk, cattle keepers, and others, represent only one vector of socioeconomic connectedness in the Bentiu PoC and surrounding communities, where relationships based on proximity (neighbors), kinship and shared initiation (age sets) are also key sources of connectedness. However, over the course of South Sudan's current crisis, violence and displacement have disrupted and reconfigured traditional bases of social connectedness, and livelihood groups have emerged as increasingly important sources of support among households. While these groups do not have official status in the PoC and beyond, they often rely on clearly articulated internal norms and enforcement strategies to govern their activities. We analyze these rules and norms, highlighting the ways in which socio-economic relationships can be highly regulated, even in an environment of constant change and instability. We also explore relationships between different livelihood groups, links between livelihood associations in the PoC and those outside, and issues of inclusion and exclusion within these groups. We acknowledge that the meanings, effects, and social dynamics of these groups vary among different research participants and have sought to reflect this range of perspectives throughout our analysis.

Understanding the dynamics of these groups is relevant for humanitarian practitioners, decision-makers, and researchers. First, this analysis contributes to a growing literature on coping strategies related to livelihoods *during* displacement, as opposed to examining these questions only in the aftermath of violence.[1] Second, the associations we discuss are self-founding and self-regulating on the part of their members, with little to no intervention from humanitarian actors or other authorities. It is therefore essential for humanitarians to understand the dynamics of these groups, so as not to inadvertently undermine people's coping strategies and ways of maintaining social connectedness.[2] Third, given that these associations are an important source of both social and material support for their members, humanitarians must explore what happens to those who, because of gender, political affiliation, livelihood activity, or other reasons, are not members. This can assist humanitarian actors in

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[1] Jose, Betcy and Peace A. Medie. "Understanding Why and How Civilians Resort to Self-Protection in Armed Conflict." *International Studies Review,* 17: 515-535. Mégret, Frédéric. "Beyond the 'Salvation' Paradigm: Responsibility to Protect (others) vs the Power of Protecting Oneself." *Security Dialogue,* 30, no. 6 (2009): 575-595. Barrs, Casey A. "How Civilians Survive Violence: A Preliminary Inventory", *The Cuny Center,* November 2012. Addison, Simon. "Protecting People in Conflict and Crisis: Responding to the Challenges of a Changing World." Refugee Studies Center. Conference, Oxford Department of International Development, University of Oxford, November, 2009.
[2] For a similar analysis, see Ibreck, Rachel and Naomi Pendle. "Customary Protection? Chiefs' Courts as Public Authority in UN Protection of Civilian Sites in South Sudan." *The Justice and Security Research Programme.* September 2016; Maxwell, Daniel, Rachel Gordon, Leben Moro, Martina Santschi, and Phillip Dau. "Trajectories of International Engagement with Local and State Actors: Evidence from South Sudan." *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding,* 12, no 1: (2016) 98-119.

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better understanding vulnerability, inclusion, and exclusion in this setting, and in turn design more impactful community engagement, assessment, and targeting strategies.

This briefing paper is part of an OFDA-funded partnership between Mercy Corps and the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University to examine changes to social connectedness for conflict-affected South Sudanese in South Sudan and Uganda, and how these connections are linked to their coping and recovery. Other outputs in this three-part Bentiu-focused series include briefing papers on (a) changes in the forms and sources of social connectedness in Bentiu, and (b) changes to weddings and marriages in the PoC and beyond. Collectively, these three papers expand on key themes that emerged from research on social connectedness in Panyijar County, South Sudan[3] captured in a paper released in January 2019, which highlighted the significance of social support networks for survival and coping during conflict and in its aftermath.[4]

Context

In December 2013, conflict broke out in South Sudan between forces loyal to President Salva Kiir Mayardit and Vice President Riek Machar. Soon, the fighting, which began in Juba's army barracks, had spread to much of Greater Upper Nile region. Within days of the outbreak of the conflict, thousands of civilians had poured into UNMISS (United Nations Mission in South Sudan) bases in Juba and other major towns seeking safety and protection within their confines. The informal encampments that subsequently grew inside the fenced enclosures were termed Protection of Civilian (PoC) sites. The UN initially viewed the PoCs as short-term responses to the dire need for civilian protection upon the eruption of a conflict that observers hoped would be short-lived. However, in the six years since the outbreak of this crisis in South Sudan, the PoCs have become semi-permanent communities, home to tens of thousands of civilians and vast, complex and unique economies. While assessments conducted by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) suggest that civilians have begun to leave the PoCs, the Bentiu site remains home to approximately 100,000 residents, making it by far the largest of South Sudan's six PoCs.[5]

The Bentiu PoC is populated by numerous Nuer clans and sub-clans, often living in direct proximity to one another for the first time. Ongoing violence, and the effects of displacement to PoCs, have both disrupted and reconfigured bases of social organization and connectedness. People have developed new livelihood strategies and systems of economic exchange. Novel forms of governance and authority have emerged, in which traditional 'customary' forms of authority and UNMISS, and UNMISS-appointed governance structures both co-operate and clash.

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[3] Panyijar County, in southern Unity State, is a rural, opposition-controlled region. The county 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.

[4] Humphrey, Alex, Vaidehi Krishnan, and Roxani Krystalli. (2019). "The Currency of Connections: Why local support systems are integral to helping people recover in South Sudan." Washington, DC: Mercy Corps.

[5] "PoC Update" United Nations Missions in South Sudan (UNMISS), August 30, 2019, https://unmiss.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/poc_update_30_august_-_05_september_2019.pdf

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Methods

The findings in this report are based on qualitative research conducted by three South Sudanese researchers and four expatriate researchers from Mercy Corps and FIC.[6] Researchers spoke with a total of 133 people in 33 semi-structured in-depth interviews (IDIs) and 14 focus group discussions (FGDs). Research was conducted both inside the Bentiu PoC and in Bentiu Town and Rubkona Town. Research participants included men and women of diverse ages and livelihoods in an effort to document varying perspectives and experiences of life in the Bentiu PoC. Interviews were both led in Nuer by South Sudanese researchers, and in English by expatriates with translation by South Sudanese researchers. With participants' consent, most interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed and analyzed in English.[7] Transcripts were analyzed using Dedoose through an iterative process of inductive coding, paying attention to patterns that emerge from the research, rather than assigning pre-determined analytic categories. In all cases in the write-up, the names of research participants have been changed in order to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

It should be noted that this research was conducted in communities that are predominantly ethnically Nuer, and many of the narratives presented in this series are deeply rooted in this unique context. While the implications of the findings in this report are relevant to audiences interested in diverse contexts in South Sudan and beyond, it is important to note that the specific narratives presented in this report may manifest differently in different contexts.

South Sudan/Mercy Corps/D Nahr

[6] Tufts University received permission to collaborate on this research with Mercy Corps through the Tufts University Institutional Review Board. Research participants were recruited based on snowball sampling. While the researchers attempted to ensure that diverse participants were included within the sample, including men and women of diverse ages and socioeconomic standing, the finding in this write-up are not necessarily representative of the entire population within the POC. Researchers were careful to assure participants that their responses would be kept confidential and would have no bearing on the receipt of assistance from Mercy Corps or any other humanitarian agencies.

[7] When participants preferred not to have a recording, researchers took notes by hand.

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Key Findings and Analysis

Origin stories: Motivating factors and process of group formation

Many livelihood associations, such as groups of cattle herders or traders, existed prior to displacement and provided material and non-material support to their members.[8] Although these groups could not be maintained in their earlier forms due to the effects of armed conflict and displacement, their existence gave respondents the idea to start similar associations in the Bentiu PoC and outside of it. The consistent motivating factor to start or join such associations was an understanding that it was harder to pursue a livelihood alone than in collaboration with others: "If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go with others," one FGD participant said, citing an African proverb.[9]

❭ *"There are thieves and bad people who would rape us or even kill us… if you go [to Rubkona] as a group, they would be afraid to hurt you as you are many"*

— Female research participant, Bentiu PoC

Security concerns were recurrently cited as a motivating factor to join these groups, particularly for those whose livelihood depended on movement outside the PoC, such as traders or women who come and go from the PoC for their livelihoods. "We do this business as a group because we always go to Rubkona to buy fresh okra, bring it to the PoC, dry it, and sell it. Going to Rubkona by foot is dangerous. There are thieves and bad people who would rape us or even kill us. If you go alone, they will harm you, but if you go as a group, they would be afraid to hurt you because you are many," a focus group

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[8] Complicating this narrative, a few respondents suggested that because economic conditions were better prior to the conflict, there was less need for these associations, so (depending on the area) they did not exist, were weaker, or there were fewer reasons to join them. Conversely, other respondents suggested that some associations have *weakened* within the PoC due to external circumstances, such as a river drying up, meaning that people no longer travel there in groups to fish and instead fish more independently in other areas. Focus group discussion with male fisherfolk, Bentiu Town, March 2019.
[9] Focus group discussion with people of all genders pursuing a variety of livelihood activities, Bentiu Town, March 2019.

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participant explained.[10] For those who were targeted because of their clan or political affiliation, partnering with other members of the livelihood group offered a form of protection. As one trader explained, "non-Nuer traders plan to partner up with Nuer traders so they will be less targeted."[11] In these cases, the collective nature of the group can become a form of protection against individual-level threats and vulnerabilities.

> *"Non-Nuer traders plan to partner up with Nuer traders so they will be less targeted."*
> — Male trader, Bentiu PoC

In forming these associations and seeking members for them, people primarily turned to those who pursued a similar livelihood, regardless of whether they shared an existing social connection. While livelihood groups existed prior to displacement, the ones forged in the PoC appear to cut across clan and sub-clan divides in a way that did not occur prior to displacement. "Social connections here in the PoC rely on the same livelihood. People who were doing the same livelihood before [the crisis] find it easy to connect with their fellow colleagues," one respondent said.[12] These new connections were sometimes neighbors in the same sector or block, or people who met while fishing in the same river or selling goods in nearby stalls at the market.[13]

While some respondents stated that the original members of their livelihood groups were relatives or people with whom they shared a pre-displacement connection, the majority suggested that members did not know each other well prior to joining the group, and that initially they only had their livelihood activity in common. This points to both the importance and resiliency of these livelihood-based connections following displacement. A group of traders explained how they came together: "We are a group of six. We met one another while living here in the PoC and did not know one another before the crisis. We help one another with business advice and spend time at one another's tables [kiosks] if one of us needs to move away for a day."[14]

One's reputation as being good at what they do, not being involved in disputes within the PoC, as well as repeated social interaction through conversation and meals, were key for forging bonds that might not otherwise have existed. In the words of a trader, "the older traders from Koch only provide advice to you once you have demonstrated your ability to be a good trader. The only way to build trust with the other Koch traders is to show them your ability as a trader and they will start to reach out to you."[15] A focus group discussion with fisherfolk reinforced this point: "If there is a person who wants to start being a fisherman and he doesn't have the tools to start, we contribute what we have. But before that, he must prove to us the skills and knowledge of being a fisherman,…through following rules and norms."[16] These narratives suggest that, while groups are welcoming of novices, reputation is an important vector of trust, and signaling one's intention to comply with norms is key for being welcomed into the group. These criteria also likely existed prior to displacement but appear to be particularly important in a setting characterized by transition and upheaval.

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[10] Focus group discussion with female research participants pursuing small-scale livelihood activities, such as gathering firewood and reeds, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.
[11] In-depth interview with male trader, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.
[12] In-depth interview with male trader, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.
[13] In-depth interview with male fisherperson, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.
[14] In-depth interview with male trader, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.
[15] In-depth interview with male trader, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.
[16] In-depth interview with male fisherperson, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

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> *"The main reason as to why we give support to each other is because we do not want to look down on others. We are all equal."*
>
> — Fisherman, Bentiu PoC

Notably, research participants did not reference the potential for increased competition as a deterrent to providing business start-up support to others. Instead, many participants explained that their willingness to provide this help was based on an altruistic and indiscriminate commitment to the overall well-being of their community. One male trader explained that "traders are willing to support you in any way. Then you can repay after you start your business. All they want is for their market to expand in terms of number, size, and quality."[17] In another FGD, a fisherman explained that "the main reason as to why we give support to each other is because we do not want to look down on others. We are all equal."[18] While this altruism is unlikely to be universal, it was referenced as an importance source of cohesion within a number of the PoC livelihood associations.

Governance and norm enforcement within groups and associations

Although these associations do not have an official role within the PoC, they are internally regulated in terms of both leadership and norms. Traders stated that they developed a process in 2014 by which to elect leaders and vice leaders, after they noticed that there were issues in the market they wanted to resolve among themselves, but had had no mechanism until that point to do so.[19] As one trader explained, "the traders came up with the idea to form a trade union. This was democratically done. Nine members from different communities of Unity State were elected. Among the nine members, two came from Malakal and Bor to represent their members in the market."[20]

Traders clarified that they ensured wide representation of counties in order to perform the dispute resolution functions described below. "We were elected on a county basis, so that when there is a business person in the market who might be trying to cause problems among traders, the representative from their community will be sent to deal with that person," a trader explained.[21] Most groups have fixed term representation (of approximately a year), in order to allow other members to serve.[22] In general, respondents across livelihood groups agreed that a good leader is "someone who doesn't divide people, someone who knows how to talk to people, and someone who has knowledge of the business."[23]

The primary responsibility of these leaders is to prevent and resolve conflicts within the livelihood group. This involves mediating with members as well as liaising with other authorities that have a conflict resolution mandate within the PoC, such as local chiefs and the Community High Committee (CHC).[24] For example, in fishing groups, leaders resolve disputes that arise from contentions regarding which group can fish where.[25] This suggests

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[17] In-depth interview with male trader, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

[18] Focus group discussion with male fisherfolk, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

[19] Depending on the nature of the group, the associations may be organized by block or sector, rather than being PoC-wide. In-depth interview with male trader, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

[20] In-depth interview with male trader, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

[21] In-depth interview with male trader, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

[22] In-depth interview with male research participant, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

[23] In-depth interview with male trader, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

[24] The Community High Committee was formed to liaise between PoC residents, humanitarian agencies and UNMISS. Committee members include men and women who serve on a rotational basis. The committee chair changes every six months to ensure that all counties are represented. For a detailed account of the CHC's origins and functions in the Bentiu PoC, see: Pendel, Naomi. "The Future of Protection of Civilian Sites: Protecting displaced people after South Sudan's peace deal." *The Conflict Research Programme*. February 2019.

[25] Focus group discussion with male fisherfolk, Bentiu Town, March 2019. In fishing groups, leaders also designate the start and end of fishing season, the areas that each group can fish in, and the time that people can harvest water lilies.

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that the leadership of these groups complements, rather than replaces, other conflict prevention and dispute resolution mechanisms in the PoC, such as the CHC.

One set of norms that group leaders enforce pertains to social relationships and behaviors. As a trader summed up, "traders should not be involved in community issues like fighting. We are not supposed to sleep with other people's wives, we can't be involved in revenge killings, we can't fight among ourselves in the market, and we are not supposed to drink alcohol."[26] Similar norms are present within fishing groups. One fisherman explained that the members of his group have "meetings to discuss how we should be doing our fishing business peacefully," and that the group has established "some rules to guide us in our business, like we should not fight among ourselves or with people from the community."[27]

> *"[Members of my group] have meetings to discuss how we should be doing our fishing business peacefully."*
>
> — Fisherman, Bentiu PoC

In certain cases, respondents suggested that their livelihood group also offered guidance as to whom they could date. "The men are advised not to date girls of the same cattle camp because it may create conflict among us," one trader said.[28] These rules and norms were explicitly tied to preserving social connectedness. When asked why he abides by these norms, a trader responded: "Because these things can affect our business. If we are involved in revenge killings, it can stop support for traders. Sleeping with other people's wives in the community can destroy our relationship to the community."[29]

Another set of norms pertained to 'good practice' within the context of the respective livelihood, such as encouraging traders to be polite to customers, discouraging overcrowding in shops, and requiring people to pay back debts or return borrowed equipment on time.[30] These narratives suggest that the groups affected the lives of their members beyond the specific conduct of the livelihood activity in ways that related to gender norms, relationships, and disputes within the PoC, including mitigating conflict risks.

Livelihood associations have developed a series of sanctions for those who violate these norms. Enforcement mechanisms range in severity from offering advice and support to the person who committed a violation, to referring them to the CHC or local chiefs for further action,[31] to requiring them to pay a cash fine (or in-kind fine, such as in the form of dry fish) for the perceived violation,[32] to suspending someone's membership in the group or removing them from the group altogether.[33]

Forms of support to members

Livelihood groups offer a variety of support to their members. The majority of respondents insist that this support was available to all members, regardless of gender, clan or sub-clan membership, perceived political affiliation, or place of origin. As a fisherman explained: "The support we give to each other is not for relatives or fishermen

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[26] In-depth interview with male trader, Bentiu PoC, December 2018. A fisherperson confirmed that these rules apply to their livelihood associations as well: "As fishermen, they should not fight. They must trust and respect each other, working as a team. No matter what, they should appreciate each other since there is nobody better than the other. They should not steal, not take alcohol, not commit adultery." In-depth interview with male fisherperson, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

[27] In-depth interview with fisherman, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

[28] In-depth interview with male trader, Bentiu PoC, December 2018. For a more detailed discussion of weddings and marriages in the PoC, see "The Currency of Connections: The impact of weddings and rituals on social connectedness in Bentiu, South Sudan," another paper in this series.

[29] In-depth interview with male trader, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

[30] In-depth interview with male trader, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

[31] In-depth interview with male trader, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

[32] "When someone attempts to collect water lily before the agreed period of time for the collection, that person is fined with some dry fish and suspended from ripening water lily for two weeks," a key informant said. In-depth interview with male fisherperson, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

[33] In-depth interview with male trader, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

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from the same county alone. It's for everyone who is our group member and fishing with us."[34] We revisit these narratives in our discussion of inclusion and exclusion below.

A key pillar of support within these groups is in the form of exchanging advice, particularly from older and more experienced members to younger ones or those who are just starting a new livelihood activity. One older, experienced trader articulated a model of informal apprenticeship: "We support the upcoming traders by providing them with ideas and allowing them to operate in the same shops as us in order for them to learn from the ways we do our business or the way we make money."[35] Fisherfolk echoed that more experienced fishermen would teach those who were newer to this activity. The advice people exchange within livelihood groups can range from how to set prices in a market stall to how to procure equipment to start fishing. Advice also consists of exchanging information, such as potential tips about an upcoming cattle raid so herders outside the PoC can move and protect their cattle, or suggestions about where to fish.[36] Respondents state that this is an essential function of the groups because it enables them to both adapt their livelihoods according to the circumstances and rely on a budding community as they navigate these activities.

Groups can also offer material support, such as loaning equipment (e.g. fishing nets, twine)[37] or cash when possible.[38] Some respondents suggested that membership in a Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLA) was another material form of support. "I have seen some vegetable farmers having small groups where they pay money as part of the VSLA," one respondent said. "The group contributes 1,000 South Sudanese pounds[39] each and it is given to one person in a given period of time. They keep rotating until it covers all the members."[40] Importantly, not all research participants were able to participate in such groups, often due to a lack of extra cash. "We firewood collectors don't have any [savings] group because what we do is to make ends meet," a respondent said. "We only support occasionally in small portions."[41]

Furthermore, respondents suggest that they join forces when starting up an activity, such as sharing a market stall with others who sell goods in order to defray start-up costs or banding together to resist cattle raiders and move cattle when there is information about an upcoming attack. These strategies of sticking together were particularly important in the wake of attacks and are important examples of the potential for livelihood groups to contribute to the resilience capacities of their members. As one trader explained, "when the market got burnt, traders contributed to support each other. You would find three to four traders in one shop because they didn't have enough cash to rehabilitate their shops. They contributed the little amount they each had and agreed to work in the same shop as partners until they had enough cash for each of them. They wanted the best for all traders. They didn't want any of them to stop trading because of lack of support from other traders."[42] Similarly, another trader explained that "one time there was a trader who went to Amiet [Sudan] and loaded a truck with a lot of goods like sugar, a drum of petrol, and lots of other things...On the way back [to Bentiu], there were some unknown gunmen who shot the truck. The truck got burned, but he managed to escape. When he reached, we called him and gave

[34] In-depth interview with male fisherperson, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.
[35] In-depth interview with male trader, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.
[36] Focus group discussion with male cattle keepers, Bentiu Town, March 2019.
[37] In-depth interview with male fisherperson, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.
[38] Consistent with the narratives we share in other briefing papers in this series, most respondents agreed that loans were easier, more common, and more helpful when the economy was cattle-based, rather than cash-based. It is important to note that some respondents disputed the possibility of traders being able to offer one another loans due to lack of cash. As one trader said, "We don't give business loans to one another though. We all have our own plans for our shops. We are all working to save money to pursue our plans. we don't support each other with loans because we need the money for our own shops." In-depth interview with male trader, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.
[39] Equivalent to approximately $4.40 USD, as of May 2019 (according to the unofficial South Sudanese exchange rate).
[40] In-depth interview with female research participant, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.
[41] In-depth interview with female research participant, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.
[42] In-depth interview with male trader, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

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him emotional advice and also contributed cash to him according to our means. We did that because he knew how to do business. We didn't want him to go back home and commit crime in the community. That's why we contributed to him, and at last he has restarted his business now."[43]

In addition to describing various economic benefits of livelihood group membership, research participants also described the importance of the groups in social terms. When asked about forms of support within these groups, a trader summarized these dynamics as follows: "We offer just advice and encouragement, really. But the sense of solidarity is very important to us. It is nice to know that we are here together pursuing this."[44] Other research participants explained that group members

> *"If it happens that one of us from the fishing group hasn't caught any fish and I have, I'll give that person some of the fish that I have caught to sell and support his family."*
>
> — Fisherman, Bentiu PoC

often support each other at the household level, for example in the form of caregiving when group members or their families are ill and sharing food and WFP rations with those in need.[45] When cash is limited, people share their stock with other members of their livelihood group who may be in need. "If it happens that one of us from the fishing group hasn't caught any fish and I have, I'll give that person some of the fish that I have caught to sell and support his family," one FGD participant explained.[46] Members also work together to ensure the protection of fellow group members and their families in the face of violence and insecurity. As one trader summed up, "we back each other up if one of us is a victim of a night attack. We come to his home or shop and defend them."[47] While, as we show below, some of these forms of support were also available to non-members, respondents suggest that the bonds between group members were strong and thus support flowed more readily and reliably among them. The fact that group members provide one another with emotional support, share with, and support each other's families, and offer one another protection, reinforces a growing recognition that economic connections and well-being are important determinants of non-economic outcomes.[48]

> *"I cannot go outside the PoC to buy goods. I will then choose my trustworthy friend to go outside to bring the goods for me. This alone has created a strong relationship among us in the market, regardless of which community we come from."*
>
> — Male trader, Bentiu PoC

The collective nature of these groups was also a coping strategy against both insecurity and limited individual economic means, with traders traveling together outside the PoC to restock or sharing the cost of hiring a car to Juba. As an FGD participant elaborated, "when the traders want to go and bring goods for themselves, they select members from their groups and send them to buy the goods. We do this because nobody can manage to hire the transportation carriage alone. Planes and cars are very expensive for one person to rent. If the group joins its hands, the costs are shared among us."[49] The group dynamic also allows people to circumvent some of the mobility challenges they faced alone. As a trader explained, "I am from Rubkona

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[43] Focus group discussion with male traders, Bentiu Town, March 2019.
[44] In-depth interview with male trader, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.
[45] Focus group discussion with female research participants pursuing small-scale livelihoods, such as firewood and reed collection, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.
[46] Focus group discussion with male fisherfolk, Bentiu Town, March 2019.
[47] In-depth interview with male trader, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.
[48] For example, see: Howe, Kimberly, Roxani Krystalli, Vaidehi Krishnan, Jon Kurtz, and Reimar Macaranas. R. (2018). "The Wages of War: Learning from how Syrians have adapted their livelihoods through seven years of conflict." Washington, DC: Mercy Corps.
[49] Focus group discussion with people of all genders pursuing a variety of livelihood activities, Bentiu Town, March 2019.

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and I cannot go outside the PoC to buy goods.[50] I will then choose my trustworthy friend who has access to go outside to bring the goods for me. This alone has created a strong relationship among us as traders in the market, regardless of which community we come from."[51] Particularly for women, as we saw earlier, traveling in groups to collect firewood was an important—if not always successful—strategy for preventing attacks against them. Among members of the livelihood association, these exchanges sometimes unfolded with the expectation of return (such as paying back a loan), while other times the members relied on a presumed norm of reciprocity, knowing they could ask someone whom they helped in the past for assistance down the line.[52]

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Group inclusion and exclusion

Gender analysis reveals that not only did groups regulate gender norms, such as prohibiting adultery or weighing in on dating and marriages, but also that gender identity affected group membership. Initially, most livelihood groups were open only to men. This partly tracked with the dynamics of who could pursue a particular livelihood and partly reflected attitudes towards women's livelihood activities. Some respondents suggested that the exclusion of women from livelihood groups was a strategy for preventing conflict, by ensuring that the groups minimize the chance of adultery or of husbands getting jealous.[53] Women themselves participate in the

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[50] The mobility constraints that this man describes may be due to fear of a form of intra-Nuer communal violence termed revenge killing. Revenge killing is a cyclical form of violence between households which occurs when a male is killed either intentionally or inadvertently, and often (but not always) during cattle raids. Members of the victim's household in turn seek out and kill a member, or members of the perpetrator's household, beginning a cycle of inter-clan violence that often lasts for years.
[51] In-depth interview with male trader, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.
[52] Focus group discussion with male research participants, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.
[53] In-depth interview with male trader, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

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enforcement of these norms, with one FGD participant stating, "we would maybe also tell a woman who has a husband that the job does not suit her and she cannot do this type of activity while her husband is around."[54]

However, over time, women have increased their presence in the market, selling tea or cooking in stalls, and have also begun to participate in fishing and the sale of dry fish. One male focus group participant explained that "Before the crisis, women could not do a manual work, but now women are doing lots of manual jobs in order to support their families."[55] Research participants often described women's growing participation in traditionally male-dominated livelihood activities as a function of necessity in order to survive during crisis. According to one fisherwoman, "the main reason why we women do this fishing activity is because most of our husbands and brothers in law are in the bush and some of our husbands were killed. We do these activities to send our children to school and so that maybe in the future we will not suffer."[56]

> *"We go fishing in groups. In this group we have savings. If we buy fish and we see one of our sisters does not have money, we each give out [some cash] and give it to her to buy fish."*
>
> — Female fisherfolk, Bentiu PoC

As such, women have started to form livelihood groups, providing support to their fellow members. "Women organize themselves in groups of five or ten and form business cooperation," one FGD participant commented. "For instance, most of us here are cooks in the market and we work in groups. When we make a profit, we take some of the amount and give it to one member for a month. We do this for all of them until we round out all the members in the group."[57] Women involved in fishing explained how their groups function: "We go fishing in groups," one FGD participant said. "In this group we have savings. If we buy fish and we see one of our sisters does not have money, we each give out [some cash] and give it to her to buy fish."[58] This suggests that the forms of support women exchange are similar to those in male-only groups, albeit with a different membership.

Women's groups occasionally interact with men in livelihood groups. Traders in the PoC claimed that "recently a woman was added to the group to act as the women's representative here in the market."[59] Similarly, male traders help women access different areas: "When a male business person goes to bring goods from places women can't reach, the women will give their money to the men to bring them goods. That's how women and men who work in business cooperate in the market," a trader explained.[60] That said, there were few narratives of integrated groups of mixed genders.[61]As FGD participants explained, "this is because sometimes the husband of the women won't trust the men who work with their wives, thinking they might get involved in adultery. This would cause bad terms in the relationships between husbands and wives."[62] This suggests that (a) there remain gendered barriers to pursuing livelihood activities, even as women's livelihood roles and pursuits have changed; and (b) even when women start a particular livelihood activity that was previously less available to them, they mostly commune with other women, rather than joining associations with men.

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[54] Focus group discussion with female fisherfolk, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.
[55] Focus group discussion with middle aged men, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.
[56] Focus group discussion with female fisherfolk, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.
[57] Focus group discussion with research participants of all genders pursuing a variety of livelihoods, Bentiu Town, March 2019.
[58] Focus group discussion with female fisherfolk, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.
[59] In-depth interview with male trader, Bentiu PoC, December 2018
[60] In-depth interview with male trader, Bentiu Town, December 2018.
[61] In-depth interview with male trader, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.
[62] Focus group discussion with research participants of all genders, Bentiu Town, March 2019.

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> **"Tribalism and clan-based groupings are not encouraged in business. We discourage it in order to make sure traders stay united."**
>
> — Male trader, Bentiu PoC

While respondents agreed that gender played a role in group membership, the majority claimed that sub-clan or county of origin were less significant. This marked a change from pre-displacement dynamics, when kinship was a major vector of social connectedness and people primarily interacted with those from the same sub-county.[63] "In fishing, everyone who is willing to join can do so, no matter where one comes from. There are no conflicts in the fish groups that might require a kinship relationship," an FGD participant said.[64] Traders described this approach as essential to the success of their business: "Tribalism and clan-based groupings are not encouraged in business. We discourage it in order to make sure traders stay united."[65] A participant in another FGD echoed this attitude: "We have not refused anyone who wants to join. No woman can refuse someone who just wants to help herself."[66]

That said, there were some respondents, particularly those who are members of groups which operate outside the PoC, who felt that county of origin *does* still affect who can participate in livelihood activities and groups. "Outside the PoC, the Jikany people from Guit County do not allow fishermen from a different county to come and fish where they are. That is the only river that is active and has a variety of fish. For those who are not from Jikany County, they feel insecure to go there and carry out their livelihood activity," one fisherperson reported.[67] While other respondents contradicted this narrative, it is important to note that *perceptions* of county grouping can affect social connectedness within and among livelihood groups.

> **"Outside the PoC, the Jikany people from Guit County do not allow fishermen from a different county to come and fish where they are. For those who are not from Jikany County, they feel insecure to go there and carry out their livelihood activity."**
>
> — Male trader, Bentiu PoC

Though it is not a factor of explicit exclusion, many respondents cited time limitations as a reason they could not join (or fully participate in) livelihood groups. This was particularly the case for those who have manual jobs, such as digging latrines, or who rely on daily wages, such as women harvesting reeds.[68] "Yes, there are many women's groups inside the POC," one woman said, referring to informal livelihood groups with no affiliation to aid groups. "I have heard that they support one another mainly through advice when they are in trouble. They spend the whole day talking to each other. I don't have the time for this. I have to be at my tea business every day and take care of my family—cook, clean, take care of the children. I don't have time to be involved in these types of activities."[69] As such, while exclusion may not necessarily be deliberate or explicit, there are dynamics that affect who can participate in livelihood groups and, consequently, who can benefit from the social connectedness these group foster among their members.

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[63] For a more thorough discussion of the changing nature of kinship connections in the PoC, see "The Currency of Connections: The evolution of pre-displacement connections in Bentiu, South Sudan", another paper in this series.
[64] Focus group discussion with male research participants, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.
[65] In-depth interview with male trader, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.
[66] Focus group discussion with female fisherfolk, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.
[67] In-depth interview with male fisherperson, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.
[68] Focus group discussion with male research participants, Bentiu PoC, March 2019. Focus group discussion with female research participants pursuing small-scale livelihoods, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.
[69] In-depth interview with female research participant, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.

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South Sudan/Mercy Corps/L Hamsik

Relationships between livelihood groups and non-members

Some of the forms of support that we discussed above are also available to those who are not group members. For example, traders regularly reported making loans to other residents of the PoC, including negotiating the terms of repayment and establishing penalties for non-repayment. Fisherfolk similarly reported sharing fish with PoC residents who were in need. Similarly, all livelihood groups reported advising community members about livelihood strategies when possible, as well as supporting caregiving activities and sharing food. Some research participants indicated that they favored their friends and relatives for such support, while others insisted that they would provide such support indiscriminately, to anyone in need.

However, some members of livelihood groups said they experienced tensions with non-members. They reported that these tensions were often related to non-members' perception that group members were less vulnerable and deserving of support than others in the community. For example, some traders suggested that non-traders envy their activity and resent them for making a profit, stating "they feel very jealous of us because we are making some money from our work here in the market."[70] These traders suggested that the misperception that traders were not vulnerable has affected the support they receive from community members and NGOs. One trader lamented that after the PoC marketplace was destroyed by arson in 2017, "The board of the trade union was expecting to receive support from the NGOs. We don't have a budget from the government like we did before the crisis. […] The traders whose shops got burnt with all their goods and cash are now home idle because they never got any support from anywhere to bring them back to the business," one trader said.[71] A different trader echoed: "Only traders were supporting each other. The community never gave any single support to the traders, not at all."[72] And yet, traders insist that they will continue to support the community in the spirit of fostering social connectedness, even when they perceive these relationships to occasionally be non-reciprocal: "When we support

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[70] In-depth interview with male trader, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.
[71] In-depth interview with male trader, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.
[72] In-depth interview with male trader, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

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them and they don't support us, it shows that we don't want to destroy the relationship between traders and the community," a trader said. "We want to build a stronger relationship between them."[73]

Traders, however, did not uniformly share the perception that the community did not support them. A different trader suggested that there was indeed support to traders from their community, but it unfolded along county lines: "People from the same county supported each other. When the market burned down, the community supported their traders from the same county by contributing cash to them. They were not supporting those from other counties."[74] Offering yet another different standpoint, some traders remarked that they were grateful for the ways in which the community reciprocated the support that traders provided. This included loans to restart their stalls in the market after attacks. "The people from the community gave money to the businessmen who lost their goods when the market got burned," one trader said. "The community wanted the market to function because it is very important for their lives. […] You can have your money, but without the market, it becomes useless."[75] The fragile relationship between livelihood groups and non-members required constant reinforcement through acts of trust, and suffered through perceived acts of exclusion, county-based support, or lack of support altogether.

> *" The people from the community gave money to the businessmen who lost their goods when the market got burned. The community wanted the market to function because it is very important for their lives. […] You can have your money, but without the market, it becomes useless"*
>
> — Male trader, Bentiu PoC

The aforementioned tensions did not apply only to traders. Fisherfolk claimed that historically they were stigmatized by the wider community and were often labeled *Balang Kal*, a traditional derogatory term for fisherfolk which refers to the fact that fishing communities historically did not own cattle. "That was a way of mocking fishermen a long time ago, but now people know that fishing is an important activity that earns people a living," an FGD participant said.[76] A different participant echoed, "calling fishermen *Balang* is still there, but it is not as much as before. Now people have realized it's a way of finding food for your family to prevent them from starving."[77] Further, participants suggested that fisherfolk are increasingly marrying into the rest of the community, which may be further reducing this historical stigma. One fisherman explained, "Now that we have learned how to save money from our fishing and buy cows or pay the dowry in cash if they want to, it's going to be easy for us."[78] While the stigmatization of fishing communities is clearly declining, these narratives suggest that, while livelihood groupings can be very beneficial for members, they can also make members visible in ways that invite stigmatization.

Networks outside the PoC

In addition to fostering social connectedness among their own members, and between their members and the broader PoC community, livelihood groups also had relationships with those pursuing a different livelihood. "Traders sometimes ask for help when things get rough on their side," a fisherperson said in an FGD. "Traders are

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[73] In-depth interview with male trader, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.
[74] In-depth interview with male trader, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.
[75] In-depth interview with male research participant, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.
[76] Focus group discussion with research participants of all genders pursuing a variety of livelihoods, Bentiu Town, March 2019.
[77] Focus group discussion with male fisherfolk, Bentiu Town, March 2019.
[78] Focus group discussion with male fisherfolk, Bentiu Town, March 2019.

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just like us: There are times when you will have luck and what you are selling will be bought fast and there are times when you will have bad luck. So, they come and ask for help when they have an issue that is burning them. Then they pay you back when they get things right."[79] Research participants resoundingly described the terms of such loans as helpful, rather than predatory. For example, a male trader from Bentiu Town explained that "sometimes our businesses get great losses and we have no more capital. Then traders will go to the fisher people to borrow some money because the fisher people have less activities and save their money. They cooperate with us and give us money to set up our business with when we have less money to start work with."[80]

These relationships sometimes stretch beyond the PoC itself to include links with those pursuing a similar livelihood outside. People who still had cattle when they entered the PoC could not bring their cattle with them, so they ask herders in the area outside Bentiu PoC to care for their livestock.[81] Conversely, traders and fisherfolk from outside the PoC sometimes partner with traders within the PoC to sell their goods (and vice versa).[82]

It is important to note that relationships with those outside the PoC or in different livelihood groups are not always amicable. Tensions between livelihood groups inside and outside the PoC may be exacerbated by economic competition as well as physical divisions which may limit social cohesion and beneficial economic relationships. As one trader said, "we don't interact with traders in Rubkona. They are, in fact, our first enemies who give wrong information about us and inform the authorities to tax our goods."[83] Cattle keepers also suggested they do not always interact with other groups of cattle keepers. "Some of the people [in the surrounding area] are our enemies because their communities were the ones who raided our cows. Because of that, we don't approach one another. They have their own life, and we have our own life, and it makes it so hard for us to make new connections with other people from different counties."[84] These narratives suggest that a complicated web of both positive and tense relationships extends between livelihood groups within and outside the Bentiu PoC.

> *"Some of the people [in the surrounding area] are our enemies because their communities were the ones who raided our cows. Because of that, we don't approach one another. They have their own life, and we have our own life, and it makes it so hard for us to make new connections with other people from different counties."*
>
> — Male cattle keeper, Bentiu PoC

For some, forging connections with those with whom they do not share a livelihood was a challenge. "Cattle keepers support other cattle keepers. Fishermen help other fishermen. That's how it works. They don't support anyone; they support each other based on their groups," one respondent said.[85] This underscores the need to pay attention to multiple vectors of connectedness, and to the effects of not having connections outside one's group.

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[79] Focus group discussion with male fisherfolk, Bentiu Town, March 2019.
[80] Focus group discussion with male and female traders, Bentiu Town, March 2019.
[81] Focus group discussion with male cattle keepers, Bentiu Town, March 2019.
[82] In-depth interview with male fisherperson, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.
[83] In-depth interview with male trader, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.
[84] In-depth interview with male cattle keeper, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.
[85] In-depth interview with male research participant, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

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Conclusions and Implications

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

❯ **Implications for aid actors:** By channeling assistance through informal livelihood groups, aid actors may be able to maximize the effectiveness of their interventions and reduce the likelihood of doing harm. More specifically, before implementing livelihood interventions, aid actors should consider first assessing which activities people undertake in groups, and which activities they undertake individually. Where groups exist, aid actors should consider implementing livelihood interventions through existing groups to ensure that underlying protection, trust, and reciprocal support remains intact. Targeting groups rather than individuals for economic recovery interventions may also help aid actors more efficiently distribute limited resources to a larger number of people. This is because livelihood group members are likely to share resources with fellow members, in accordance with group rules and norms. When aid actors target individuals for assistance without considering group membership, they risk inadvertently restricting assistance to a limited number of groups, which may in turn create tensions between groups and weaken inter-group cohesion and support. Finally, as discussed in more detail below, it is important to note that some individuals may be excluded from livelihood groups by design or default, and additional efforts are needed to ensure that such individuals are not "missed" by aid actors.

Additionally, to guard against inadvertently undermining group cohesion, when implementing livelihood interventions aid actors should ensure that they analyze market dynamics to ensure that a particular livelihood is capable of absorbing new participants. This is because group members' abilities to support each other is inherently tied to the economic viability of the group's livelihood and the strength of members' social connections. Over-crowding a specific economic sector could inadvertently undermine

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existing social support systems. For economic sectors that show growth potential, aid actors should channel skills training through older, more experienced livelihood group members. Aid actors can ease the economic burden for existing group members to support new entrants by providing access to inputs to new participants, and linking them to existing livelihood groups for apprenticeships, advice and mentoring.

Livelihood groups are not a new concept or phenomenon in South Sudan.[86] However, inside the PoC they have reconfigured to include both kin and non-kin from multiple Nuer clans and sub-clans and diverse geographical locales. Members explain that the heterogeneity of their group membership is a function of the fact that living in the confines of the PoC has forced diverse populations to interact for the first time. Many respondents welcomed these new social connections, and some explained that they planned to remain in touch in the future, including after leaving the PoC.

❯ **Implications for aid actors and donors:** The inter-clan social cohesion displayed by members of informal livelihood groups may be contributing to conflict mitigation and management within the Bentiu PoC. By channeling assistance through these groups, aid actors may be able to increase the effectiveness of economic interventions, with potential secondary peacebuilding benefits within the PoC. Notably, Mercy Corps similarly found that Dinka traders from Bor County and Nuer traders from Panyijar County forged local peace agreements to maintain critical economic ties at the pinnacle of the crisis.[87] Additionally, these groups may have the potential to foster peace in the future, after members eventually return to their communities of origin.[88] Donors should consider supporting further research to identify the extent to which similar outcomes are possible in South Sudan, and to better understand the full extent to which livelihood groups may be leveraged for peacebuilding outcomes, both inside the PoC, and following potential returns.

Some individuals may be excluded from group-based sharing and support, either by design or by default. Prospective group members who do not have the required skills, experience or access to inputs, and women/women-headed households, may have fewer social and economic connections to rely on. Additionally, women-headed households who are required to balance income generation activities with domestic care may also be excluded, as a result of higher time poverty and the related constraints they would face in engaging in social activities.

❯ **Implications for aid actors:** Understanding who is included and excluded from social networks, livelihood groups, and related support structures can provide aid actors with more context-specific understandings of vulnerability. Gender and age analysis is an essential component of this exploration. Aid interventions, including those with economic goals, should build on a strong understanding of the bases for inclusion and exclusion in social networks. These interventions should seek to improve the capacity of excluded individuals to share and access resources and information through diverse social support networks. This first requires the collection of data to identify excluded groups, for example about livelihood skill level or access to inputs to ply a viable trade, primary livelihood type, and whether individuals have the capacity to share resources (including types of shared resources) and/or the frequency

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[86] Humphrey, Alex, et al. (2019) The Currency of Connections.

[87] Humphrey, Alex., et al (2019). The Currency of Connections.

[88] Mercy Corps' impact evaluation of a peacebuilding program in Nigeria found that contact and collaboration among farmers and pastoralists to achieve shared goals helped communities to maintain or improve relationships despite a wider escalation of violence. See: Dawop, Danjuma Saidu, Christopher Grady, Lisa Inks, and Rebecca. (2019). "Does peacebuilding work in the midst of conflict? Impact evaluation of a peacebuilding program in Nigeria." Washington, DC: Mercy Corps.

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of such sharing. Providing excluded groups with additional assistance such as vouchers to access inputs from the market, and/or livelihood skills development or linkages with older more experienced groups for skills and guidance may help increase their capacities to share resources, form new linkages and diversify their social networks. However, aid actors must ensure that support for excluded individuals is part of a wider program intervention that also addresses the needs of the larger community. If not, aid interventions risk creating social tensions and further alienating excluded populations from social support structures. It is also important to bear in mind that gender analysis reveals not only the power dynamics that underlie vulnerabilities and exclusion, but also coping strategies, from which aid actors can glean important insights that inform their work on livelihoods, social dynamics, and targeting assistance and interventions.

Aid actors should also be aware that gender norms may result in additional barriers for men and women to accessing support from social connections. For example, women inside the PoC are adopting previously male-dominated livelihoods to support their households yet remain largely absent from male-dominated livelihood groups and in turn are unable to benefit from the support that these groups offer. Some women are able to mobilize women-only livelihood groups and support one another by sharing information, protection (travelling in groups), or cash through rotating savings and loans (ROSCAs). Aid actors should consider taking concerted steps to support these groups through the provision of small amounts of targeted cash to help supplement their existing cash sharing mechanisms, or through helping them form interest-based Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) to make these informal financial practices more sustainable. Supporting these groups with cash and targeted livelihood support will help strengthen their economic interaction with male-dominated livelihood groups and improve their capacity to access other forms of technical or market-related information.

Livelihood groups that are engaged in different economic sectors may be inter-connected and may rely on one another for various types of support. For example, in the Bentiu PoC, traders in the marketplace seek out fishing groups for cash loans in times of need, and women's fishing groups rely on male fishermen to gather their daily catch.

❭ **Implications for aid actors:** A social systems lens, rather than approaches which only focus on individuals or households, may help identify the appropriate aid modalities to maximize the flow of resources both between and within groups. By considering the ways in which diverse livelihood groups may be interconnected and interdependent, aid actors can identify leverage points, such as the interaction between trader and fishing groups, or the cooperation between genders, and strategically target specific forms of assistance in an effort to maximize impact across the system. To this end, during program assessments, aid groups should seek to understand how individuals, businesses, and informal institutions obtain and share information about livelihood activities, suppliers, and customers. Again, a gender and age-sensitive approach is essential, as is an exploration of additional relevant dimensions of power. Direct livelihoods support should take the results of this analysis into account and identify opportunities to strengthen inclusive social networks, while avoiding activities that might undermine these systems. For example, providing vouchers to existing or new fishing groups to procure livelihood inputs from traders who have valuable information or products to offer may help strengthen the relationship between actors in these economic sectors.

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