Social connections and displacement from South Sudan to Uganda: towards a relational understanding of survival during conflict

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Abstract

South Sudanese fled their communities in large numbers following the outbreak of political violence in 2013, with an estimated 4.5 million forcibly displaced by mid-2018. Of neighboring countries, Uganda hosts the greatest number of South Sudanese refugees. Based on qualitative data collected in 2018 and 2019 in two refugee settlements in the West Nile sub-region of Uganda, this article examines the social connectedness of refugees during their flight and after their arrival in Uganda. How do refugees rely on the new relationships they form during displacement, and in what ways do these relationships enhance our understanding of the role, forms, and importance of social connectedness during displacement? We analyze how social connections provide material and non-material support, how refugees use scarce resources to negotiate and cultivate social connections, and how gender and status influence inclusion and exclusion within social networks. We find that proximity and shared experience are the two most important factors in social connectedness following displacement, and that non-material support plays a critical role in facilitating resilience. Collectively, these findings highlight the significance of a relational, rather than individualistic, approach to survival during displacement. In addition to the theoretical significance of these findings, and the contribution to the growing literature on social connectedness during armed conflict, this article is relevant to humanitarian decision-makers and practitioners who aim to craft programs that support, rather than undermine, the coping strategies of displaced people.

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This article examines the importance of social connectedness for South Sudanese refugees both during their flight and after their arrival in refugee settlements in West Nile, Uganda. Based on work by Maxwell et al. (2016), we define social connectedness as the sum of people's social linkages, including the social networks on which they draw, the extent and strength of those networks, and the obligations, presumed reciprocity, collective risk and mutual support that such networks carry. Recent studies have explored the vectors and effects of social connectedness among populations affected by humanitarian crises (Author et al. 2018; Aldrich 2012; McIlwaine and Moser 2001). In this article, we trace the ways in which refugees form and maintain new social relationships and analyze the support that stems from these bonds. This focus on new relationships formed during displacement complements an existing body of scholarship on how refugees maintain relationships with those at the point of origin (Muggeridge and Doná 2006; Kibreab 2002). The scope of this article further emphasizes the importance of understanding social connectedness *during* crises, rather than only examining its effects on rebuilding lives and livelihoods 'after' violence.

Based on in-depth qualitative research with South Sudanese refugees in Uganda, we ask: How do refugees rely on the new relationships they form during displacement, and in what ways do these relationships enhance our understanding of the role, forms, and importance of social connectedness during displacement? In response, we analyze refugees' reliance on new acquaintances, in the form of refugee neighbors and people to whom they are proximate while displaced, as opposed to primarily on kin. These relationships are constituted and reinforced through the provision of both material and non-material support. Recognizing that social connectedness is linked to social hierarchy, and that 'connectedness' for one group may well spell marginalization for another, we argue that social connections do not only enhance coping strategies, but also potentially exacerbate vulnerabilities and exclusion.

This article makes three contributions to the understanding of social connectedness during armed conflict in general and displacement in particular. First, based on respondents' narratives, we argue that survival is inherently relational and cannot be understood exclusively through an individualistic approach. We build on existing critiques of individualistic conceptions of resilience in contexts of political violence and humanitarian action (Aradau 2014; Neocleous 2012). In considering peoples' own strategies for forming, preserving, and adapting social relationships during displacement, this analysis contributes to research on the ways in which communities rely on one another during and after crises (Author et al. 2018; Patel and Gleason 2018). Our findings offer a different lens on the localization of humanitarian response, which to date has focused on local institutional responses to humanitarian emergencies (Robillard et al. 2020; Maxwell and Majid 2016; Baines and Paddon 2012; Santschi et al. 2018; Mo et al. 2018; Mégret 2009). Second, until recently, the literature on social connectedness tended to largely ignore new relationships formed during armed conflict and displacement, in favor of focusing on how people maintained relationships with those remaining at the point of origin (Author et al. 2018; Author 2017). In this article, we discuss these new relationships as important components of self-protection and people's responses to crises. Third, while most social analyses in refugee contexts focus primarily on refugee-host dynamics (Jacobsen 2002; Doocy et al. 2016), this article also considers dynamics *among* refugees, acknowledging that power and hierarchy still operate within displaced communities, and that refugees do not experience crises monolithically. Additionally, we posit that non-material support among refugees plays a critical role in resilience and well-being.

We found that proximity and shared experiences were especially important bases of social connectedness for refugees. This contrasts with pre-displacement social networks, categorized primarily by kinship and clan affiliations (Thomas 2018). Indeed, in West Nile, refugees' social networks are highly localized, and respondents identified new relationships forged during flight and following their settlement in Uganda as of primary significance in terms of the exchange of various forms of material and intangible support. To the extent that their relationships spanned national borders, refugee respondents identified the importance of bi-directional support with social connections in South Sudan, but rarely described having any connection to the global diaspora.

This article informs theoretical explorations and critiques of resilience and social connections during crises, traces the mechanisms by which people establish and maintain relationships while displaced, and examines the forms of support that these relationships provide. In addition, the insights of this article can aid humanitarian decision-makers in better understanding crisis-affected people's coping strategies. Such an understanding can be vital for designing programs that seek to amplify existing coping strategies and minimizing the risk that humanitarian action will undermine existing means of survival (Maxwell and Majid 2016). In this article we first discuss the nature and functions of social connections as people fled their places of origin. Second, we examine social connections that refugees forged once in Uganda and how these may differ from pre-displacement connections. Third, we investigate ways in which refugees actively use scarce resources to negotiate and cultivate social connections. We questioned patterns of inclusion and exclusion by gender and status throughout all stages of the research and analysis.

Context

South Sudan has known violent conflict for much of its short history. In December 2013, fighting erupted between forces loyal to President Salva Kiir Mayardit and Vice President Riek Machar. Conflict started in the capital, Juba, and spread throughout the countryside. As of mid-2018, approximately 4.5 million South Sudanese

had been displaced and nearly 400,000 killed (Checchi et al. 2018). Reports of conflict-related violence have decreased significantly since the signing of the 2018 Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) and the formation of a transitional government in February 2020. Nonetheless, displaced people, including respondents for this study, remain deeply reluctant to return to their communities of origin. As of February 2020, approximately 2.2 million South Sudanese refugees continued to reside in neighboring countries, including Uganda, home to an estimated 873,741 South Sudanese refugees (UNHCR 2019b).

This article is based on interviews conducted in Palorinya and Rhino Camp, two highly populated and geographically expansive refugee settlements in West Nile, Uganda. Located in northwest Uganda and primarily agricultural, West Nile ranks among one of the least developed sub-regions, with 77.3% of the population living in poverty as of 2017, compared to the national rate of 55.1% (Oxford Poverty and Development Initiative 2019; Storer and Pearson 2019). Most refugees in Rhino Camp and Palorinya are from the bordering Greater Equatoria region of South Sudan (Tuckwood 2019). In 2019, UNHCR estimated the population of Rhino Camp to be 113,176 refugees and Palorinya settlement to hold 121,091 refugees (UNHCR 2018, 2019a; 2020). While many of these individuals fled South Sudan due to the 2013 conflict, others moved to Uganda years earlier to escape violence during southern Sudan's decades-long struggle for independence.

Methods

This article is based on qualitative data collected by a team of three South Sudanese and two American researchers from [humanitarian NGO redacted] and [university redacted] in several site visits between March 2018 and February 2019. Using convenience sampling, researchers spoke with a total of 136 people in 19 semi-structured individual interviews and 13 focus group discussions segregated by gender. Interviews took place in Rhino Camp's Ofua Zone and Palorinya's Ibakwe Basecamp zone. Respondents included men and women of diverse ages and livelihoods in order to document varying perspectives and experiences of flight and life in the settlements. We did not question respondents on their official displacement status and hence we assume a mix of refugees and asylum seekers in the population, although respondents considered themselves to be refugees. Respondents primarily included members of minority groups from the Greater Equatoria region of South Sudan; these groups comprise the majority in the two settlements. Interviews were conducted either in Juba Arabic or via an interpreter. With participants' consent, most interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed and analyzed in English. The team used deductive and inductive coding and Dedoose qualitative software.

During this study, we remained cognizant of the various ethical considerations associated with conducting research in contexts where both humanitarian service delivery and forms of violence are ongoing (Lewis et al. 2019; Mazurana et al. 2013; Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018). The institutional review board (IRB) of [redacted] University granted approval for the team's role in this research. We recognize the challenges and opportunities that this environment presents for research, both in terms of potential respondent hesitation to participate and in terms of the chance for humanitarian agencies to learn from the experiences of intended beneficiaries. To mitigate potential risks, we developed an informed consent script that emphasized respondent anonymity and clarified that participation would have no influence on the respondents' eligibility to receive assistance from any agency. No identifying information about research participants was shared with staff from [NGO redacted], other agencies, or any officials.

Social connections before and during flight

Access to information and material support

Social connections influence peoples' experiences of displacement even before they flee. Information and its flow affect decision-making about when and how to flee (Author et al. 2018), but the flow of information is unequal and depends in part on social configurations. In the context of escalating violence in South Sudan, information about security and flight passed between households. Many respondents reported that they were among the last to leave their communities of origin. Respondents attributed this, in part, to being unaware of the deteriorating security conditions. Many explained that they did not have the preferential access to critical information that was available to better-connected households. This had often dramatic consequences for the safety and wellbeing of those who were unable to obtain timely information (for similar findings from Jordan, see Wall et al. 2017). Respondents described the resulting fear and confusion. As one woman from Rhino Camp explained:

> I was in Yei when the conflict began. Most of the killings happened at night. People were randomly murdered, including children, and we had no idea who was responsible or who was behind the killings... I did try to reach out to relatives and friends about what was going on, but the mobile network was already shut down.

Households with male relatives working in urban centers, especially Juba, often had better access to information about security and were able to flee earlier than others. A woman in Rhino Camp recalled, 'The people who fled first to Uganda were the ones who had relatives, husbands, and friends in big towns who provided them with vital information and asked them to leave.' Another woman in Rhino Camp from Yei highlighted the often gendered barriers to information, which she felt caused her to be late to flee:

> Those who remained behind mostly were women who don't travel to big towns, and women without husbands who struggled to get information about what was going on. We just saw cars moving from our places to Uganda and we began to trek on foot with our families because it was not safe anymore.

The ways in which information about the conflict and insecurity travelled (or did not travel) within communities is difficult to reconstruct from refugee narratives. Some people described attempting to share information with those who had less access. For instance, a man who knew people who had already gone to Uganda called them to learn about conditions in the camps. He explained that he relayed what he learned to others who lacked such relationships. 'There were a lot of people who were not able to access this kind of information. Others were able to get the information through me because I delivered it to them there and then.' In other instances, however, respondents described seeing people in their communities packing belongings and preparing to depart without informing others of the impending danger. While there are no definitive explanations for why information might have been held within tight social circles, a few patterns did emerge.

First, such information may have been available, but not acted upon. Respondents may be reluctant, in hindsight, to admit that they disregarded such warnings. Lack of action may have been due to financial constraints or the hope that the violence would spare their community. One woman, for example, recalled that her relatives were among the last to leave their communities in South Sudan because 'they were just waiting for the fighting to cool down and go back to normal.' Second, people who did have security information may have kept it private out of mistrust or fear. Political allegiances within communities were not always known, and

people may have feared that if word got out that they were fleeing they would be stopped or face other repercussions. As a key informant living in Juba described:

> By the time the crisis began, strangers were not trusted.... Marauding soldiers were there in almost every village and [also at] the exit points at which the affected populations would flee the country. These [factors] made many people fear to disclose information to others.

Third, as the conflict intensified, community leaders with political clout were often specifically targeted by armed groups because of their status and wealth. A key informant in Juba explained that these politically connected households, who may have had better knowledge about security, may have fled early in the conflict without disclosing the information. Lastly, security advice may have passed through some networks and not others. Those who did not receive this information may not have been connected to the right people.

The importance of fleeing with others

Whether a household had advance knowledge about the impending risks also influenced the configurations in which they fled. Those who had the means—both economically and in regard to information—often left as entire households or made plans for household members to be reunited. In marked contrast, respondents who fled only when the violence reached their villages were more likely to be separated from household members and to face unplanned journeys. Not being part of a household—or being in a partial household, such as without two parents or without a partner—can continue to influence material and emotional well-being after fleeing (Author et al. 2018; Lewis 2019; Schulz 2019).

Refugee respondents explained that their social relationships were critical sources of support during the trip to Uganda. While respondents emphasized the importance of pre-existing relationships prior to fleeing, they explained that they were more likely to depend on new relationships while en route. As one man in Palorinya recalled, 'I moved with other people. Those people were my friends whom I made on the way. You don't move alone. We moved as a team. If you moved alone, you would be killed.'

Respondents described banding together with fellow travelers, including strangers, in ad hoc but fluid groups. A man in Palorinya described the connections he made with strangers at the bus station in Juba while en route to Uganda: 'When someone asks you how you're doing when [you] meet them for the first time, I feel like I've known that person for a very long time.' The groups evolved as they approached Uganda, and people moved among groups in accordance with their pace. Fleeing in a group offered both safety and material support. Respondents described pooling food within groups, as explained by a woman in Palorinya whose family brought goats with them when they fled Yei:

> We shared the goat meat with others. They were all different people from different counties, and I did not know them, but I shared with them because we were moving together. They also shared with me. If some of them had flour and the other ones had grains, we would gather them all in one place and eat all together.

Group members also helped each other to keep moving, as described by a man in Rhino Camp:

> We came with a group of children, women, and men. The journey took long because my children had to rest frequently. Some people we were moving with were carrying their belongings on bicycles, and

> when our children had to rest, sometimes they offloaded the luggage and took children on their bicycles instead. It was group movement, not just a few people or one family.

Many research participants emphasized the inclusivity of these ad hoc groups. 'We were just walking together as one family without discrimination. We were one big family,' said a female refugee in Palorinya. Some respondents, especially those from Greater Equatoria, noted that this inclusivity extended across ethnicities, but this view was not shared by all. (Importantly, our sample did not include members of all ethnic groups, and additional research would be needed to understand the full dimensions of ethnic inclusion, exclusion, and/or solidarity.) One respondent, a Nuer man in Palorinya, said he felt more comfortable among those from his own ethnic group. He explained:

> On our way to Uganda, I came together with my fellow Nuers. We ate together and told stories. We shared what we had. We met each other on the way to Uganda, and because we used the same language, I knew that they were good people. I had no relation with them [before fleeing], but we just assisted each because we are from the same place.

Respondents explained that their groups of fellow travelers often dispersed when refugees were assigned to different settlements or blocks within settlements after reaching Uganda. As a man in Rhino Camp explained, 'the only thing that separated us was the UN.' In many cases, however, the social relationships refugees developed during flight withstood separation and remained important sources of material and non-material support. For example, one man provided assistance to another man he fled with, who ended up in the Democratic Republic of Congo. 'Last year my friend in Congo called me and told me that his daughter was sick and was admitted in a clinic and wanted some money for her…I decided to send him the money.'

In sum, social connections were critical for refugees both before and during their flight to Uganda. Whether people were connected to those with access to timely and accurate security information could be, quite literally, a matter of life or death. Most respondents described forming strong and beneficial connections with others they met while en route to Uganda. These relationships appear to be forged primarily through shared experience, rather than through the kinship ties which are often of primary importance in communities in South Sudan (Author 2019). These findings demonstrate that survival does not depend solely on individual decision-making and coping strategies, but on both pre-existing and new social relationships.

Social connections in Uganda

New relationships among refugees: non-material and material support

Once refugees reach Rhino Camp and Palorinya settlement, new relationships provide crucial forms of material and non-material support. Supportive social networks vary and at times overlap to include relatives, people with connections from home, and people whom they met while fleeing. However, immediate neighbors within the settlements are the most important source of assistance for many respondents.

Non-material support consists primarily of emotional assistance, advice, and labor. As feminist scholarship has highlighted (Friedemann-Sánchez and Griffin 2011; Gordon 1996), these forms of support are often overlooked because they cannot be easily quantified (Merry 2016), and/or because they do not directly relate to participation in a formal, capitalist market or workplace (Weeks 2007). We argue that these non-material

forms of support are just as essential as material assistance for understanding how people form and maintain bonds during displacement and for analyzing survival strategies.

Many respondents emphasized the importance of finding a sympathetic ear among those who have experienced similar hardships and trauma. For example, a young woman in Palorinya settlement explained:

> When I remembered my dead beloved ones [who died] during the conflict I started weeping because these terrible memories are still in my mind and defeat my strength…A neighbor came and asked why I was weeping. Sometimes they know what has actually happened and they give me positive pieces of advice. They give courageous words, come frequently and converse with me and then I forget those disturbing memories.

Numerous respondents described a system of support in the form of labor. This could be occasional assistance, such as when 'your neighbor remains in charge of your home and children when you are travelling,' or in response to a crisis, such as 'the death of a family member and sickness. We go and help the person who is involved in a problem with housework, like fetching water and cooking.' People also reported that they receive or provide help in emergencies if they have certain assets that others do not. For instance, a male respondent in Palorinya who had a motorcycle provided transport to the hospital free of charge when someone was sick, even if he did not know them.

As in communities of origin in South Sudan, labor is often shared within reciprocal social networks. For example, women help in each other's gardens on a rotating basis and may move in groups when collecting resources outside of the settlements for protection. Not all systems are based on reciprocity: respondents also described helping those who lack adequate resources or labor without expecting assistance in return. For example, young men in Palorinya explained:

> Sometimes you find elders who came here without any relatives. As youths of this community, we mobilize ourselves to do [what is] needed and to support our people. For example, we go to the forest to collect firewood for building homes [for these elders].

Importantly, though most respondents reported widespread sharing of tasks, this view was not universal. As indicated by a male respondent in Palorinya, 'There is no support extended unless you pay and hire some laborers to construct the shelter.' These variations in experiences may be due to a number of factors, including differences in the composition of social networks or social exclusion. While many respondents described community relations in the settlements as inclusive, others — as discussed later in more detail— narrated cases of active and passive exclusion based on factors including gender, language and sometimes ethnicity.

In addition to non-material support, the material exchange of food among friends and neighbors in the refugee settlements is an important means of coping with food insecurity. The culture of sharing is a defining characteristic of many communities in South Sudan, as illustrated by field work with the Dinka in the late 1990s by Harrigan and Chol (1998). Relief aid provided to Dinka communities was then redistributed by lineage, with each group deciding who was most vulnerable. Similarly, Nuer key informants interviewed in Juba for our study described in depth the social expectations of sharing within their clans. The extent to which these patterns are replicated within South Sudan among the minority groups who made up the respondents in the West Nile camps is unknown, however, sharing is widespread among study participants. The exchanges among

respondents are most often of humanitarian food rations, and 'borrowed' food is repaid after the next distribution occurs. A woman in Palorinya described this system:

> [I]n the middle of the month before we receive food from WFP, if your friend's food is over you lend her some kilograms of sorghum. She refunds it back when she gets her food. That is how we are managing life here.

Sharing also takes place without expectation of repayment. Some respondents explained that they watch out for their neighbors' well-being, knowing that at times people may hesitate to ask for assistance. A woman in Palorinya explained that if her neighbor does not light a fire, she knows that her neighbor has nothing to cook for her family. On these days, she will bring her neighbor food and does not expect repayment. As a man in Palorinya stated, 'Who knows if tomorrow it will be my turn to ask for help?' However, people also recognize that others may be unable to help, even when asked. One woman in Palorinya explained, 'If I have anything at hand I definitely give to them. If I have nothing, they understand it.' However, if someone is believed to be capable of assisting and opts not to, their refusal is likely to damage their social connections. A female respondent in Palorinya explained that such actions 'will definitely lead to the collapse of the relationship you have, because friendship means sharing and helping in times of problems.'

Cash is also shared and exchanged (Harvey and Bailey 2015), though to a lesser extent than food due to its relative scarcity. Indeed, many respondents explained that since arriving in Uganda, access to cash has dramatically declined. When cash is needed, for instance to purchase food or educational supplies, people sell portions of their rations to members of the host community. One respondent in Rhino Camp estimated that she sells a quarter of her food ration each month for these purposes. Some of the few refugees who have salaries (e.g., from employment with humanitarian agencies in the settlements) explain that they do share money, but the sharing is primarily with relatives and close friends, as opposed to with the broader circle of neighbors who share food. This can cause tension in a culture that relies heavily upon mutual support. Notably, respondents explained that beneficiaries of NGO programs that distribute cash may experience significant pressure to share the money with non-recipient relatives and friends. For example, a woman in Palorinya explained that 'NGOs do of course give [cash beneficiaries] instructions not share what has been provided to them, but beneficiaries can face pressure to share sometimes up to half of the money with others who didn't receive it.'

Respondents explained that the dynamics of cash sharing have changed since they became refugees. They pointed out that those who were 'wealthy' were less likely to share with others in the camp than they had been in South Sudan. A young woman in Palorinya said that the wealthy in the settlement 'only supported their relatives,' whereas 'back home in South Sudan, the wealthy households always gave support to anybody in the community, not their family alone.' When asked why this change had occurred, respondents largely agreed that the uncertainty of the duration of the conflict in South Sudan combined with the extent of need among refugees made those who had money hesitant to give too generously, especially to non- relatives. In addition, while many respondents discussed support crossing ethnic lines, some indications suggest that cash might be kept within a closer circle. When cash is shared outside of close circles, it appears to most often be in response to major crises or investment needs. Respondents mentioned receiving cash to cover the costs of a funeral, travel in response to a death in the family (including back to South Sudan), the purchase of a motorbike, or hospital fees for a very sick child.

Collectively, these narratives offer a complex view of the role of different forms of support in shaping and maintaining social connections. Non-material support, including information and emotional support, is reportedly shared among new connections and wide networks, often without expectation of reciprocity. Material resources, on the other hand, are scarce and therefore shared only with the closest kin and acquaintances, or in the event of emergencies. An exception is food, which is readily shared in small amounts among neighbors, particularly women, within a system of mutual support. Non-material support helps to form new relationships and establish trust, while material support affirms existing bonds. Importantly, when respondents perceive that either form of support is withheld or absent altogether, they express disappointment and a sense of isolation, highlighting the significance of both material and non-material assistance for people's experiences of displacement.

Gender and social connectedness in Uganda

A gender analysis further illuminates varied experiences and challenges in establishing social connections. Many women fled South Sudan without male partners and became the sole providers for their children in the settlements. Women described lacking certain forms of capital, such as labor to build shelters. A woman in Palorinya noted that fewer women than men could speak Arabic, the primary shared language among the diverse refugee population, which constrained women's social networks. Female respondents also appeared to be less likely than their male counterparts to establish often valuable connections within the host community, due in part to social norms that limit women's interaction with non-related men. Research in other contexts, including Ethiopia, has examined the implications of gendered social networks and demonstrated that women's networks may 'command fewer resources than men's and include more 'strong' family and kin relationships that are less valuable than new connections in creating [business] opportunities' (Campos et al. 2019, p 14). These norms also constrain the extent of the network that women can call upon for assistance. A woman in Palorinya explained that suspicions of adultery underpinned many of these constraints:

> It's very hard for women to approach men to give them support because people may take it differently…When a woman begins to receive support from any man here in the camp, the wife of the man will cause trouble which may lead to violence among the refugee community.

While single women in the settlements face numerous challenges, in some regards they appear more adept than men at creating valuable social networks. In particular, women described close connections to other female refugees, particularly neighbors, who rely on each other for small loans of food and for emotional support. Women in Rhino Camp explained that they collect firewood in a group, and then provide the sale proceeds to one group member. This rotating system allowed one woman at a time to meet her family's needs, and also provided important emotional support. As explained by one respondent:

> We come together like this because some of the women here in the camp commit suicide when they have problems. When we saw that, we said 'let us form a group where we can advise ourselves and share our feelings as women who are having problems.

Critical engagement with masculinity is an important pillar of gender analysis (Schulz 2019; Author, 2016). Some men complained of extreme idleness and the erosion of 'typical' male roles as providers for their households. A man in a focus group in Palorinya explained, 'we don't do anything here as men, because we have nothing to do. Some of us just drink alcohol and sit without doing anything because we are not citizens of this country.' However, men also form social connections in this leisure time, whether in drinking

establishments, tea houses, or over card games. A female respondent in Palorinya described men as being 'more flexible than women' in their activities. She explained that this enables men to converse easily with people and gives them better 'access to information, which in turn helps them get more connections and, in some cases, even jobs.' The connections forged through social interactions can be particularly important for male refugees in making ties with host community members, as discussed further below.

Inclusion and exclusion

In addition to gender, ethnicity and language also shape social connections and the structure of refugees' relationships. Many respondents stressed the unity in the camps, the bonds forged during flight, and a common South Sudanese identity. However, the study primarily included members of different minority groups from the Greater Equatoria region of South Sudan. While cooperation and solidarity are central to the systems of support that ensure daily survival in the diverse settlements, this narrative of cohesion and harmony likely masks a more complex social fabric that includes myriad tensions among and between individuals and groups (Author et al. 2018; Ticktin 2011).

One area of possible tension centers on perceived inclusion and exclusion from networks, activities, and support systems. A handful of respondents alluded to such exclusion existing along ethnic lines, borne out in the distribution of humanitarian assistance. Narratives on the perceived links between ethnicity and corruption overlapped in many of these critiques, whereby one ethnic group was said to have favored their own ethnicity in doling out assistance. Aid agencies often hire refugees on short-term contracts to serve as mobilizers during distributions, and respondents felt that these mobilizers sometimes prioritize members of their own ethnic group on beneficiary lists. While these views were not nearly as widespread as those of cross-cutting ethnic unity, the repeated mention by various respondents indicates that this had been a problem.

Other areas of exclusion include language barriers, which, as discussed above, are particularly felt by women, who may be less able to form social ties across the diverse community. In addition, language barriers overlap with gender to curtail women's interaction—when compared to their male counterparts—with members of the host community. As discussed below, host community interactions function as an important social connection for those refugees able to forge such ties.

A number of respondents also discussed isolation as a form of exclusion, and reported that this was particularly experienced by the elderly and (although mentioned less often) those with disabilities. Gender and language intersected with age to create vulnerabilities for older refugees. Elderly widows were seen as particularly vulnerable, and respondents felt that older people faced more language barriers. A man in Rhino camp explained that those who suffered were "these women who have lost their husbands and the old men who have no relative to rely on. These people are really isolated." To note, several respondents pointed out that the elderly and people with disabilities were also more likely to experience isolation in their communities of origin in South Sudan.

These narratives suggest that an emphasis on social connectedness should not overshadow attention to who is excluded and on which basis. For researchers and humanitarian practitioners alike, these insights provide important information on social dynamics during displacement, as well as on potential vulnerabilities and sources of tension that can inform humanitarian action.

Social Connectedness and Refugee Agency during Displacement

South Sudanese refugees in West Nile actively use scarce resources to negotiate for assets and cultivate social connections. This section describes two ways in which respondents exercise agency, even when forced to flee their homes and to rely on external assistance. These narratives highlight the complexity and dynamism of social networks, in which power relations and socio-economic status fluctuate, and in which populations affected by humanitarian crises not only experience hierarchies in their interactions with humanitarianism (Ticktin 2011), but also challenge and reshape those hierarchies and relationships.

The first example of refugee agency is apparent in refugee-host community interactions. The literature on forced migration covers this relationship in depth, and themes from that literature were present among the study population, including the generosity of host communities who shared land, employment, food, and emergency support (including cash) with refugees. Some refugees had previous experiences of displacement to Uganda, and either maintained social connections from this period or were able to re-ignite social contacts. One of the most salient examples was a refugee in Palorinya who had lived in the same area as a refugee as a child. His father was a popular pastor with many friends among the local Ugandan community. When this respondent returned to the area, one of his father's friends granted him a large portion of arable land along the river. Other respondents spoke of the repeated forced displacements of both Ugandans and South Sudanese across the border and said that this shared experience fostered generosity and empathy. These interactions between South Sudanese refugees and their Ugandan hosts are made possible, in part, by Uganda's refugee policy which allows freedom of movement and limited access to land. Reciprocal exchanges took place between host and displaced households, as explained by a young male refugee in Palorinya: 'When we get our [humanitarian food] ration we give [our friends in the host community] a little food. Then, when their vegetables are ready, they give us free vegetables like okra and sweet potatoes.' However, refugee respondents also described instances in which they shared with members of the host community not to maintain reciprocity, but as a means to an end. In the most salient example, a male respondent in Palorinya regularly took food aid to a host family for several months. After doing this for some time, he asked the family for a piece of land on which to farm; they agreed. The respondent explained that he provided the food with the intent of making it difficult for them to refuse his request. This and similar anecdotes illustrate that not all the power lies with the host community, and that refugees are able to use resources, particularly regular food deliveries, to leverage influence.

A second example illustrating the dynamic nature of social connections and the ways in which refugees retain agency is apparent in cross-border exchanges. Most respondents expressed a desire to return to South Sudan but remained reluctant to do so because of ongoing political upheaval. Amidst such uncertainty, respondents spoke of the importance of communicating with relatives in South Sudan, primarily via phone (whether personal, borrowed, or set up by aid agencies) In addition to maintaining contact, respondents sought to make material exchanges whenever possible. This instance of refugee agency up-ends conventional wisdom about how support flows: the material cross-border exchanges occur in *both* directions. Funds sent from South Sudan to refugees are most often from relatives employed by NGOs or the government, particularly those receiving salaries in United States dollars. Support in the other direction is primarily food items that are cheaper in Uganda than South Sudan—including maize and sorghum at the time of data collection (Food Security and Nutrition Working Group 2018). A woman in Palorinya reported that sending food north is common:

> There are many people who send their families food stuff from here. Most people send cooking oil and beans…Since I came here, my husband [in South Sudan] has not sent anything to us. I have been the one catering for him.

A South Sudanese trader in Koboko explained the practicalities of these exchanges: each month he puts his sister's name and phone number on a parcel of food and sends it to Juba via bus or lorry. The driver calls the trader's sister upon arrival and she picks up the food. The system of sending food north operates entirely on trust. Importantly, many respondents neither receive nor send assistance of any kind due to lack of means or few social connections outside their camp. However, the fact that this is a regular, if limited, practice indicates the importance of social connectedness for coping in conflict and also that, despite past and present hardships, refugees in West Nile continue to be important *sources* of support. We see the ways in which social networks coalesce and shift in response to need, resources, and specific local contexts, and the ways in which refugees within these networks are not passive bystanders, but are agents negotiating access and managing their social connections.

Conclusion

This paper has illustrated the many roles and functions of social connectedness in enabling survival during flight and displacement. It has demonstrated the ways in which social networks serve as conduits for information about safety and protection in the midst of escalating violence. When this information is timely and accurate, it may allow people to make informed decisions about when and where to flee. Being able to make calculated decisions may limit the loss of life, livelihoods, and assets and thereby improve recovery. However, a variety of factors shape social networks and determine who is (not) included. The nature of these networks in turn affects the flow of information and means that information may reach some people but not others, even within the same communities. Households' reliance on their own networks for information during crises has implications for how humanitarian aid actors design and utilize conflict early warning systems. An understanding that potentially lifesaving information flows first and foremost through informal social networks points to the importance of disseminating early warning data locally and horizontally to the extent possible.

Displacement destroys social connections, but refugees strategically build and leverage new ones. Refugees established trust with and offered and received support from people they fled with, even when these people were strangers from different locations, clans or sub-clans. While the fluid nature of mass migration means that some of these relationships proved temporary, many respondents established lasting bonds with those with whom they fled. These new social connections may serve to assist refugees' coping, recovery, and resilience.

Aid actors should take concrete steps to support, and at the very least not undermine, relationships that refugees forge during displacement. This could include encouraging refugees of diverse backgrounds to convene at events such as trade fairs, extension programs, livelihood trainings, NGO-supported Village Savings and Loan association (VSLA) meetings, or social gatherings not necessarily associated with NGO interventions, such as community sports events. While VSLA groups and livelihood trainings are not novel, their benefits are usually described in terms of economic outcomes. Our research suggests that the informal exchanges at such gatherings likely have additional important social outcomes. For example, they may allow refuges to forge new social connections and share information and advice regarding livelihood activities, host community relations, and conditions in South Sudan. Additionally, these gatherings might have psychosocial benefits for their participants, which respondents explained are among the most significant aspects of their social relationships in the settlements (Mukdarut et al. 2017). Aid actors should consider interventions to assist refugees to remain

connected or to reconnect with their pre-displacement social networks in South Sudan. Providing refugees with access to cellphones and/or airtime is one such intervention that could may help households diversify their sources of kinship support, both in the immediate term and in the possibility of eventual return to South Sudan.

Respondents in the heterogeneous settlements of Rhino Camp and Palorinya spoke of relative unity across ethnic lines, though this is unlikely to represent the experiences of all refugees. The instances in which respondents did admit to social tensions or exclusion along group lines often overlapped with the distribution of food aid and allocation of positions of authority. These allegations illustrate the ways in which aid resources can flow through specific social networks to the benefit of some and the exclusion of others. To counter this trend, aid actors should ensure that local hiring practices, including for volunteer positions, consider these social dynamics. By ensuring ethnically inclusive local recruitment practices and affirmatively hiring from under-represented groups, aid actors might minimize exacerbation of social tensions. Doing so is also likely to reduce the prevalence of actual or perceived corruption and ethnic favoritism during aid distributions.

The role of food aid as an important resale commodity to generate cash, to allow for acquisition of non-food items and, often, to support broader markets is well known (Buchanan-Smith and Jaspars 2007). However, this article has illustrated that sharing food aid also has important social functions. Refugees, particularly female food-preparers, share small amounts of food aid with other households on a regular and recurring basis. Some of these transfers are based on an expectation of reciprocity while others are purely altruistic. In addition, food aid serves as an important means through which people build new relationships, including with host communities. Refugees may also exchange food aid strategically to enable access to future benefits. Such examples illustrate refugees' agency and the ways in which food aid can be an important social commodity that allows recipients to build ties that potentially contribute to resilience and livelihood strategies.

Bidirectional cash and in-kind remittances flow between Uganda and South Sudan through established networks of trust. Significant research exists on remittances in the context of humanitarian crises, and aid actors are increasingly seeking to leverage remittances in programming and as an alternative means of financing recovery (Bryant 2019). However, existing research on this topic has overwhelmingly focused on cash remittances sent to crisis-affected populations from 'outside' of emergency zones, most often from members of the diaspora residing in more developed countries. Conversely, refugee respondents frequently explained that remittances, both cash and in-kind, sent *between conflict-affected populations*—in this case, refugees in Uganda and their connections in South Sudan—are more common sources of support for refugees in the West Nile settlements. While the prominence of 'local' remittances may be explained in part by the fact that the South Sudanese diaspora in developed countries is relatively small, this finding nonetheless challenges the dominant characterizations of remittances as cash sent from afar to vulnerable and passive recipients in crisis-affected contexts (KNOMAD 2020). These transfers, which rely on relationships of trust, may be strong indicators of a household's ability to leverage social networks, for both material support and for information, advice, and other important non-material assistance. Such 'local' remittances sent between conflict-affected populations may be an important component of household resilience capacities. However, additional research is required in order to identify the extent of 'local' remittances in the West Nile settlements, and the channels through which in kind goods flow.

Proximity and shared experiences are among the most significant sources of social connectedness among South Sudanese refugees in Uganda. Refugees depend on these relationships for critical material and non-material support both during flight from South Sudan and after their settlement in Uganda. Accounting for the ways in

which people utilize social connections in situations of forced displacement has critically important implications for understanding coping, resilience, and recovery.

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