

WHO CAN I TURN TO?

Social connections research



📍 Displaced family in Duhok Governorate, Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Photo: Sarah Guy/Tearfund

Tearfund and Queen Margaret University (QMU) undertook a small-scale study on social connections among displaced and settled communities in Kurdish Region of Iraq (KRI). The purpose of the research was to learn who these crisis-affected communities turn to for support – and who they trust – in a context of conflict and displacement. This approach can help humanitarian actors to understand existing social support networks, and use this information to design more effective programmes that strengthen community resilience.

This brief draws on the research findings to provide policy and practice recommendations for humanitarian practitioners, including NGOs, UN and other humanitarian agencies, and donor institutions (including governments).

KEY MESSAGES

- The research highlighted the importance of faith as a key factor in personal and community resilience for conflict-affected populations, including in situations of gender-based violence (GBV). Both displaced and host communities demonstrated higher levels of trust in God and religious sources of support compared to NGOs or government.
- It is important to invest in mapping social connections within crisis response, as understanding existing community connections and perspectives on trust (including gender dynamics) is vital to shape more effective and context-appropriate humanitarian strategy and response.



Background

The humanitarian crisis in Iraq remains complex with multiple, unpredictable and volatile dynamics impacting civilians. The pace of displacement, and return, is one of the fastest on recent record. More than 11 million are in need of humanitarian assistance, and over 3 million have been internally displaced.¹

Families, friendships, community and business relationships provide an essential means of support and protection within and between communities. When people flee from conflict these connections, and existing community coping mechanisms, are often catastrophically disrupted. Without this established network of social relationships, displaced people often struggle to meet their needs.

Social connections research

In October 2016 Tearfund conducted a study on social connections, in partnership with QMU, as a pilot initiative to provide more insight into the perspectives and priorities of local populations facing a humanitarian crisis.

The research focused on three conflict-affected Yazidi and Muslim communities in the Duhok Governorate, in KRI. A total of 103 people were involved: 48 women and 55 men from displaced Yazidi and Muslim populations and a Yazidi settled ('host') population.

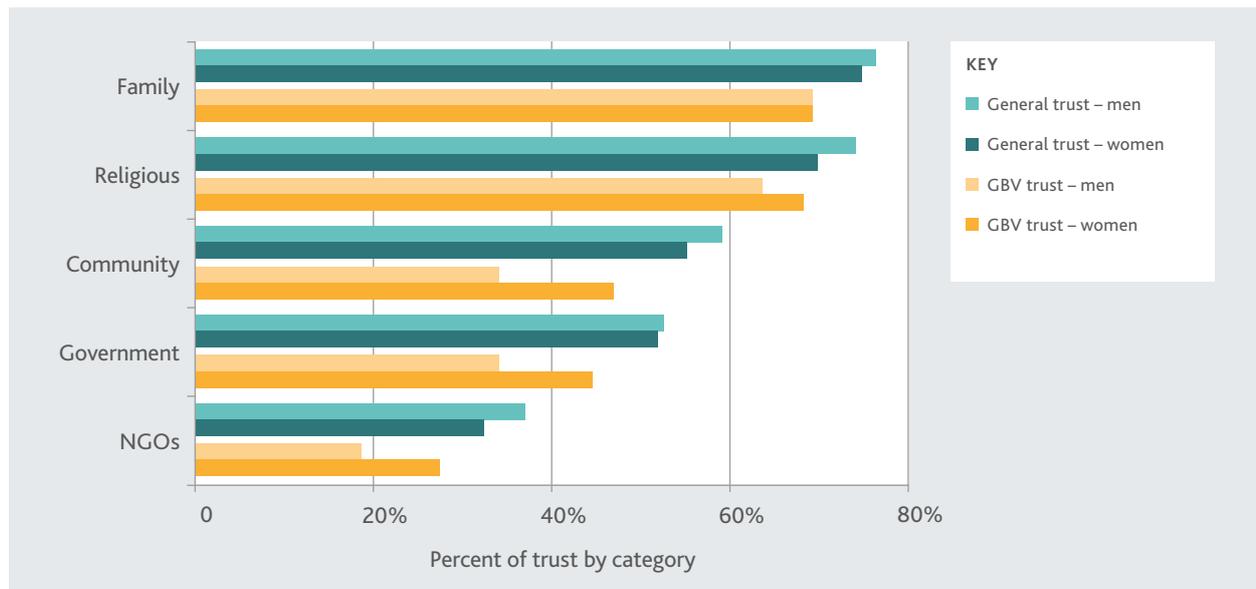
A social mapping tool developed by QMU² was used to identify the social connections – ie people and organisations – that these communities turn to for support, and who they trust. The tool incorporated a gender-sensitive approach to explore differences in support resources available to men and women. The study focused on social connections relevant to meeting basic needs, resolving disputes and addressing gender-based violence (GBV). The aim was to use this information to improve programme design to strengthen community resilience, based on processes that are genuinely community owned and shaped.³

The research findings were then shared in May 2017 in workshops with key stakeholders in-country, including local community leaders, academics, local and international NGOs and UN agencies. Recommendations based on the research were developed and refined through these participatory discussions.

📌 Understanding community connections and perceptions on trust is vital to design more effective and context-appropriate humanitarian responses. Photo: Stella Chetham/Tearfund



Table showing levels of trust in different sources of support, both in general and in relation to gender-based violence.



Key findings

- For the majority of people in the study, God is their most valued source of help.⁴
- Other important sources of help for meeting basic needs include family, neighbours, friends and tribal leaders followed by, for the Yazidi people, faith leaders. Concerns around honour mean that displaced people feel increasingly constrained in requesting help from some of their traditional sources of support, since they have nothing to offer in exchange.
- Men have higher numbers of external connections. Women without any male relatives to assist them have fewer options for support and feel more vulnerable; this is frequently the case for displaced women.
- In general, men and women from both displaced and host communities place the highest level of trust in household and extended family members, and God. There are significant levels of trust in religious sources of support in communities. There are lower levels of trust for external actors, such as NGOs, police and government.
- Faith leaders and institutions play a crucial role in dispute mediation and resolution, especially among Yazidi communities. For disputes within communities, people prefer to try to resolve disputes within the family first. They then seek help from the extended family, neighbours or local community representatives such as the Mukhtar or faith leaders. Help is rarely sought from external agents such as the police or government bodies, unless it is a dispute between communities, or when different religions are involved.

- Avoiding public shame and protecting family honour takes priority in resolving GBV issues. Therefore, men and women are extremely reluctant to seek help beyond the immediate family, and external sources of support are seen as a last resort. Both men and women trust God and immediate family members the most when seeking to address GBV. Men are often expected to manage and resolve issues of GBV, and have a significant level of influence. Although men have higher levels of general trust than women, they demonstrate less trust in matters relating to GBV.

Conclusions

This research confirmed that it is critical for humanitarian actors and policymakers to understand the social norms and practices that drive participation, identity and coping mechanisms in conflict-affected contexts.

Particularly within the context of communities that have experienced trauma and have lost trust, it is important to identify key local influencers and fully understand their role, sphere of influence and potential within their communities. Building on this foundation will help ensure that humanitarian strategies and programmes enhance resilience in an effective and sustainable way. For tackling sensitive issues such as GBV, this understanding becomes an essential first step.

Understanding gender dynamics in conflict and displacement contexts is crucial to understanding social connections, and to designing effective responses. The research revealed some of the ways in which gender

relations affect the communities' decision-making processes and approaches to seeking help, and helps to identify key entry points for working on the sensitive issue of GBV.⁵

The research highlighted the vital importance of faith as a key factor in personal and community resilience for the populations studied.

Recommendations

Humanitarian agencies and donors should ensure that all interventions build local resilience through identifying and strengthening existing support networks:

- Use culturally appropriate social mapping tools to improve baseline knowledge of resilience and protection among displaced and conflict-affected communities. Social connections mapping could be integrated within needs assessments to identify gaps and resources to shape programming, as well as used in monitoring and evaluation to measure the impact of programming on trust and access.
- Use data on existing social connections and help-seeking pathways to develop strategic interventions that complement and strengthen existing pathways (or identify appropriate replacement strategies), rather than set up parallel systems.
- Understand preferred help-seeking pathways to better address barriers to accessing services and to ensure the needs of the most vulnerable are addressed within community interventions, giving consideration to constraints around reciprocity and honour.
- Incorporate a gender-sensitive approach within social mapping tools, and consider the impact of trust and connections in referral pathways for GBV services.

Recognise the role of faith in personal and community resilience, and engage with local faith leaders and faith organisations within humanitarian response:

- Increase faith literacy⁶ among humanitarian actors and build partnerships between secular and faith groups

in order to develop the potential role of faith actors within humanitarian response, particularly in conflict resolution, preventing GBV (including addressing where faith teachings may currently be used to justify harmful gender norms) and in psychosocial response.

- Equip community leaders, religious and tribal leaders in mediation and dispute resolution (including between different faith communities). Where appropriate, work alongside local police and judiciary to develop skills and knowledge.
- Work with faith leaders to address barriers within 'honour' cultures to enable survivors of GBV to safely access services and support, and engage men (particularly community leaders, faith leaders and heads of household) as allies and agents of change at all stages of addressing GBV.

Research report

The full research report: *Who can I turn to? Mapping social connections, trust and problem-solving among conflict-affected populations* (Strang and O'Brien, 2017) is available online at www.tearfund.org/socialconnections

1 UN OCHA Iraq: *Humanitarian Snapshot* (August 2017) www.unocha.org/iraq

2 The tool has been used in a variety of contexts including with refugees in Glasgow and Sudan.

3 As part of Tearfund's commitment to the localisation agenda is a dedication to strengthening the role and influence of local actors to be active participants shaping humanitarian agenda, strategy and practice.

4 In all four participant groups (men/women, host/displaced) the list of people ranked with the highest trust to meet needs (over 80 per cent of total possible score) was the same – family members within the household, extended family and God.

5 Understanding that harmful gender norms must be challenged sensitively with due regard to cultural values, and international ethical guidelines on this issue must be followed in humanitarian response.

6 <https://lfc.jlilfc.com/resources/local-humanitarian-leadership-religious-literacy-engaging-religion-faith-faith-actors/>

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www.tearfund.org/sexualviolence

100 Church Road, Teddington, TW11 8QE, United Kingdom

T +44 (0)20 8977 9144 E publications@tearfund.org