

What are the sources of social capital?

A pilot study in La Plaine, Cité Soleil, Haiti

SoCap Research Brief

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Key Points

In La Plaine, social capital is built first and foremost through people and relationships, which underpin how all other resources are accessed and used.

Across the pilot findings, participants consistently identified people as the community's most important resource. Family members, neighbours, peers, community leaders, faith networks, and diaspora ties provide everyday support, protection, advice, and problem-solving during crises. Other resources – including institutions, economic activities, and natural assets – were seen as valuable mainly when they are mobilised through trust and collective action.

Social capital is not evenly shared: age and gender shape who can access networks, resources, support, and opportunities, as well as risks faced.

Young women often rely on narrower, family-based networks and engage in low-return, localised livelihoods. Young men generally access wider peer and leadership networks and more diverse economic opportunities but also face greater pressure to join armed groups and heightened exposure to violence. These differences shape how support is mobilised and how young people navigate shocks and stress.

The way international civil society groups and researchers engage with communities can undermine or enhance social capital.

Frequent needs assessments with little community feedback, and selective aid targeting were often seen as weakening solidarity, encouraging dependency, and increasing competition within communities. In contrast, participatory and asset-based approaches that worked through trusted local structures, respected mutual aid practices such as konbit, and recognised residents as knowledgeable experts helped to build trust, coordination, and confidence. These findings underline that even well-intentioned external engagement can cause harm if it does not align with local norms, relationships, and power dynamics.

Introduction and Background

The Role of Social Capital in Urban Fragile and Conflict-Affected Contexts (SoCap) project is a three-year Irish Aid-funded research project analysing the interactions between social capital, resilience, the urban environment, and conflict and fragility among marginalised urban populations in Haiti, Somalia and Somaliland.

It aims to understand how social capital translates into resilience among marginalised urban groups, to identify practical leverage points for operational and policy actors. In Haiti, the research project specifically asks how various subgroups of youth in Cité Soleil build resilience towards shocks and stresses through differential access to social capital.

Social capital refers to the networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation.^[1] Research has demonstrated the value of social capital for resilience at various levels and stages of the disaster cycle, from preparedness through recovery.^[2] However, understanding social capital's role in fragile and conflict-affected contexts is challenging. Stressors and shocks in these contexts can be protracted, cyclical and severe. In addition, insecurity and conflict-related divisions can entrench, transform or undermine social bonds and networks, while insular forms of social capital can reinforce distrust and undermine long-term resilience.

Understanding the sources of social capital, and the roles different actors can play in supporting community social capital, is a necessary first step in better understanding how, and under what conditions, social capital supports resilience. This research brief summarises the approach and key findings of the SoCap project pilot phase in La Plaine, Cité Soleil, Haiti. Based on these initial findings, it presents several recommendations for different stakeholders and concludes with a summary of next steps and future research.

1. Putnam, R. (1995) 'Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital,' *Journal of Democracy*, 6, 65-78, p. 67.

2. See discussion in Rhude, K., et al. (2025) *A Review of Evidence of the Impact of Social Capital on Resilience*, SoCap Research Brief, No. 1.

Approach

The SoCap project pilot phase in Haiti adopted a locally led, participatory qualitative research design, prioritising community ownership, reflexive learning, and ethical accountability.

Early engagement showed strong resistance to surveys and standard interviews. Many participants felt these methods took information from communities without leading to visible benefits or change. In response, the research team worked with community members to redesign methods, using local language and familiar approaches to build trust and clearly distinguish this work from past research experiences. The majority of the in-country team members are social leaders from within Cité Soleil. Two primary qualitative methods were employed:

- Chita Pale (“collective dialogue”) – facilitated group discussions (CP)
- Tèt-a-Tèt (“one-to-one conversation”) – in-depth individual interviews (TaT)

Between September and October 2025, the team conducted 11 CP discussions, and eight TaT, with a total of 95 individuals.

Data collection in the pilot phase took place in La Plaine, Cité Soleil. La Plaine is an area in the north-east of Haiti’s capital, Port au Prince. It has a rich agricultural history, and has historically been more stable, and less exposed to violence and armed group control, than more central areas of Cité Soleil.

What is Konbit?

Konbit is a Haitian-Creole term referring to a traditional practice of communal collaboration and cooperation, rooted in mutual aid and collective action. It was historically associated with rural agricultural life, often referring to collective labour during key seasonal periods, for example.^[3] Its contemporary meaning extends beyond this, as articulated by community researchers involved in the SoCap project, to encompass core values of solidarity, responsibility, reciprocity and participation. It is understood as both a value and a lived practice of mutual support.

3. Versaillot, P.-D. and Honda, R. (2024) ‘Building Social Capital through Konbit for Post-Disaster Recovery: A Case Study of Rural Areas in the Xaragua Peninsula, Haiti’, *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 109, 104604.2.

Key Findings

The pilot phase set out to understand the sources of social capital among the population in La Plaine.

This brief presents findings from the pilot phase, intended to describe how social capital currently functions in practice, rather than to make causal claims. As preliminary findings, these should be treated as indicative and exploratory, designed to inform learning, adaptation, and next steps in the multi-year research project.

Five key, interrelated sources of social capital emerged from the findings:

1. Human resources (youth, skilled labour, family, friends, neighbours and community leaders and the diaspora);
2. Social and institutional resources (including schools, hospitals, churches, community-based organisations and NGOs);
3. Economic resources (including informal trade networks, farming/livestock associations, and savings groups);
4. Natural and physical resources (including land, sea, fisheries) with an emphasis on the area's rich agricultural history and potential; and
5. Social fabric (solidarity, determination, and konbit – mutual aid and collective response).

A closer examination of the five key sources of social capital outlined above reveals the following key insights.

Finding 1: People and relationships are the community's most important resource

Across all participant groups, there was a consistent and powerful assertion that people are La Plaine's greatest resource. Human capital is seen as the engine for survival, innovation and hope. Family, neighbours, peers, church members, community leaders, and diaspora relatives provide one another with daily support, emotional solidarity, referrals to services, and protection during crises. This dense web of bonds is the foundational social infrastructure on which community members depend and to which they actively contribute. These findings challenge common stereotypes that portray residents of Cité Soleil as affiliated with armed groups, instead highlighting strong leadership, mutual support, and solidarity within the community.

Other resources, such as land, infrastructure, institutions, and financial assets were viewed as meaningful primarily as they are activated through collective activity and trust. For example, local institutions were valued primarily as spaces where trust is built and coordination occurs; mutual-aid and savings groups were valued not only for access to credit, but also for advice, emotional support, and belonging. Natural resources were seen as assets that are made productive and valuable through collective labour. These practices show how relationships help people make the most of limited resources and cope together during difficult times.

As one religious leader noted: **“Human resources are the greatest, without it, all others collapse”** (m, TaT 101)

At the same time, participants stressed that access to people and institutions is unequal and can be unreliable. Violence, stigma, and fear severely limit mobility and restrict who can physically access schools, hospitals, and markets, and can also indirectly influence social access to networks and support beyond immediate neighbours. Diaspora networks are enormously valuable but may also reproduce dependency and power imbalances between those within and outside the area. Social capital is therefore not fixed: it changes over time and is easier for some people to access than others.

What is new about this finding?

Existing studies show that social relationships play an important role in how people in Haiti cope with shocks, especially through close ties with family, neighbours, and trusted peers.

^[4] The pilot research adds clear, place-specific evidence from La Plaine that people rely on these relationships first, before turning to institutions, services, or material assets. It also builds on work on *konbit*,^[5] by showing how mutual help supports everyday survival in an urban setting, not only after disasters.

Why does this matter for resilience?

Resilience-building efforts that focus only on services or infrastructure risk missing how people actually cope day-to-day. Programmes that recognise, protect, and avoid disrupting neighbour- and relationship-based support are more likely to strengthen people’s ability to manage repeated shocks. Where these relationships are ignored or weakened, households are left with fewer practical options when crises occur.

4. Rahill, G.J., Ganapati, N.E., Clérismé, J.C. and Mukherji, A. (2014) 'Shelter recovery in Urban Haiti after the Earthquake: The Dual Role of Social Capital', *Disasters*, 38(S1), S73–S93; Patel, R.B. and Gleason, K. (2017) 'The Association between Social Cohesion and Community Resilience in Two Urban Slums of Port au Prince, Haiti', *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 27, 162–167.
5. Versaillot and Honda (2024) 'Building Social Capital through *Konbit*.'

Finding 2: Social capital among young people varies by gender, creating distinct profiles of resources and resilience

While social capital among young people takes many forms, key differences by gender were revealed across three key dimensions: economic strategies, social networks, and exposure to risk, violence and stigma.

Economically, young women are often dependent on low-return informal livelihoods, such as small-scale vending (*ti komès*), domestic cleaning, and maintenance work associated with schools and churches. These are often home-based or highly localised in their neighbourhoods due to care responsibilities and safety concerns of moving longer distances. Socially, young women are also often more dependent on familial support than young men. Women generally reported seeking advice from adults, family members, and church, and tended to have fewer deep friendships with other young women. This suggests that young women rely on narrower and potentially less robust social networks than men.

As one female Chita Pale participant recounted, **“We don’t have many relationships because the area feels trapped. People fear one another [...] there isn’t much connection between women and community leaders.”** (female *Chita Pale* participant)

In considering risk, while young women’s restricted mobility reflects steps taken to limit exposure to some forms of violence and harm, young women repeatedly reported being less valued than young men in their community, and being stigmatised (perceived as *madam bandi*, or as female armed group affiliates) by outsiders. By contrast, economically, young men were more often involved in small businesses, transportation, construction, mechanical services, or IT. These livelihoods often required them to move between areas. Socially, young men often reported closer connections to local leaders; having more influence in decision-making; and more frequently sharing ideas, opportunities and advice with peers. This suggests that young men can access wider, more diverse and potentially more robust social networks, with more and deeper peer connections than female counterparts. In terms of risk, young men recounted intense pressure to join armed groups, and vulnerability to extreme violence, alongside similar experiences to women of being perceived as affiliated with armed groups.

Both young women and young men recounted similar experiences of stigma, stereotyping Cité Soleil residents as armed group affiliates. This stigmatisation and criminalisation causes very real harm, rendering young people susceptible to discrimination, harassment, and targeting by security forces. Both young men and young women expressed strong aspirations for education, dignified work, safety and recognition, yet identified few viable pathways to realise these goals.

“My dream for the community is to see all young people working, able to move around freely, living comfortably, and managing their own activities.”
(male *Chita Pale* participant)

What is new about this finding?

Research already shows that social networks can be unequal and reflect existing power dynamics.^[6] Our research adds detail on how these differences play out among young people in the specific context of La Plaine, Cité Soleil. It supports evidence that youth often depend on close, informal networks,^[7] while introducing important insights into how young women and young men have different levels of access, support, risk, and exposure.

Why does this matter for resilience?

Resilience programming that treats communities or young people as a single group risks reinforcing existing inequalities. Programming should consider who can access support and who has fewer opportunities, or faces risks, doing so. Approaches that are blind to these differences may unintentionally expose some groups to harm or exclude them altogether.

6. Portes, A. (1998) 'Social Capital: Its Origins and Applications in Modern Sociology,' *Annual Review of Sociology*, 24, 1-24; Rahill et al, (2014) 'Shelter Recovery in Urban Haiti after the Earthquake.'

7. Esposito, J. and Happel, A. (2015) "'You Have to Hold your Own': Investigating the Social Networks of a Diverse Group of Disenfranchised Urban Male Youth', *The Urban Review*, 47(3), 541-562; Reynolds, T. (2013) "'Them and Us': 'Black Neighbourhoods' as a Social Capital Resource among Black Youths Living in Inner-City London', *Urban Studies*, 50(3), 484-498.

Finding 3: How international civil society and researchers engage can undermine or enhance social capital

In La Plaine, social capital is highly sensitive to how civil society organisations and researchers frame needs, recognise resources, and seek to engage communities and residents.

Many participants described NGO engagement ambivalently. While NGOs are often the only providers of material support, short-term projects and repeated needs assessments were seen as discouraging initiative and weakening collective responsibility. Dependence on and expectations of aid can shift attention away from local assets and undermine practices such as *konbit*, encouraging people to “wait” rather than organise themselves. Aid targeting and distribution practices were identified as key mechanisms affecting social capital. Selective assistance based on narrow beneficiary lists was reported to generate suspicion and conflict and erode solidarity. These practices conflict with context-specific mutual aid norms and tended to intensify competition within and between neighbourhoods.

Conventional research practices were similarly criticised. Deficit-oriented approaches that prioritise understanding “what is lacking” were widely reported to be extractive and demoralising, contributing to research fatigue and declining trust. Participants contrasted this with engagements that asked, **“what do you have, and how do you use it?”**, which fostered recognition, agency, and dignity.

Similarly, participatory approaches that worked through trusted local structures, prioritised transparency, and recognised residents as a source of knowledge and expertise were associated with stronger trust and coordination. Community-based organisations that are trusted and respected by community members and have a long-term presence were repeatedly cited as effective intermediaries. In practice, facilitation style, selection of meeting spaces, and awareness of power dynamics all influenced participants' experiences of research and perceptions of their own capacities.

The pilot shows that even well-intentioned aid and research can cause harm when they weaken trust, cooperation, or existing support networks.

Participants contrasted questions about what is lacking with engagements that asked, “what do you have, and how do you use it?” which fostered recognition, agency, and dignity.

What is new about this finding?

Many studies already raise concerns about extractive research practices and top-down humanitarian approaches.^[8] Our findings add evidence from La Plaine that these approaches also affect relationships within communities, shaping trust, cooperation, and willingness to engage. It shows that how organisations ask questions and work with communities can weaken social bonds and trust, just as it can potentially support and reinforce it, echoing findings from strength-based and resilience-focused research.^[9]

Why does this matter for resilience?

When programmes overlook local knowledge or frame communities mainly through needs, they risk reducing trust and cooperation. Approaches that recognise existing strengths and relationships are more likely to support collective action and sustained resilience over time.

8. Mulder, F. (2020) 'Governing the Humanitarian Knowledge Commons,' *Politics and Governance*, 8(4), 407-420; Saulnier, D., Allen, C., Eriksson, A. and Heaven Taylor, B. (2019) 'The Use of Evidence in Humanitarian Response Decision-Making,' *Prehospital and Disaster Medicine*, 34(S1), S15-S16; Potts, A., Kolli, H. and Fattal, L. (2022) 'Whose Voices Matter? Using Participatory, Feminist and Anthropological Approaches to Centre Power and Positionality in Research on Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies', *Global Public Health*, 17(10), 2530-2546; 9. Jones, L. and Tanner, T (2017) "Subjective Resilience": Using Perceptions to Quantify Household Resilience to Climate Extremes and Disasters,' *Regional Environmental Change*, 17(1), 229-243; Pamungkas, A., Atmodiwirjo, P., Harani, A.R., Harun, I., Darmaji, D., Lasminto, U. and Setyawan, W. (2025) 'What Makes Community with over Decades Flooding history Resilient? A Lesson Learned from Flooded Bengawan Jero, Lamongan, Indonesia', *International Journal of Disaster Resilience in the Built Environment*, 16(4), 543-558.

Recommendations

The findings above are drawn from an initial pilot phase of a multi-year and multi-sited research project. Below, we present reflections and implications for community, practitioner, policy and research stakeholders based on these early insights.

Preliminary implications for community residents, organisers and leadership

Our pilot findings suggest the community's strength lies in its connections. Social capital is already a powerful tool to support one another through crisis and recovery, but it is currently uneven and unequally accessed, with young women in particular often facing greater barriers to social networks and the support they offer. By working to protect, widen access to, and work through existing connections that already exist within your community, residents, organisers and leaders can help to create a wider and stronger safety net that supports everyone together.

01 Create and protect inclusive spaces where young women and men can connect and be heard.

Preliminary research suggests that for community residents and organisers, informal spaces where young people can meet, talk, and share experiences without fear of stigma or judgement may be valuable. Activities that encourage storytelling, peer exchange, and reflection – especially those led by young people themselves – can help strengthen a sense of belonging and reduce isolation. Ensuring these spaces are accessible to young women – who often have fewer peer connections – is particularly important. Community leaders can help by recognising these spaces as valuable and ensuring they are not disrupted during periods of insecurity.

02 Collectively question and shape how research and humanitarian activities engage with the community.

Residents, organisers, and leaders can play an active role in deciding how assessments, studies, and programmes are carried out in their community. This may involve asking direct questions about purpose, sharing feedback on how information is collected, or pushing back against approaches that create competition or weaken trust. By speaking collectively, communities can encourage programmes and research that respect local relationships, build on existing networks, and leave communities stronger rather than divided.

03 **Strengthen collective practices such as konbit by building on what already works.**

Community residents and leaders can continue to draw on collective traditions that support shared action, mutual help, and problem-solving. Where outside support is involved, organisers and leaders can look for partners who complement these efforts rather than replace them: partners who listen, adapt, and work with existing knowledge and resources. Protecting and valuing these collective practices helps ensure that external support adds to the community's strength instead of undermining it.

04 **Build trust and reduce tensions through clear, visible leadership.**

Our pilot data suggests leaders can strengthen resilience by listening to concerns, explaining decisions openly, and addressing tensions early, especially during periods of uncertainty. Even where formal authority is limited, creating space for dialogue and cooperation can help prevent divisions from deepening and reduce the risk that support networks become sources of conflict rather than solidarity.

Preliminary implications for development and humanitarian organisations

Early-stage research indicates social capital is already the foundation for everyday survival and crisis response among communities in Haiti. Social networks built on these bonds are the 'first response', but they are currently fragmented and unequal. Programmes that work with and through existing bonds can improve access, acceptance, and effectiveness, while anticipating where programming may unintentionally weaken them can help minimise harm and reduce unintended consequences.

01 **Support activities that strengthen and broaden peer networks among young women as a form of protective resilience-building.**

Humanitarian needs data consistently show that women and girls make up a large share of those affected by food insecurity, displacement, and protection risks in Haiti. Pilot findings suggest that young women's peer networks are often narrower and more fragile, limiting access to support during shocks. Programmes that integrate and support community-led groups, cooperatives, and informal networks of young women – for example, by embedding peer spaces in existing group-based activities in livelihoods, nutrition, protection, or multi-sector responses – could help strengthen trust, mutual support, and information sharing. Lessons from existing women and girls safe spaces in similar contexts show that such spaces help build relationships, confidence, information access, and peer solidarity over time; and that peer connections formed in such groups can persist beyond the life cycle of the programme.^[10]

10. Stark et al (2022) 'The Effectiveness of Women and Girls Safe Spaces: A Systematic Review of Evidence', *Trauma, Violence and Abuse*, 23(5), pp. 1786–1800; International Rescue Committee (2017) *A Safe Place to Shine: COMPASS – Learning from adolescent girls programming in Ethiopia, DRC and Pakistan*; CARE (2024) *Women and Girls Safe Spaces: Promising Practices Guide*. Geneva: CARE.

02 **Reduce assessment fatigue and protect trust by shifting away from extractive, deficit-focused engagement practices.**

Frequent, overlapping needs assessments are often cited by communities as burdensome and one-sided, particularly when results are not shared or translated into visible action. While assessments remain necessary, organisations can minimise harm by coordinating joint assessments, limiting repetition, and closing feedback loops with communities. Approaches that map existing capacities and strengths alongside needs, and that clearly communicate findings and decisions back to communities – such as through dedicated you said, we did messaging – are more likely to sustain trust and cooperation. In a context where access and acceptance are fragile, these adjustments can improve both data quality and programme feasibility.

03 **Invest in partnerships with trusted community institutions that already anchor service access and support.**

In our pilot, participants in La Plaine consistently identified schools, health facilities, and locally-rooted community initiatives as the most trusted and functional structures during crises, often acting as safe spaces and connectors to external assistance. This reflects wider practice in Haiti, where education, nutrition, food security, and protection programmes already rely on community-based delivery and local intermediaries.^[11] Strengthening formal partnership with trusted hubs through co-planning, shared decision-making, and incremental scaling, can improve access, legitimacy, and accountability, particularly for groups with limited reach.

Preliminary implications for humanitarian funders

Our preliminary findings suggest networks are the infrastructure that makes localisation work in practice, and in contexts like Haiti, they are already the foundation for everyday survival and crisis response among communities. Supporting, reinforcing and expanding those bonds so they are more equitable and inclusive can transform the effectiveness and sustainability of humanitarian funding, delivering greater value and impact.

01 **Work to recognise and engage local authorities, even where formal authority is constrained.**

Although local authorities may be constrained, and some may no longer be located in the community, our preliminary findings indicate efforts should be made to include them when possible. Policy frameworks and funding instruments should encourage humanitarian and development actors to acknowledge and engage local authorities where feasible, without assuming they are the primary delivery channel. Even limited inclusion can support longer-term governance, reduce parallel systems, and improve coordination. This approach is consistent with donor commitments to strengthened governance and institutional presence in fragile contexts.^[12]

11. UNOCHA (2025) *Haiti: Humanitarian Needs*.

12. Government of Ireland (2019) *A Better World: Ireland's Policy for International Development*; World Bank (2020), *World Bank Group Strategy for Fragility, Conflict, and Violence 2020-2025*.

02 Consider funding social and relational capacity as necessary programme inputs.

Humanitarian funders can explore ways to strengthen impact by allowing funding for facilitation, trust-building, coordination, and community-level dialogue as legitimate and necessary programme costs. Pilot evidence from Haiti shows that programmes that overlook social dynamics risk duplication, exclusion, and even generating competition and conflict, while those that invest in relationships are more likely to be accepted and sustained. On the other hand, programming informed by evidence of where existing social supports are fragmented, unequal or uneven has the potential to not only work with, but support, enhance and expand, existing social structures. This recommendation aligns with commitments to locally led approaches under the Humanitarian Reset, conflict sensitivity, and resilience-building, adapting humanitarian responses and strengthening local partnerships, and calls for people-centred engagement.^[13]

03 Prioritise direct, flexible funding for trusted community structures.

Our initial study points to the value of humanitarian funders improving effectiveness by expanding direct-access and flexible funding windows for trusted community-based organisations, including women's networks and local associations, supported by appropriate accompaniment and capacity exchange. When local actors are resourced as partners – rather than subcontractors – programmes are perceived as more legitimate, adaptive and accountable.

Next Steps

Building on the insights from the pilot phase, in the coming months, the SoCap project team will revise, collaboratively re-design and re-deploy revised data collection tools and approaches in a larger number of areas, with the aim of deepening our understanding of how social capital differs within and across key groups in a wider area of Cité Soleil.

13. Government of Ireland (2019) *A Better World*; World Bank Group (2025) *Country Partnership Framework for Haiti*; ECHO (2026) *Humanitarian Implementation Plan (HIP) Latin America and the Caribbean*.

About the SoCap Project

The Role of Social Capital in Urban Fragile and Conflict-Affected Contexts (SoCap) project is a three-year research project funded by Irish Aid and undertaken in partnership with Concern Worldwide. It systematically analyses the interactions between social capital, resilience, the urban environment, and conflict and fragility among marginalised urban populations in Haiti, Somalia and Somaliland.

This mixed-methods research aims to understand how pathways that translate social capital to resilience among marginalised urban groups are both fostered and thwarted, to identify practical leverage points for operational and policy actors.

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For more about the SoCap project, please visit

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