

Social capital and resilience among IDPs in La Plaine, Haiti:

Implications for humanitarian policy

SoCap Policy 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, family members, neighbours, peers, community leaders, faith networks, and diaspora ties provide everyday support, protection, advice, and problem-solving during crises. Pilot evidence from Haiti shows that programmes that overlook social dynamics risk duplication, exclusion, and even generating competition and conflict, harming the very relationships on which communities actually depend. 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.

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

Preliminary findings indicate that 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. 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. Funders should consider support for programming that explicitly targets the strengthening of peer networks among those, such as young women, whose access to social capital is most constrained.

The way civil society organisations and researchers engage with communities can unintentionally undermine social capital.

Our pilot study found that 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. Policy frameworks and funding instruments should encourage humanitarian and development actors to acknowledge and engage local authorities and community structures where feasible, and incentivise engagement modalities, including asset-based approaches and closed feedback loops, that actively protect rather than erode relational assets.

This policy brief outlines findings presented in more detail in a SoCap Research Brief, available at:



BACKGROUND

In Haiti, the Role of Social Capital in Urban Fragile and Conflict-Affected Contexts (SoCap) project asks how various subgroups of youth in Cité Soleil build resilience towards shocks and stresses through differential access to social capital.

Social capital – the networks, norms, and trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation – has demonstrated value for resilience across different stages of the disaster cycle.^[1] Understanding its role in fragile and conflict-affected contexts is, however, challenging: stressors are protracted, cyclical, and severe; conflict-related divisions can entrench or undermine social bonds; and more insular forms of social capital can reinforce distrust and undermine long-term resilience. Throughout this brief, we refer to *konbit*, a Haitian-Creole term referring to a traditional practice of communal collaboration and cooperation, rooted in mutual aid and collective action.^[2] Its contemporary meaning extends beyond this, to encompass core values of solidarity, responsibility, reciprocity and participation.

The SoCap project in Haiti involves a locally led, participatory qualitative research design. The majority of the in-country team members are social leaders from within Cité Soleil. Between September and October 2025, the team conducted 11 group discussions, and eight individual interviews, with a total of 95 individuals in La Plaine, Cité Soleil.

This policy brief outlines findings presented in more detail in a SoCap Research Brief, available at:

<https://www.concern.net/knowledge-hub/social-capital-and-resilience-fragile-and-conflict-affected-urban-contexts>

What is social capital?

Social capital can be broadly understood as the networks, relationships, norms, institutions and social trust that facilitate interactions, exchange, coordination and cooperation within and between social groups.

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. Family, neighbours, peers, community leaders, and diaspora relatives provide daily support, emotional solidarity, referrals to services, and protection during crises. Other resources – land, infrastructure, institutions, financial assets – are viewed as meaningful primarily as they are activated through collective activity and trust. As one religious leader put it: **"Human resources are the greatest; without it, all others collapse."** At the same time, violence, stigma, and fear limit mobility and who can access networks and support.

What does this mean for policy?

Resilience-building efforts that recognise, protect, and avoid disrupting neighbour- and relationship-based support are more likely to strengthen people's ability to manage repeated shocks.

FINDING 2:

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

Young women are often dependent on narrower, family-based networks and low-return, localised livelihoods. Young men access wider peer and leadership networks and more diverse economic opportunities, but face intense pressure to join armed groups and heightened exposure to violence. Both groups experience severe stigmatisation as presumed armed group affiliates, which can lead to discrimination, harassment, and targeting. Both expressed strong aspirations for education, dignified work, and safety, yet identified few viable pathways to realise these goals.

What does this mean for policy?

Resilience-building efforts that recognise, protect, and avoid disrupting neighbour- and relationship-based support are more likely to strengthen people's ability to manage repeated shocks.

FINDING 3:

How civil society and researchers engage can undermine or enhance social capital

Social capital in La Plaine is highly sensitive to how external actors frame needs, recognise resources, and engage communities. Short-term projects and repeated needs assessments were seen as discouraging initiative and weakening collective responsibility; selective aid targeting generated suspicion, eroded solidarity, and intensified competition within and between neighbourhoods. Participatory approaches that worked through trusted local structures and recognised residents as knowledgeable experts were associated with stronger trust and coordination. The pilot shows that even well-intentioned aid and research can cause harm when they weaken trust, cooperation, or existing support networks.

What does this mean for policy?

Approaches that recognise existing strengths and relationships are more likely to support collective action and sustained resilience over time.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings above are drawn from an initial pilot phase of a multi-year and multi-sited research project. Below, we present preliminary implications for policy stakeholders based on these early insights.¹⁴ Community 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.

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 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.^[3]

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.^[4]

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.

1. Putnam, R. (1995) 'Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital,' *Journal of Democracy*, 6, 65-78, p. 67; Rhude, K., et al. (2025) A Review of Evidence of the Impact of Social Capital on Resilience, SoCap Research Brief, No. 1.

2. Versaillot, P.-D. & 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.

3. Government of Ireland (2019) *A Better World: Ireland's Policy for International Development*.

4. 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

<https://www.concern.net/knowledge-hub>



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