

# A review of evidence of the impact of social capital on resilience

SoCap Research Brief  
No. 1, July 2025

## Key Points

**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.**

While the forms and nature of social capital vary across contexts, social capital is often grouped in three main categories. 1) Bonding social capital, which encompasses interpersonal relationships based on collective identity and solidarity, often among families, friends, and communities who share commonalities based on religion, ethnicity, culture, socio-economic status, etc. 2) Bridging social capital, which encompasses the relationships involved in accessing outside resources and creating connections between groups (e.g. host and displaced populations), and 3) Linking social capital, which encompasses the relationships connecting individuals and groups to formal institutions and service providers and to the resources and services they provide.

**There is strong evidence of the impact of bonding social capital on certain forms of resilience.**

Building trust and strengthening relationships are key to enhancing communities' absorptive, adaptive, and transformative capacities. Factors including reciprocal support and solidarity based on collective identity contribute to bonding ties and are essential for mobilising resources, providing emotional support, accessing better livelihood outcomes, and supporting disaster recovery efforts. To date, the strongest evidence of the impact of social capital on resilience comes from programming focusing on savings and income-generating initiatives. These buffer against small-scale shocks though may not be as effective for resilience to larger, community-wide crises.

**However, the positive effect of bonding social capital is largely found in the first-response phase of crisis.**

Contradictory findings and evidence gaps make it difficult to determine how much bonding social capital translates into emergency preparedness and long-term resilience. Evidence suggests that bridging and linking social capital are more important in later stages of crises; and that in the long-term, bonding social capital has a limited effect on transforming inequalities and decreasing vulnerability.

# INTRODUCTION

Social capital is a critical, yet often overlooked, resource for building resilience in marginalised urban communities affected by conflict and fragility. Evidence shows that social capital can act as a buffer in crises – providing support, information, and access to resources through trusted networks. At the same time, research suggests social capital can reinforce existing inequalities, or be exploited in ways that undermine, rather than build, resilience. Understanding when and how social capital can be harnessed for positive impact, and how to avoid or minimise negative effects, is critical to enhance local ownership in crisis response, and support the effectiveness and impact of humanitarian interventions.

This research brief summarises the state of current evidence on the impact of social capital on resilience in humanitarian and development contexts. It also maps evidence on the limitations, or potentially negative impacts, of social capital and lists key evidence gaps. The aim is not to provide a comprehensive review of all evidence on social capital and resilience, but to highlight key areas of consensus and debate, to inform future humanitarian and development programming, policy and research.

This evidence brief is based on a grey literature review, based on targeted searches of the websites and online repositories of humanitarian organisations, combined with a structured academic literature review.<sup>1</sup> In total, 66 grey literature reports or studies and 194 academic journal articles were reviewed to inform the findings of this brief.

# WHAT IS SOCIAL CAPITAL?

Social capital is commonly defined as the ‘networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit’.<sup>2</sup> Research often groups various forms of social capital in three broad categories – bonding, bridging and linking social capital.

**Bonding social capital** refers to personal relations based on collective identity and solidarity. This includes the interpersonal relationships and connections between family members, close friends, neighbours and allies who share commonalities based on religion, ethnicity, culture, socioeconomic status, among other identity markers.<sup>3</sup>

**Bridging social capital** involves ‘accessing outside resources and creating connections between groups.’<sup>4</sup> This generally involves relationships across different identity or community groups, and/or groups and individuals from different backgrounds.<sup>5</sup>

**Linking social capital** involves connecting individuals and communities to formal institutions and service providers – for example, the state, community-based organisations, civil society groups and/or humanitarian agencies – and the resources and services that they provide.<sup>6</sup>

**Bonding social capital involves personal relations such as family or neighbours; bridging social capital involves connections between groups, like identity groups; and linking social capital involves connections with formal institutions, such as state or civil society organisations.**

1. The grey literature search covered ReliefWeb’s publication repository and the following humanitarian organisation repositories: World Food Programme, International Committee of the Red Cross, International Organization for Migration, World Vision International, Norwegian Refugee Council, Mercy Corps, Catholic Relief Services, Plan International, Concern Worldwide and Trócaire. The academic literature review focused on studies between 1990-2023, inclusive, returned by the search: ("social capital" OR "bridging capital" OR "bonding capital" OR "linking capital") AND (resilience OR resiliency) AND (humanitarian OR development OR "sustainable development" OR "international development" OR "development studies" OR "development intervention"). The search returned 345 results, of which, 194 journal articles were deemed relevant. A fuller description of the methodology is available at the end of this document.

2. Putnam, 1995, p. 67.

3. Mpanje, Gibbons and McDermott, 2018; Delilah Roque, Pijawka and Wutich, 2020; Aldrich et al., 2021; Kolade et al., 2022; Lubis and Ronoatmodjo, 2023.

4. Delilah Roque, Pijawka and Wutich, 202, p. 209.

5. Mpanje, Gibbons and McDermott, 2018, p. 5; Grant, 2001; Furukawa and Deng, 2019; Tippens, 2020; Kolade et al., 2022.

6. Mpanje, Gibbons and McDermott, 2018, p. 5.

## THE LINK BETWEEN SOCIAL CAPITAL AND RESILIENCE

Considering different aspects of social capital, there is strong evidence that bonding social capital has a significant and positive impact on aspects of community resilience.<sup>7</sup> Research demonstrates that people often turn to family, close friends, and neighbours to deal with the immediate effects of a crisis.<sup>8</sup> Through this, bonding social capital is an important resource supporting crisis response, especially where community governance systems are disrupted by crises.<sup>9</sup> Factors including reciprocal support, and solidarity based on collective identity contribute to bonding ties and are essential for mobilising resources, providing emotional support, and supporting disaster recovery efforts.<sup>10</sup>

Evidence also shows that building trust between diverse community actors (bridging social capital) strengthens communities' absorptive, adaptive, and transformative capacities to withstand shocks.<sup>11</sup>

Through this, bridging social capital can contribute to enhanced resilience on a wider community level through mutual support towards prevention, response, recovery, and conflict resolution activities.<sup>12</sup>

## LIMITATIONS OF SOCIAL CAPITAL IN ENHANCING RESILIENCE

Research highlights how community members may not have the capacity or resources to support one another when faced with a collective, community-wide crisis.<sup>14</sup> This limitation is particularly relevant in the context of overlapping, complex emergencies where the capacity and resources available to households are often stretched.<sup>15</sup>

While bonding social capital can contribute to short-term resilience, the evidence suggests that it is less effective at decreasing long-term vulnerability.<sup>16</sup> Studies also show that bonding social capital does not necessarily translate effectively into emergency preparedness and disaster mitigation.<sup>17</sup> However, this is a contested area of research. Contradictory evidence shows that bonding social capital is more durable than bridging social capital, especially for managing food security in both short and long-term.<sup>18</sup>

Different contextual factors also impact social capital in different ways. For example, forced displacement may trigger the need to build new bridging and linking social capital.<sup>19</sup>

**Community members may not have the capacity or resources to support one another when faced with a collective, community-wide crisis, thus limiting social capital's potential effects.**

Violence and conflict can contribute to the erosion of social cohesion and trust, which has a direct effect on the ability of communities to resist future shocks.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, strengthening relationships with local authorities (linking social capital) and building trust within communities is critical for facilitating an effective operating environment for humanitarian response.

By contrast, armed conflict may lead to strained inter-community relationships, thus limiting bridging capital, and prompting increased reliance on bonding social capital to build resilience to shocks.<sup>20</sup> However, this is also a contested area of research. Other studies show that some indicators of bridging social capital are associated with an increased likelihood of conflict resolution, while others were associated with more frequent conflict shocks.<sup>21</sup>

7. Kolade et al., 2022.

8. Abheuer, Thiele-Eich and Braun, 2013; James and Paton, 2015; Kolade et al., 2022.

9. James and Paton, 2015; Scantlan and Petryniak, 2018, pp. 21–23.

10. James and Paton, 2015; Bernados Jr et al., 2020; Kolade et al., 2022.

11. Bond et al., 2017; Diallo, Giordano and Simonet, 2017; Patel et al., 2022; Piton, 2023; Kawasaki et al., 2024.

12. Kurtz and McMahon, 2015; Bond et al., 2017; Piton, 2023.

13. Patel et al., 2022.

14. Abheuer, Thiele-Eich and Braun, 2013, pp. 31–32.

15. ACAPS et al., 2023.

16. Abheuer, Thiele-Eich and Braun, 2013.

17. James and Paton, 2015, p. 224; Aldrich et al., 2021, p. 1794.

18. Scantlan and Petryniak, 2018, pp. 21–23.

19. Kolade et al., 2022; Parvin et al., 2023.

20. Aldrich et al., 2021.

21. See Kurtz and McMahon, 2015, p.15, for a fuller discussion of the bridging social capital index and constituent variables.

## RELEVANCE TO PROGRAMMING

Programmatically, the strongest evidence demonstrating the impact of social capital on resilience comes from savings and income-generating initiatives. These include Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) and self-help groups, which NGOs regard as vital components of ‘financial and social inclusion’.<sup>22</sup> Such initiatives can support social and economic resilience by improving access to finance and food security, strengthening relationships within communities, and fostering rapport with service providers and community leaders.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, evidence shows that VSLAs are used as a buffer against shocks by facilitating a degree of social protection and access to emergency funds, especially for vulnerable and traditionally excluded individuals.<sup>24</sup>

## GAPS IN EVIDENCE

There is limited evidence on linking social capital, especially when compared with the larger body of research on the impact of bonding and bridging forms of social capital on resilience. While there is extensive grey literature on strengthening relationships with service providers, community leaders, and governance structures, this literature does not always explicitly mention linking social capital nor are the specific features of linking social capital always made clear.<sup>28</sup>

There are also gaps in academic evidence on social capital’s impact on resilience in conflict- and violence-affected contexts. Conflict and violence are discussed in detail in only 9 out of the 194 academic studies addressing social capital and resilience in development or humanitarian contexts assessed for the purposes of this review.

**There is strong evidence that savings and income-generating activities, bonding social capital, and trust-building, all have a significant and positive impact on resilience.**

Similarly, studies show that informal financial services, such as women’s savings groups, can play a vital role in building social capital and resilience to financial and climate-induced shocks.<sup>25</sup> However, research suggests that the buffer effect provided by VSLAs ‘may not be sufficient when households are coping with larger shocks’.<sup>26</sup>

While studies show that social capital initiatives focusing on VSLAs amplify existing trust, social cohesion, and reciprocities within communities, they are not as effective in creating new social capital in contexts where social cohesion is weak.<sup>27</sup>

Comparatively, grey literature provides more extensive discussion on social capital in conflict- and violence-affected contexts, especially in relation to intersecting work on peacebuilding, social cohesion, and humanitarian action.<sup>29</sup> Grey literature also contains evidence of how social capital can be mobilised by armed groups and other violent actors with potentially harmful effects on resilience.<sup>30</sup>

However, more research is needed to fully understand how social capital influences resilience in conflict- and violence-affected contexts. This includes examining negative forms of social capital that can intersect with, and even amplify conflict, and clarifying debates on whether social cohesion enhances resilience to conflict-related shocks and if so, in what conditions and among which groups.<sup>31</sup>

22. Mercy Corps, 2017b, 2017a; Ward, Hemberger and Muench, 2017; Collins and Mock, 2024, pp. 6, 27.

23. MATRIX Business Development, 2020.

24. Diallo, Giordano and Simonet, 2017; Collins and Mock, 2024.

25. Carabine and Wilkinson, 2016; Perche and Jones, 2019; Collins and Mock, 2024.

26. Collins and Mock, 2024, p. 35.

27. Diallo, Giordano and Simonet, 2017.

28. Concern Worldwide, 2018; Arnott and Wahis, 2020; Mock et al., 2023; Segar, 2023.

29. Abdulla et al., 2013; Neaverson, Gould and Peters, 2019, 2019; Kim, Sheely and Schmidt, 2020; Spencer, 2022; ACAPS et al., 2023; Baldet et al., 2024; Collins and Mock, 2024; Stepanovic et al., 2024.

30. Clark-Ginsberg, Hunt and Matturi, 2015.

31. Scantlan and Petryniak, 2018.

## Methodological Note

The review combined two search strategies to construct the dataset for analysis. The first is an in-depth review of publications that include reference to social capital in the following humanitarian organisation repositories: World Food Programme, International Committee of the Red Cross, International Organization for Migration, World Vision International, Norwegian Refugee Council, Mercy Corps, Catholic Relief Services, Plan International, Concern Worldwide and Trócaire. The above organisations were selected as a sample of medium- to large-scale international humanitarian organisations across a range of organisation types (from non-governmental to intergovernmental and UN-mandated organisations).

In addition, the research team systematically searched the publication repository of ReliefWeb by i) searching for results that included references to “social capital”, ii) automatically sorting results by relevance; iii) manually screening results for relevance through a review of abstracts and executive summaries; and iv) ceasing the search when 5 results in a row were deemed irrelevant. No time period was applied for the inclusion of reports, though resulting publications tended to be concentrated in the last 15 years. The resulting search produced a total of 66 grey literature studies or reports, all about social capital, and/or social capital and resilience.

The second strategy encompassed a structured search of academic materials. This was undertaken by assessing English-language peer-reviewed academic journal articles containing empirical findings on the relationship between social capital and community resilience in humanitarian and development contexts, published between 1990–2023, inclusive. Studies in other languages or formats or outside these years were excluded. We identified eligible publications using the Scopus database, employing Boolean operators to systematically search titles, abstracts and keywords for literature for results containing the following search terms: ("social capital" OR "bridging capital" OR "bonding capital" OR "linking capital") AND (resilience OR resiliency) AND (humanitarian OR development OR "sustainable development" OR "international development" OR "development studies" OR "development intervention"). The search returned 345 results.

From initial results, duplicates were removed, before screening was conducted based on a review of titles and abstracts in turn. False positives were particularly associated with studies with only theoretical or speculated implications for the relationship between social capital and resilience; those related to professional and/or organisational development and resilience; and research on development and resilience in interpersonal relationships, such as parent-child relationships, which were not relevant to the humanitarian-development focus of our review. The resulting dataset contained 194 journal articles.



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# 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.

The research team includes Jessica Hsu and Robillard Louino, Gwoup Konbit, Haiti; Manar Zaki and Brenton Peterson, Consilient, Somalia and Somaliland; Dr Kelsey Gleason, University of Vermont; Dr Ronak Patel; and Dr Caitriona Dowd and Dr Kelsey Rhude, University College Dublin.

The ideas, opinions and comments therein are entirely the responsibility of its authors and do not necessarily represent or reflect Irish Aid policy.

## How to cite this publication:

Rhude, Kelsey, Caitriona Dowd, Kelsey Gleason and Ronak Patel. (2025). *A Review of Evidence of the Impact of Social Capital on Resilience*. SoCap Research Brief, No. 1.

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