

# Participatory Assessment Tool for Mapping Social Connections

## A Users' Guide

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# PARTICIPATORY ASSESSMENT TOOL FOR MAPPING SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

## *A USERS' GUIDE*

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## 1. Introduction

The below guide will be continuously updated in line with ongoing developments and refinements of the Social Connections tool, such as the upcoming public release of the tool's accompanying app. For further enquiries on making use of the tool, please email [ADakessian@qmu.ac.uk](mailto:ADakessian@qmu.ac.uk)

The *participatory assessment tool for mapping social connections* is an approach developed by Queen Margaret University (QMU), which employs participatory activities to explore the various types and qualities of social resources that avail themselves to the participant group. The methodology uses hypothetical real life problems to explore connections associated with 'bridging', 'linking' and bonding (trust) social capital (Putnam 2000; Granovetter 1973; Szreter and Woolcock 2004) and relational properties such as frequency and reciprocity (Torche and Valanzuela, 2011). The methodology also invites participants to identify geographically where they would most likely find these resources (at the household, neighbourhood, city, country or global level), in this way coproducing data that remains sensitive to the situatedness and specificity of communities or subcultures.

A second stage of the methodology uses the generated connections to develop measures of connectedness and trust for individual participants, as well as trust scores for those actors identified as resources by the participant group. The participatory research design and approach of the tool mean that not only does it enable us to collect information, but could also provide participants with information and support directly relevant to them.

The tool has been tested in different settings, ranging from refugees in Glasgow to internally displaced people in Kurdistan and has proven not only applicable to different contexts (after accurate tailoring), but also valuable in guiding NGOs in developing appropriate support mechanisms for the populations studied.

An app is currently under development that should enable researchers to conduct activities two and three (see below) electronically and will facilitate both data collection across geographically disparate population, and the analysis of the resultant data.

## 2. Preparation

### Step 1: Preparing the study

- *Defining research questions, objectives, aspirations*

It is important to clearly define the research objectives and aspirations and spell out one or more research questions. This would help tailor the tool to the specific research that is carried out.

#### **Example 1: Objectives for a study using the assessment tool**

"The study seeks to contribute towards improving mental health and well-being for refugees and asylum seekers in the area. The aspiration was to learn more about the social connections of our participants in order to inform service provision and community planning, as well as to provide direct support to them through the research design."

Research questions can be worded as follows:

1. What are the social connections (people and organisations) that [the specific community/communities observed] identify as resources in addressing [type of challenge on which the analysis focuses]?

2. How much do people from this community/ies connect with the sources of help and support that they have identified?
3. How much do they trust in the individuals and/or organisations that they identify as potential supports?

- *Defining tools and scenarios*

The assessment tool consists of two separate stages, with an optional third activity:

1. A participatory activity in small groups to elicit awareness of local social connections and resources. The results of the discussions at this stage is a list of people and organizations that are most helpful to people in your community;
2. An individual card sorting task to explore individual connectedness and levels of trust in people and organizations, for selected problem scenarios;
3. (Optionally) focus group discussions and/or individual interviews for further exploring and understanding specific issues or problems.

Problem scenarios should be chosen as familiar and relevant to the current lives of the participants and will depend on the focus on the study.

**Example 2: Problem scenarios**

***Displaced Yazidi communities in Kurdistan***

If you were struggling to meet the basic needs of your family...

If there was a dispute with another community ...

If a woman in your community experiences violence...

***Single asylum seekers living in Glasgow***

*Who would you speak to about the problem or ask for help if your computer/phone was broken?*

*'Who would you speak to about the problem or ask for help if you felt lonely?*

*'Who would you speak to about the problem or ask for help if you had problems with your housing?*

- *Involving stakeholders in the study*

During the preparation stage, it is also important to set up a supportive environment to ensure the success of the study as well as the uptake of the research results. This can be achieved by involving a range of stakeholders in both supporting and advisory roles. For example, during the preparation of the study on refugees in Glasgow, a Steering Group of refugee representatives and service providers was convened to guide the design, implementation and application of the study. In Kurdistan, an advisory group was established comprising the commissioning organisation, the QMU research team, and local academic colleagues. Members of the advisory group helped to recruit a team of local researchers from amongst students and graduates of their respective universities.

## Step 2: Ethical considerations

Where the tool is being used by academic researchers, the observations below should be underpinned by obtaining ethical approval from the relevant academic institution. Approval should also be sought from, any relevant local body – for example, an NGO on the ground - and/or from community representatives as appropriate.

- *Potential sensitivity of the research and research contexts*

The tool has been developed in the context of work with displaced populations, where participants may be living in socially and/or economically marginalised circumstances and may fear that their participation or non-participation in the project will have an impact on their current or future immigration status.

In-group dynamics – for example based on gender roles or social class and status – may impede people's participation, particularly if the questions posed during the workshops related to sensitive topics such as violence against women or experiences of hate crime.

An assessment of the circumstances of any group should be conducted prior to any research activities, and should comprise a full risk assessment for researchers and participants, with consideration of appropriate mitigating measures.

- *Principles of ethical research*

Over and above any considerations that are specific to the group taking part in the research, researchers using the tool should ensure that their study design incorporates the general principles below, all of which are designed to ensure that participants are treated with respect throughout the research process.

These include:

- **Informed consent**

Participants should be provided with a written information sheet that they can retain for future reference. Where appropriate, this should be translated into relevant languages.

The information sheet should cover issues such as:

- the background of the study,
- the purpose of the study;
- the basis for selection of participants;
- what their participation involves; and
- data protection.

Contact details should be provided for at least one member of the research team; and for an impartial academic contact who can resolve any complaints about the conduct of the researchers.

Participants should be given the opportunity to read this with researchers present, and should be encouraged to ask questions. Where people within the group are not literate, researchers should read through the information form orally, with interpreting support as required.

After having an opportunity to ask questions about the study, participants should most often be asked to sign a consent form. If obtaining written consent is logistically or ethically complex – for example, with populations who associate written forms with persecutory government procedures – individual oral consent should be sought and noted.

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- **Voluntary participation**

Participants must be informed that they can withdraw their consent at any time before, during or after their participation in a workshop or interview. At the outset, researchers should explain that participants are not

obliged to discuss or answer questions around any topic they find upsetting, and that they are free to leave a workshop or interview before the end if they feel uncomfortable.

Researchers must continually highlight, and demonstrate, that people's participation, or non-participation in the study will have no impact, either positive or negative, on the service that participants receive from any local organisations or from government agencies.

- **Anonymity and confidentiality**

The research team must ensure that no information emerging from the research would be identifiable as relating to a particular person, unless that person has explicitly requested that data be attributed to them.

Appropriate data protection measures should be uniformly followed as regards gathering, recording, storing, analyzing and disposing of data emerging from the study.

- **Safety and wellbeing**

From project planning stage onwards, researchers should ensure that the research design is sensitive and appropriate through consultation with the Steering Committee and/or with the local community representatives.

This can include piloting the methodology on a smaller sample of participants and making amendments based on feedback from participants, support organisations and researchers.

If there are concerns that participation may lead to distress or disclosure of threat or risk of immediate harm, researchers should provide information on support services and mechanisms in case participants need immediate support (e.g., during Glasgow workshops, a qualified mental health professional was present throughout each research event to provide direct support and appropriate signposting).

The research design, and all team members, must have due regard to their own safety and wellbeing whilst conducting fieldwork. Appropriate support measures should be in place to mitigate risk to researchers from participants who become aggressive or distressed; and to ensure that all research team members, particularly local interpreters or people from the communities being studied, have access to informal and, where possible, formal support after each research activity.

### **Step 3: Creating a research team**

The tool is designed for use in a multitude of contexts. Where the study involves participation by linguistically diverse groups, previous experience has confirmed that the recruitment of local researchers, with appropriate language skills, can greatly enhance people's trust in the process.

Where this is not possible, the research team should nonetheless ensure that they engage with any support organisations or community bodies with in-depth understanding of local issues prior to recruiting participants.

#### **Example 3: Researcher recruitment process in Kurdistan**

Members of the advisory group helped to recruit a team of local researchers from amongst students and graduates of their respective universities. Five women and three men were trained as local researchers through two separate training sessions, one for each phase of the study, led by the QMU team. All local researchers were fluent in both Kurdish and English, and several also spoke Arabic. These local researchers conducted the research activities directly with the participants in Kurdish. Tearfund recruited one male and

one female interpreter to provide Kurdish-English translation to enable the research team to supervise research activities for male and female participant groups respectively.

- *Interpreting support*

Interpreters should be recruited or booked via reputable local agencies. Time should be allowed before the start of each session to brief interpreters as to the purpose and content of workshops. Researchers should work within principles of good practice in interpreting, and challenge any practices by individual interpreters or researchers that fall short of this.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Example 4: Use of interpreters in Glasgow**

A team of interpreters attended each session covering the languages of anticipated attendees at a ratio of 2:1. At each event interpreters were briefed in advance about the purpose and processes of the research. Through discussion we agreed together with interpreters which words or phrases to use to express key concepts. Interpreters were requested to ensure that they translated all participant contributions verbatim, allowing the researcher to answer/ask questions for clarity.

- *Training of researchers*

Whatever the background or level of previous experience of the researchers, we suggest that the team invest time in training all team members on the use of the tool. This can usefully be supplemented by a pilot stage, where the tool is piloted with a small group of participants prior to more extensive roll-out (see above).

The aims of the training are:

1. To build researchers' knowledge of and confidence in using the methods and tools.
2. To ensure that researchers are familiar with the settings they will be working within.
3. To discuss and embed the ethical considerations highlighted above into researchers' practice.

#### **First training day**

The objectives and methodology are explained. The researchers are allocated to gender specific teams and trained how to carry out a workshop in pairs or in threes. Practice role play exercises are conducted using local volunteers (e.g., students). Role play is also used to identify good practice in ethical consent and generate discussion about what appropriate behaviour and language are in the local context.

During the training the final wording of the questions is agreed with the researchers to ensure appropriateness and respect for local sensitivity. Researchers are trained to ensure that participants are able

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-translation-interpreting-communication-forum-good-practice-guidelines/>  
<http://www.womenssupportproject.co.uk/content/news/210,1,351/Good-practice-guide.html>

to make an informed decision about participation in the research. This involves sharing clear information about the study and asking for consent either with signature, thumb print or verbally.

### **Second training day**

Researchers are introduced to the ranking and trust exercises used in the individual interviews. Once again researchers practice these techniques through role play.

At the end of the second day, researchers are given the opportunity to discuss any concerns or seek clarification on any of the tools or methods.

By the end of day two, researchers should feel confident in the use of the tool, and have the capacity to apply it ethically and effectively in the setting where they will be working.

## **3. Data collection process**

### **Step 4: Recruitment of participants**

Although the precise methods of recruiting participants will be highly dependent on the local context of each study, they must be underpinned at all times by the ethical considerations noted above.

- *Contacting participants*

Under Step 1 above, we note the importance of involving stakeholders in preparing the study.

If engagement with these stakeholders has been positive, they can be vital allies to assist with the recruitment of participants. Obtaining 'buy-in' from community leaders and support organisations can enable access to people who already have a relationship of trust with these groups. Support organisations can also provide useful points of reference if participants raise issues that are immediate and current during the workshops.

#### **Example 5: Recruiting participants in Kurdistan**

Participants were recruited through the Tearfund Beneficiary and Accountability Officer in order to build on the trust already established in the areas where the study was to be undertaken. The purpose and nature of the research was explained to community leaders and community members. Community leaders helped to invite people to attend the research workshops.

This said, in many research projects, some caution should be used when recruiting participants as regards possible gatekeeping by organisations or individuals; and the possibility for results to be skewed if all participants are already linked into services, meaning that more isolated individuals are missed out of the study population. Therefore, a two-pronged approach may be most appropriate, and can include targeting information to places where people are known to gather within less formal settings.

#### **Example 6: recruiting participants in Glasgow**

One of the biggest challenges was to make contact with people who are not already participating in various community groups. To overcome this, leaflets were dropped in accommodation blocks known to house large number of dispersed asylum seekers.



## Step 5: Workshop programme

- *Setting up the workshop*

The research team should work to ensure that the workshops, interviews and any further focus group discussions take place in:

- A Familiar, reassuring, confidential and private venue; with
- Lunch/ other refreshments provided; and that the room used is
- A friendly, welcoming space

The workshops are held preferably within the community, in venues familiar and local to the respective participants. In previous studies, buffet lunch was provided, but no other incentives or expenses payments. A team of interpreters attended each session covering the languages of anticipated attendees at a ratio of 2:1.

While setting things up in the venue, it is important to keep in mind that the aim is to create a friendly, welcoming and private space.

- *Welcome, explanation and consent/withdrawal*

The initial stages of the workshop are crucial to ensure that the all participants are fully aware of the purpose and format of the activity, and that all ethical considerations (see above) have been fully explained to participants, with interpreting support and translated written information as required Additional elements of a welcome and introduction process, when engaging with displaced populations and any other linguistically diverse groups, include:

- Identifying the interpreters present, explaining their role to participants, and confirming that they are bound by the same data protection and confidentiality principles as the research team;
- Using appropriate methods to confirm participants' consent:
  - Enabling people to sign the consent form, either with a signature, a mark (e.g. cross) or thumb print.
  - Noting in initial ethical approval that in some cases, a researcher can sign for someone who gives verbal consent.

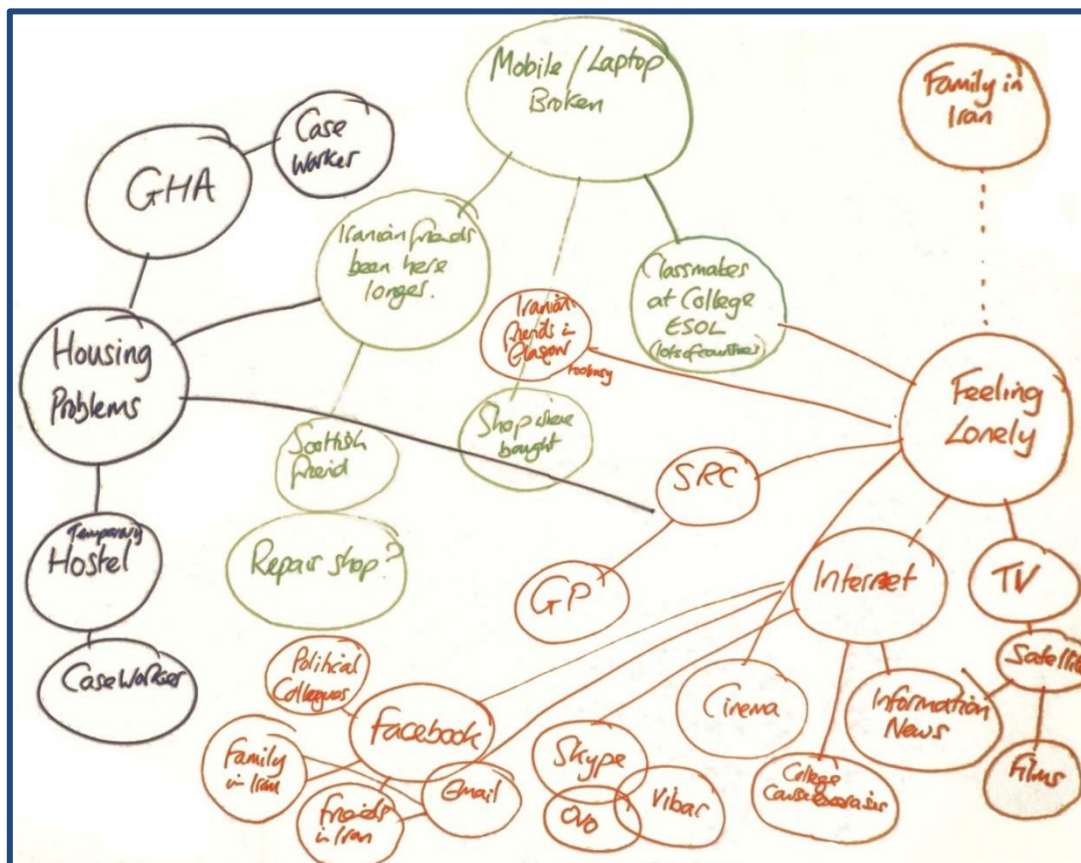
- *Activity 1: participatory workshops (30 – 40 minutes)*

**Aim:** to elicit awareness of local social connections and resources by asking participants about all the different people and organisations that are most helpful to people in their community when they have problems.

**Method:**

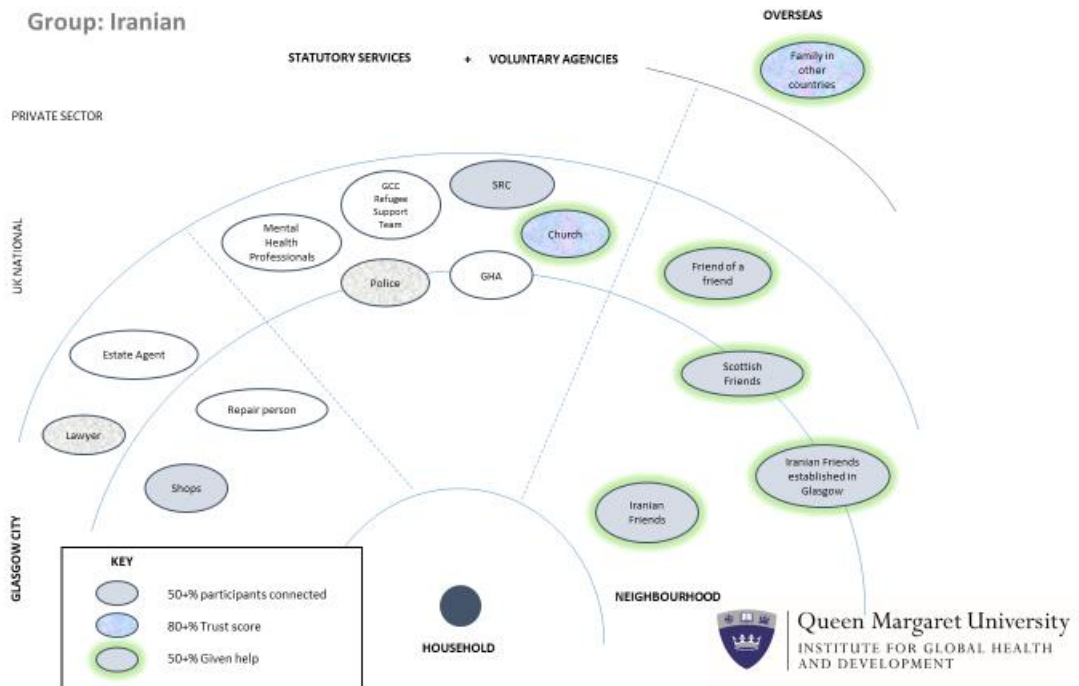
1. Divide participants into small groups (up to 4 people).
2. Remind everyone that even though we might talk about particular people in our discussions, no details about any individual will be made public by the researchers.
3. Ask participants to respect others' privacy and not talk about personal details outside the workshop.
4. One researcher leads the facilitation for each group, and the other one/two provide support and take notes. Researchers can gather general, demographic information on each participant as needed (e.g., age; first language; other languages; length of time living in the area; religion and months in paid work in the last 12 months).
5. Participants are presented with the problem scenarios chosen for the study, and familiar to their current lives. For each scenario, the group is asked to think of all the people or organisations that someone in their community might talk to about such a problem, or go to and ask for help.

6. Participants are then asked who each of these people (or organisations) might pass them on to if the problem could not be resolved. All the possible alternatives are explored (including people they might like to access but who are not available to them in their current lives).
7. As discussions progress, a researcher plots responses on a large sheet of paper, showing each type of person or organisation mentioned in a circle with a line linking them to the problems for which they were accessed.
8. Where participants mentioned connections that were no longer available to them, such person/organisation can be included, but connected with a dotted line.
9. For each scenario, a different pen colour is used, to enable researchers to link scenarios with connections at later stages.
10. Discussions continue until no new social connections for any scenario are elicited.



11. Using pre-drawn templates that show an outward spreading scale of geographical proximity, work with participants to plot all of the connections in terms of their geographical location, using readily understood divisions such as:

- Household
- Neighbourhood
- City / district
- Country
- International.



- *Preparation for Activity 2*

Once all the workshops are completed, a full list of all the people and organisations mentioned is compiled. The research team, supported by interpreters and advisory board, can then rationalise and reduce the list to between 25 and 35 people and organisations by streamlining terminology, combining very similar items and excluding items mentioned by only one person. Each item on the list is given a number and the researchers make a set of 35 small cards – each card with one of the items written on it.

- *Activity 2: Individual interview / card sorting exercise (20 – 40 minutes per interview)*

**Aim:**

Can be done one the same day as Activity 1 or after a few days

**Method:**

1. Participants are reminded that participation is voluntary, that they are free to stop the interview at any time and asked to reiterate verbal consent.
2. Participants are asked to think about the past six months, and can be helped to identify the six month time period accurately by remembering a particular local event.
3. Once the researcher is confident that the participant is clear about the time period, they can introduce the first card sort task:

*Question 1: Have you spoken to, or asked this person or organisation for help in the last six months?*

4. Participants are shown each card in turn, the name on the card is read out loud and the participant is asked to indicate their answer by putting the card on a pile for 'Yes' or 'No'.
5. The cards are brought back into one pile, and the researcher proceeds to question two.

*Question 2: How much do you trust this person or organisation: A lot, a little, or not at all?*

6. Participants are shown three cards with simple drawings of cups to represent the three responses: A lot – cup full; a little – cup half full; empty cup. They are shown each card in turn again and the name on the card is read out loud. The participant is then asked which pile they would like each card to be put on. Where a participant feels they do not know enough about the item the card is put aside as 'not applicable'.
7. The researcher then brings the cards back into one pile, discarding those found to be 'not applicable', and proceeds to question three, following the same procedure as in question two.

*Question 3: Has this person or organisation asked you for help in the last six months?*

8. For all three questions, responses are recorded by the researcher each time on a separate recording sheet for each participant.
  - a. For Q1, yes should be coded 1 and no 0.
  - b. For Q2 & 3, a lot=2, a little=1, not at all=0 (n/a should be entered when not applicable).

- *Potential further exercise: ranking task (10- 15 minutes per interview)*

Take all the cards in the trust 'a lot' pile and ask the participant to choose the one they trust the most. Mark the most trusted with a number 1 in the recording sheet ("ranking" column).

- *(Optional) Activity 3: Focus group discussion*

One or multiple focus group discussions (FGDs) can be organised after the individual activity to collect narrative information on specific topics related to the study. While this third activity is optional, it nonetheless might provide important qualitative insight to the research.

#### **Example 7: focus group questions with refugees in Glasgow**

- What is the first word or phrase you think of when you hear the words 'good mental health'?
- How do you think people would react if they knew someone was distressed, anxious or sad?
- If you or someone you knew was distressed, anxious or sad, who, if anyone, would they go to for help? (Prompt: for example family, friends or formal support through a doctor or a counsellor + what sort of help might they get from each of these people?)
- What could someone who was distressed, anxious or sad do to help themselves and make their life better?

## **4. Data analysis, report writing and dissemination**

### **Step 6: Analysis of quantitative data**

- **Perceptions of local resources**

The perception of local resources (people and organizations) that are available to the community as emerged from Activity 1 (participatory workshop) can be represented using diagrams which **map the connections** concentrically, according to their geographic location and proximity/distance from the household, in order to give a picture of the structure of relationships in the communities. A template diagram can be completed during each workshop with participants – see above.

Based on the results of Activity 2 (card sorting exercise), Q1 further information can be added on the **level of connectedness** of the participants to each of the people/organizations listed. This analysis proceeds as follows:

- The recording sheet is entered in Excel and, for each person/organization, the number of times it has been mentioned is counted (number of connections);
- The level of connection can be calculated by dividing the number of connections by the total number of responses received for that particular person/organization (excluding N/As or no replies);
- Using the Pivot Table function in Excel, answers can be further disaggregated by gender, age, type of community or any other variable that could be of interest for the study (which must be included in the entered data set for each individual);
- People and organisations can also be grouped into larger categories, such as family, community, government, NGOs.

Similarly, based on the second/third question, the **level of trust** in each person/organization can be calculated in general (Q2) and with reference to the specific problem scenario (Q3). This is done by calculating the average score obtained by each person/organization in terms of trust. The level of trust can also be turned into a percentage where the maximum score of 2 corresponds to 100%. Again, the results can be disaggregated by individual variables and people/organizations can be grouped in homogenous categories.

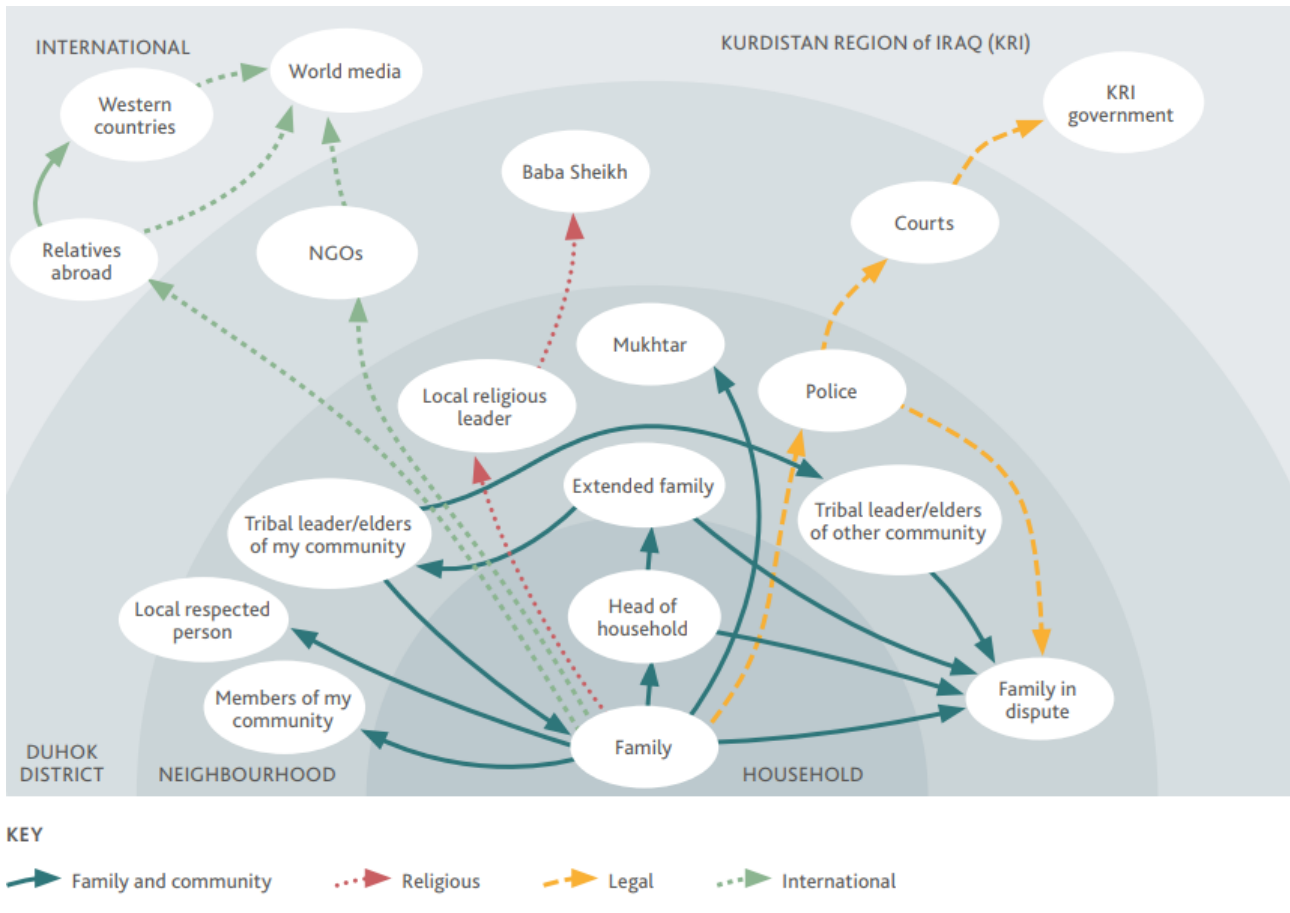
The forthcoming availability of a web-based app, whereby responses to questions two and three can be entered electronically by researchers or directly by participants should enable the analysis above to be done automatically, and will generate the maps, as well as allowing for the downloading of excel set with raw data.

### Step 7: Analysis of qualitative data

Qualitative, narrative data for the study consist in the notes taken during the workshops and interviews by the researchers, as well as notes taken during debriefs after the workshops/interviews and direct observations. Thematic analysis can be carried out using these data to identify **views and narratives** about each of the person/organization mentioned by the participants in relation to the different problem scenarios, as well as the **pathways** that participants describe following when coping with problems.

### Step 8: Bringing together quantitative and qualitative data

One possibility for bringing together quantitative and qualitative data is to use both information to draw graphs depicting the **pathways** that participants identified to cope with the problems discussed during the workshops and interviews.



## Step 9: Disseminating results

After data collection has been completed, a variety of methods can be used to disseminate and discuss the findings.

As in any research project, it is critical that stakeholders who have participated in, and supported the workshops, receive feedback on the findings. This should include identifying effective ways on feeding back to workshop participants and members of their wider communities. Multi-agency workshops have proven effective in this context.

- Stakeholder workshop

Researchers invite stakeholders who are already involved in the project, and those who work within the same or similar communities, to share the results of the study and explore implications for policy and practice.

Stakeholders can include:

- Refugee community organisations;
- People having participated in workshops during the project;
- NGO service providers;
- Government / statutory service providers e.g. health, social care, education;
- Policy-makers within local, regional or national teams.

The social connection maps (see above) provide a very clear communication tool for sharing information on social connections and access to resources.