

Sudan:

Women-led protection during war in South Kordofan

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With the civil war in South Kordofan well into its third year, local women's group engage in a number of protection activities while national and international actors mandated and resources to protect them continue to fail living up to their duties and responsibilities.

Background

Over a million people in the opposition controlled areas of South Kordofan and Blue Nile in Sudan are now more than two years² into a violent civil war. Civilians continue to be targeted by aerial bombardment and ground attacks and denied any formal humanitarian assistance or public services despite facing critical food shortages, massive displacement and increased

¹ The full names of the contributors are withheld for safety reasons. All are involved directly with the activities described in this paper.

² War began in June 2011 in South Kordofan State and September 2011 in Blue Nile State.

mortality from disease.³ The government and armed forces of Sudan are seen as a source of threat rather than a protective agent while the international community – be they political or aid actors – remains virtually paralysed and their “responsibility to protect” woefully unfulfilled.

In the absence of any meaningful protection from those mandated and equipped to provide it, local communities themselves continue to demonstrate considerable resilience and determination to protect themselves as best they can. As the Local to Global Protection Initiative (L2GP) has documented here and elsewhere⁴, affected communities are far from being passive and helpless victims in the face of disaster and they respond to the humanitarian and protection crisis using the natural and social capital at their disposal: mountainous topography, wild foods and medicines, social cohesion and self-help, traditional organisation and working civil administrative structures, self-belief, determination, optimism.

At the onset of the war in 2011, a [L2GP study](#) documented efforts of local civil society actors in South Kordofan to strengthen communities’ autonomous capacity to protect themselves by disseminating practical tips and ideas gleaned from those who lived through the previous war⁵. This pilot work proved encouraging, with many local observers citing reduced civilian mortalities as a result of changes in knowledge, attitude and practice related to self-protection. Building on these initial successes, the civil society organisations have sought to expand this work focusing on the pivotal role that women play as active protection agents within communities during war.

This update, co-written by the implementing local aid workers and an international advisor, shares early lessons generated by on-going efforts of local groups, especially the efforts of the indigenous Women’s Association (NMWA) as they honour their responsibility to protect themselves, their families and communities.

³ See for example: Amnesty International Report no AFR 54/009/2013 “Sudan: Civilians caught in unending crisis in Southern Kordofan”; and Human Rights Watch “Letter to Human Rights Council on the Human Rights Situation in Sudan” August 23, 2013

⁴ February 2012: ODI HPN 72 Local to Global protection in Myanmar (Burma), Sudan, South Sudan and Zimbabwe, Ashley South et al.

⁵ See “Protection in Sudan’s Nuba Mountains: Local achievements, international failures”, Feb2012; <http://www.local2global.info>

The Women's Association as an agency of protection

The Women's Association of Nuba Mountains (NMWA) is an indigenous civil society institution, which has evolved over the last 20 years or so. While based on grass roots women's groups (which can be found scattered across the region with very variable degrees of activity and organisation), the NMWA can also represent women's issues at higher levels in meetings with the authorities. Its primary role is seen as ensuring the women's ideas and needs are considered and included in any planning or action, whether at village level, country or even state level.

In December 2012, a group of local women and NGO representatives, with support from L2GP, developed a pilot project to test the feasibility of using the NMWA to further strengthen the capacity of communities to protect themselves. The aim was to reach a much wider number of households (there are about one million war effected people in opposition held areas) with a more holistic and autonomous self-protection strategy demanded by a war which sees systematic targeting of civilians (aerial and land attacks), increasing destitution, sickness and death from malnutrition along with an un-quantified but inevitably pervasive levels of fear, misery and associated psycho-social problems.

Building on the earlier research and subsequent social protection responses, it was agreed that increased capacity was needed for self-protection from:

- i) danger of injury or death from armed conflict (i.e. safety issues) ,
- ii) life-threatening risks from lack of food, income, basic services and shelter (i.e. physiological issues)
- iii) fear, sense of isolation and hopelessness, despair, unhappiness, erosion of dignity, core values (i.e. psycho-social issues)

A core team of 6 trainers was identified from the NMWA and a 4 day training-of-trainers course was designed and delivered (see Box 1 below summary of workshop content). In fact (as happened throughout this initiative) many more people actually turned up and in the end 14 people received the training. Subsequently, the core trainers split into three smaller groups and moved to different locations close to the different active front lines where communities were known to be most vulnerable and/or locally displaced. In these areas, the trainers first facilitated community meetings to encourage local women to form their own women's

groups and become part of the NMWA. These new groups, ranging in size from 10–32 members, were formed around general aspirations of self-help and a felt desire to respond to the needs of local women and their community. Over the space of 1 month, 5 new women's groups were formed and trained with a total of 77 members. These women were then tasked with disseminating the new ideas and skills within their own and neighbouring, villages.

At the end of the training each group was provided with a supply of:

- First aid wound dressings and disinfectant
- Whistles (for early warning systems)
- Water tabs for IDPs with no access to potable water
- Perfumes and hair extensions for celebrations days
- Musical instruments for celebration days
- Volley balls for youth

Box 1 Summary of Training of Trainers

Training skills:

- Approaches and skills for adult education and training (how adults learn)
- Roles and qualities of a good facilitator
- Community mobilization and animation
- Leading and facilitating group discussion

Protection modules, using skills and techniques mentioned above:

- Physical safety from bombing and land attacks,
- Prepositioning food and property in safe places,
- House hold budgeting and rationing of existing food supplies
- Recognition and preparation of safe wild foods and natural medicines
- First Aid
- Sanitation and personal hygiene, as preventative health care
- Human rights and violence against women,
- Dealing with mental trauma and psycho-social issues



Training of women's group in natural bomb shelter in Nuba. There were numerous interested observers present as well.

In addition, and primarily as a means to promote group work and collective action, new women's groups were given a start-up grant of about \$150 (equivalent in local currency). While it was left up to the group to decide how to use this money, the trainers encouraged them to think of ways to use for the collective good of the group and the wider community, possibly in a way that could allow the fund to be sustained.



During the training more than 40 type of herbs and plants were identified as either medicine or food. The group was able to analyze which herbs and plants to use when, how and for what disease. The women also discussed which type of plants that can be used as food and which may be mixed with food that they normally use.

Indications of impact

On-going monitoring and evaluation is not yet strong enough to provide systematic reports on scale and level of changes in knowledge, attitude and practice at community level. However, the following observations give us some idea of the impact of the programme to date:

- Trained women, their communities and observers were asked to comment critically both on the training and the wider programme. The feedback was unanimously positive. In a context where so much *material* help is so urgently needed, the level of appreciation and demand generated purely by training and dissemination of ideas and information is itself an indicator of its relevance to communities. This was apparent not only among the village women, who received or heard about the training, but also among village men and the male community leaders and senior authorities. As one County Commissioner put it:

“This community-protection training is too popular – not only do I have the women trainers coming to me all the time seeking help to get to more distant villagers to train more women, but I now have the husbands and brothers and uncles knocking on my door complaining that they want this training as well”.

- Dealing with bombing raids is frequently seen as one of the most immediate positive results of the training. This is not only because of the life-saving behaviour that can easily be acquired but also because of the positive psychological effect of reducing fear and tackling the sense of helplessness.

“Before the training when aerial bombardment started we would be terrified and run in panic here and there. Now we have the confidence to lie down calmly”

“We have dug fox-holes and we know to get in them or to lie down in depressions”.

“Now we understand how the bombs work and kill us with flying metal. So now we can respond better”

- In one location, a bombing raid coincided with the beginning of the training and all the participants panicked and ran screaming, chaotically in different directions. After the planes had left, the trainers readjusted their training schedule so that they could immediately deliver the module on coping with bombing. The very next morning an Antonov bomber returned. This time there was no chaos, much less panic and everyone moved quickly to seek shelter in the natural depressions (a small dried-out river beds) and the demonstration fox-holes dug the day before.
- First-aid skills are much in demand and greatly appreciated, but the general feedback indicated that the training was too theoretical and not sufficiently practical and hands on. In some cases the first aid kits intended for the newly trained women’s groups, were actually taken by the local health personnel. Improved first-aid training is currently being organised for the trainers and women’s groups as well as necessary orientation of health assistants (who are mostly male) on working with women’s groups.
- Sharing of information on wild-foods and natural medicines remains popular. Many family members were either elsewhere during the last war or were too young to remember and they lack the detailed indigenous knowledge on wild foods and medicines and the means of their identification, collecting (gathering and hunting) and preparation that can make such a difference to survival.

- Some communities observed that whistles were not effective for early warning as children are too apt to blow them for fun and some existing whistles in villages are already being played. More distinctive sounds were recommended (large bells, sirens, compressed air horns).
- Apart from the practical relevance of the training, many mentioned that just the fact that people travelled to their villages with a course clearly designed especially for them provided an enormous boost to individual and collective morale. The sense of solidarity and self-worth that the whole group formation and training programme generated seems as significant as the actual practical skills and knowledge passed on by the trainers.

“By visiting the community in their areas, you gave hope to us that they we are not alone which gives us stronger courage and determination to overcome our problems”.

“You strengthen our spirit of working together which has a great impact for us to then help others help themselves.”

“The interest and appreciation of the community leaders and even the senior authorities [County Commissioner] motivates us very much”

- The introductory sessions on dealing with mental trauma and psycho-social support was consistently ranked as important as the usual top priority of coping with aerial and land attacks. Participants reported that they felt better able to recognize and understand symptoms and at least somehow equipped to respond. Further training was requested.
- In the same way, provision of perfumes and hair extensions was seen as an effective and very economical way to raise moral and spirits of women in the group and contribute to a change in attitude and strengthening of self-esteem. Similarly, provision of footballs have been popular with (male) youth groups and contributed to general heightening of community spirits. To date, no clear evidence has been collected regarding impact of guitar strings, although there seems a high demand for musical instruments (i.e. for something more than just ‘spares’).

Meanwhile there is much which could be improved. The training on first aid and on dealing with trauma and psycho-social problems needs strengthening. More information and ideas on preserving techniques for different foods has been requested. Suggestions for improved in-kind support to protection groups includes

- more empty sacks for grain
- wind up radios and flashlights

- mosquito repellent and/or nets
- better early warning alerts (e.g. hand cranked bomb-warning sirens)

Sustainability and autonomy of local agency

The trained women from the groups have since been passing on the messages and skills learnt from the trainings to other women in their community. In most cases tracked so far, this has been largely informal and unstructured, involving neighbours, friends and families in the same village. In some cases, trained women have taken the initiative to have more structured sessions with women from the wider community.

All groups formed to date remain active, albeit to different degrees, with some demonstrating much more initiative than others. Of the start-up funds provided, three groups have initiated rotational savings scheme, two have developed a local emergency support fund and the remainder are still discussing. While it is too early to judge to what extent these groups will continue to operate without further external support, the indicators at this stage are encouraging. The Women's Association itself is lobbying the local authorities to support them in kind to continue and expand their training work, and the sense of purpose and self-motivation is very apparent.

Furthermore, this self-protection work has led to further reflection by women about their situation and rights within the context of war. The increased incidence of household and of sexual violence and the particular issue of loss of property-rights of widows⁶ means that, while women become the *de facto* protectors of the family, they are also exposed to greater physical risks and infringement of rights. NMWA members working with an emerging indigenous Human Rights Association have started to undertake their own assessment of what local women can do using customary and formal judicial mechanism to protect their own rights. They are now meeting with traditional sheiks and leaders, with local police, County Commissioners and the local formal judicial authorities to better understand the options open to women seeking redress for such injustices. Their aim is to then introduce a new training module for women's groups so as to disseminate their own findings on local opportunities for women to tackle rights violations.

⁶ For several local tribes, the family of the deceased husband can be expected to assume rights of property and assets, leaving widows even more vulnerable

From the monitoring possible to date, it may be concluded that the trained women's groups were able to disseminate self-protection and survival ideas and skills to a further 4,000 women during the first four months period. Assuming that these women come from at least 3,000 different households, the outreach to date would be at least 18,000 people reached.

Monitoring of this process is still underway to better understand the quality and coverage of such dissemination. The total funding for this project to date has been about \$12,000 for all training and travel costs – plus an additional \$15,000 for materials and start-up funds distributed to groups after training. Assuming that dissemination continues, albeit at a declining rate, it seems reasonable to extrapolate costs of this process very approximately at around \$1 per person reached.

Conclusions

While more time is needed to evaluate the impacts of this project on the lives of local communities, the work of the NMWA challenges common perceptions regarding women in conflict. While clearly facing heightened risks (to their physical safety, their livelihoods, their well being), the women in South Kordofan are also revealing their significant role as agents of protection for the wider civilian population. This study underscores conceptual thinking around reliance that caution against simplistic assumptions about vulnerability. There may be many ways in which women in conflict can be better helped to tackle increased protection threats that focus on internal agency than external agency.

The potential for expanding and deepening this work looks encouraging, and L2GP hopes to continue supporting the process of participatory action research now underway in South Kordofan. Already, new plans are being developed to broaden the scope of the protection work to strengthen links to local human rights defenders while also reaching out to women the other side of the conflict line using different media. There is clearly scope to explore similar opportunities in other areas of conflict: L2GP's on-going work in Myanmar, Syria and Palestine will also seek to better understand how to help women realise their full potential to act as protection agents.

At the same time, the action-research continues to highlight the central precept that such self-protection efforts can never be a substitute for an external commitment to prevent war and protect war affected and traumatised civilians in accordance with the Geneva Conventions and other

relevant parts of international law. It is important to remember that the women of South Kordofan have been forced to develop their potential for self-protection because of the failure of international humanitarian and protection mechanisms, INGOs and institutions. International peacekeeping failed to prevent a predictable return to conflict and then failed to respond once the war recommenced.

The work of the Women's Association in the Nuba Mountains, and of the Sudanese civil society groups supporting these efforts, should cause all of us to reflect. To inspire us all to understand more about what local agency can (and cannot) achieve and to learn how best to support it. To challenge some of the norms that we cling to – especially about women's roles in society and about who protects who. And to become much more critical about the existing external aid and peace-keeping systems which failed in averting a predictable return to war and in responding subsequently. If 're-invention' was to replace 'self-preservation as the dominant mantra within existing international humanitarian and protection thinking, perhaps the women of Nuba Mountains could be using their energies to protect peace and uphold human rights without being bombed and starved at the same time.

Local to Global Protection (L2GP) is an initiative intended to document and promote local perspectives on protection in major humanitarian crises. So far, community oriented research have been carried out in Burma/Myanmar, Sudan, South Sudan, Zimbabwe, the occupied Palestinian territories and the Syria.

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