



Local perspectives on protection:

Recommendations for a community based
approach to protection in Humanitarian Action



A mother in an IDP camp protects her sleeping baby from rats, snakes and scorpions with a basket and some strings, as she juggles multiple demands on her time and attention.

DARFUR, SUDAN, 2006

What do we mean by ‘protection’?

According to the most widely accepted definition, humanitarian protection aims to limit or mitigate the impacts of abuses. The Inter Agency Standing Committee (IASC) states that protection “encompasses all activities aimed at ensuring full respect for the rights of the individual in accordance with the letter and the spirit of the relevant bodies of law, i.e. human rights law, international humanitarian law and refugee law. Human rights and humanitarian organizations must conduct these activities in an impartial manner (not on the basis of race, national or ethnic origin, language or gender)”¹.

In practice, this approach tends to see protection as something outsiders may try to bring to vulnerable members of a particular community in compliance with relevant bodies of international law. When they work best, such activities by external actors are valuable and at times crucial. But often they do not resonate well with the complex realities and experiences of people-at-risk themselves.

Local to Global Protection (L2GP) therefore prefers to define protection as how people-at-risk in any given context understand it and to build the analysis and subsequent protection activities on this understanding - even when it may stretch beyond the above quoted IASC definition.

INTRODUCTION

This leaflet sums up main lessons from a series of studies on community-based protection, by the Local to Global Protection initiative (L2GP). The aim of the leaflet is to offer humanitarian practitioners a set of recommendations on how they can strengthen protection of people and communities-at-risk by placing locally rooted strategies and experiences at the very centre of the planning and implementation of humanitarian action.

From the studies, nine recommendations for humanitarian action have emerged. These are presented together with a short explanation highlighting findings from the studies. For those, who would like to know more about the individual case studies please refer to the resource list on page 22.

What is Local to Global Protection?

The L2GP is an initiative to document and promote local perspectives on protection in major humanitarian crises. Since 2010, L2GP has documented how people living in areas affected by armed conflict, protracted socio-political crisis and major disasters understand “protection” – what they value, what their concerns are, and how they go about protecting themselves, their families and their communities. L2GP seeks to add an often-overlooked dimension to protection programming that is enabling locally led responses and placing local agencies at the centre of planning and implementation of protection initiatives.

Since 2009, local and international researchers have undertaken in-depth interviews with more than 1,500 people trying to survive and protect themselves in major humanitarian crises. So far, studies have been carried out in Karen State and in the Irrawaddy Delta (after Cyclone Nargis) of Burma/ Myanmar, in South Kordofan of Sudan, in Jonglei State of South Sudan, in Harare, Mashonaland East and Matabeleland North in Zimbabwe, and in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem in the occupied Palestinian territories. A seventh study, in Syria, is on-going.

In these very different contexts, three basic research questions have guided the interviews: 1) Asking affected individuals to name the most important threats and challenges they face; 2) Asking them to describe how they, their families and communities try to deal with these threats and challenges; and finally, 3) asking how they perceive activities of “outside actors” (NGOs, INGOs, authorities, armed forces/groups etc.) and how these activities interact with their own actions.

Despite very different contexts, a number of findings resonate through the studies. The most important and inspiring finding is the manner in which people-at-risk initiate and take the lead in activities to protect themselves and their communities.



“ We tried to help as best we could. Those who had badly bruised or broken body parts we tried to help with bandages from pieces of clothes and other materials to support and protect the wounded parts. We then mended a broken boat so we could row those who were badly wounded to [the nearest town]. **MALE VILLAGER, MYANMAR DELTA STUDY** ”

RECOMMENDATION 1

Recognise how crucial local communities' own knowledge and protection strategies are for their safety and survival.

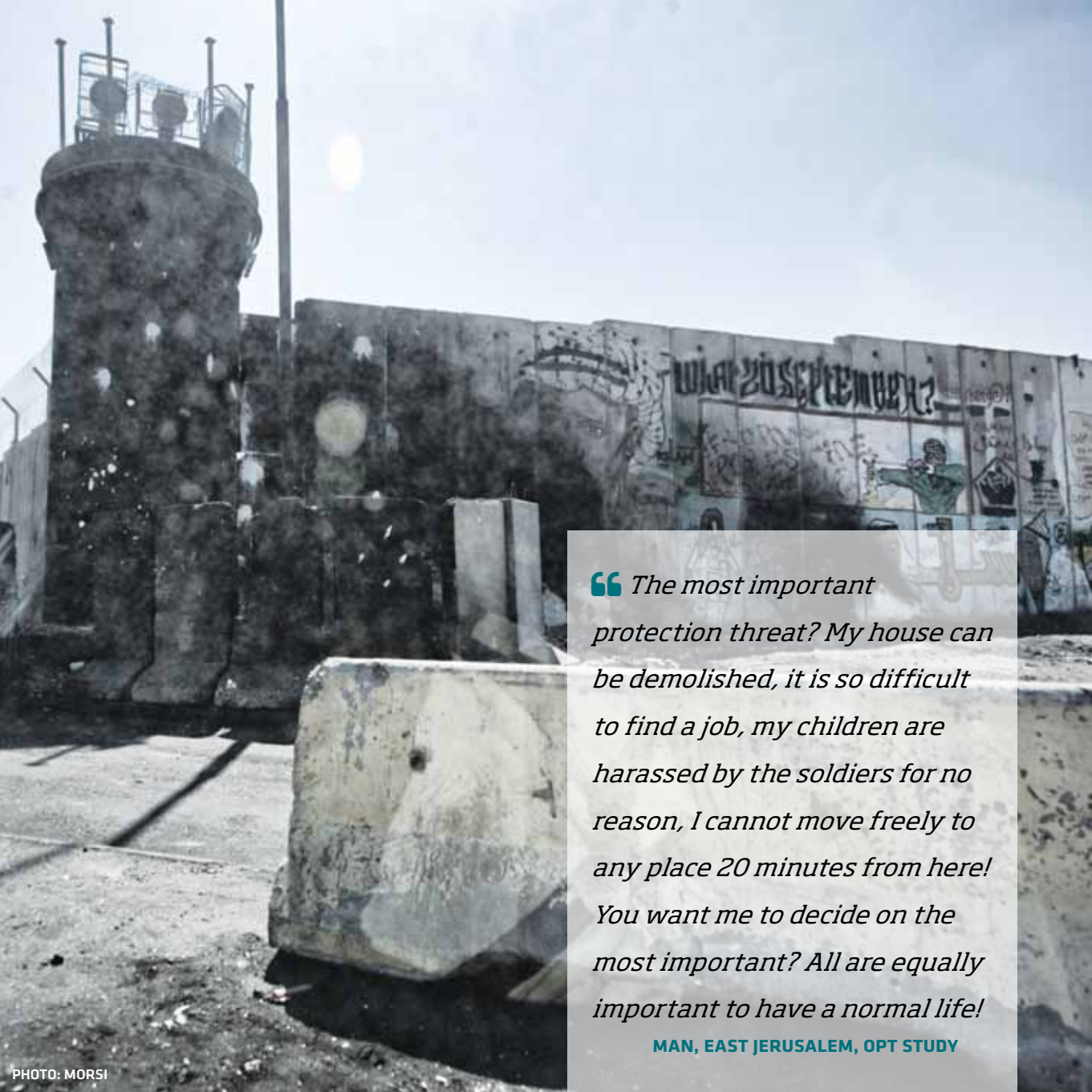
The biggest contribution to people's survival and protection stems from their own activities. This is a key finding from the L2GP studies. Affected communities base their protection strategies on an often detailed and sophisticated understanding of threats and challenges. The affected communities themselves are often the first to act when disaster has struck. The activities of international agencies constitute only one part of many actions that contribute to people's survival, protection and livelihood options. This is particularly true where there is limited international access and community-based protection strategies are crucial for the affected populations.

However, the studies also show that while local initiatives are highly important, often they are not enough. For example, to avoid the consequences of political violence, people in Zimbabwe would share information on where incidences were taking place. While this might mitigate the threat, it did not remove it. Therefore, protection by national governments

and authorities, or when they fail, from international protection actors is vital as a means to complement local strategies.

In some cases, there are also negative side effects of the community-based strategies employed. In other cases, the strategies include a trade-off – choosing what seems to be the lesser of two evils. In South Kordofan, a woman mentioned that women would fetch water even though they risked being raped by enemy soldiers. Whereas if the men went, they would risk being killed.

In such cases, international protection may be able to mitigate the negative side effects with the use of external resources. But to achieve the best possible protection, the communities' own protection strategies, based as they are on an intimate knowledge of local conditions, are crucial and need to be recognised, considered, and supported right from the very beginning.



“ *The most important protection threat? My house can be demolished, it is so difficult to find a job, my children are harassed by the soldiers for no reason, I cannot move freely to any place 20 minutes from here! You want me to decide on the most important? All are equally important to have a normal life!*

MAN, EAST JERUSALEM, OPT STUDY

RECOMMENDATION 2

Put the community's perspective at the centre and allow for a holistic response addressing physical safety, livelihoods, and psychosocial needs.

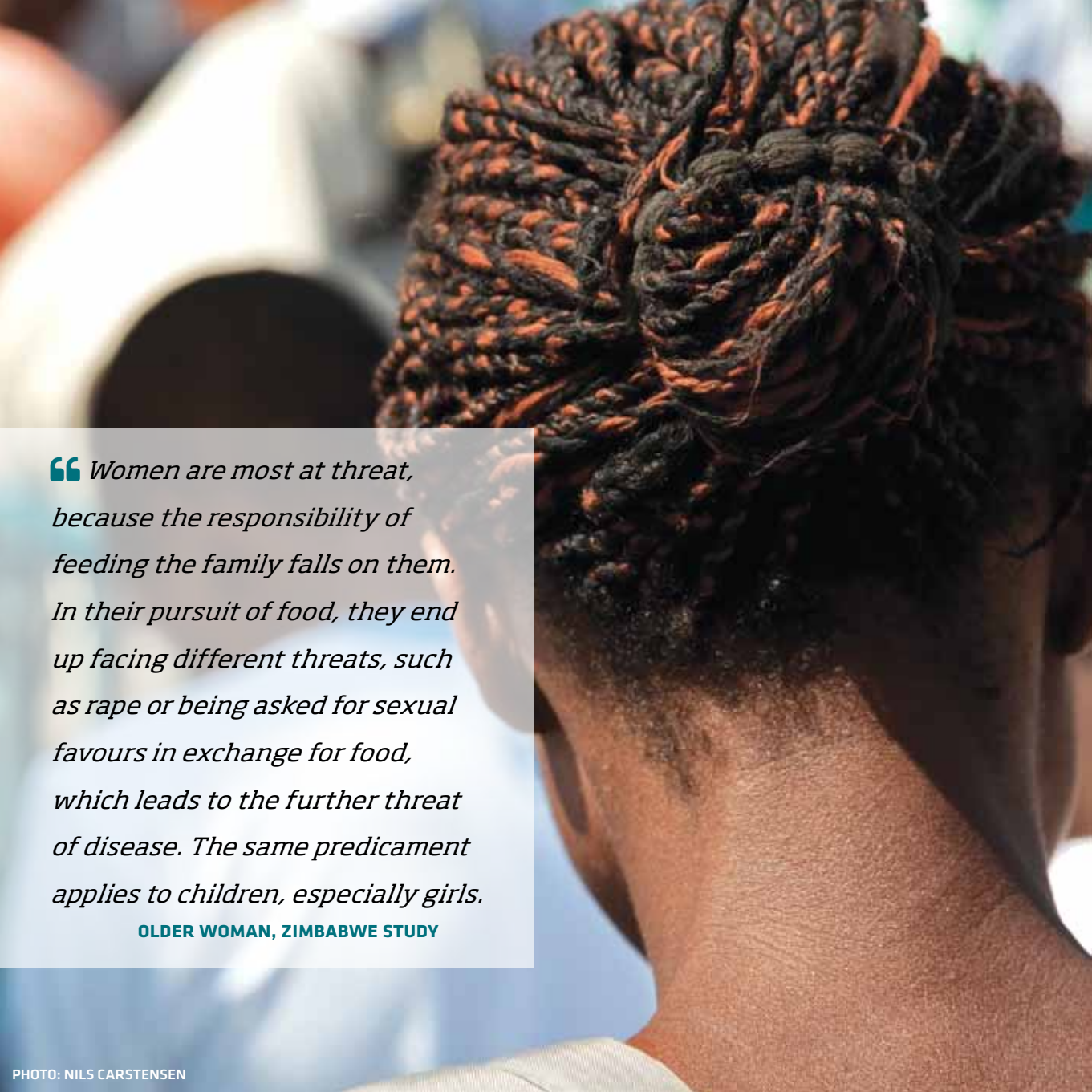
Protection threats, as perceived by crisis-affected communities, are much more comprehensive than what is often understood by humanitarian agencies. Emotional and spiritual needs, such as dignity, self-esteem, a sense of belonging, friendship and fun, are often as important as people's physical needs, and closely interrelated.

In the South Kordofan study, women stressed the importance of hair extensions and perfume, musical instruments for celebration days, and volleyballs for the youth. They emphasized how crucial dancing and having fun was for their well-being - even when hungry and under threat. It is therefore important to focus not only on physical needs, such as food, water, and shelter, but also on mental, spiritual and cultural needs.

The studies also indicate the need to remove the artificial distinctions between relief, recovery and development activities, particularly in protracted crisis.

Life-saving support should be implemented alongside medium to long-term efforts to rebuild or create livelihood opportunities. Studies show how livelihoods are intrinsically linked with protection: those who can provide for their families feel more able to handle protection threats.

Advocacy with - and on behalf of - affected communities, also has positive protection benefits. Communities feel encouraged and less isolated - that their problems are not reduced to just basic survival but that external actors recognise the importance of addressing root causes. One such example is the study carried out in the occupied Palestinian territories, where the affected communities continuously brought up the need for advocacy. They found that humanitarian aid was prolonging the conflict, and that the only way to really change their situation was for the international community to hold Israel accountable for the occupation.

A close-up photograph of a woman's head, focusing on her hair which is styled in a complex, multi-colored braided pattern. The braids are dark with orange and red highlights. The woman's face is partially visible in profile, looking towards the left. The background is blurred, showing other people in a crowd.

“ *Women are most at threat, because the responsibility of feeding the family falls on them. In their pursuit of food, they end up facing different threats, such as rape or being asked for sexual favours in exchange for food, which leads to the further threat of disease. The same predicament applies to children, especially girls.*

OLDER WOMAN, ZIMBABWE STUDY

RECOMMENDATION 3

Remember that diversity - gender, age and other social identities - matters. Crises affect women and men, children, adults and the elderly differently.

That gender, age and other social identities matter is old news. However, when working with protection it is crucial to strengthen the analysis of social identities and ensure this analysis is reflected in programme design.

The studies show significant differences in protection threats and protection opportunities according to gender, age, location or for instance ethnic or religious identity. While the most commonly perceived vulnerable groups were children (particularly orphans), elderly, women and single-parent families, in Burma/Myanmar, Syria and Zimbabwe interviewees saw kinships, political and religious associations as important determinants of strengths and vulnerabilities. The Palestine study highlights how minority groups like the Bedouin bear a disproportionate share of the protection threats and challenges.

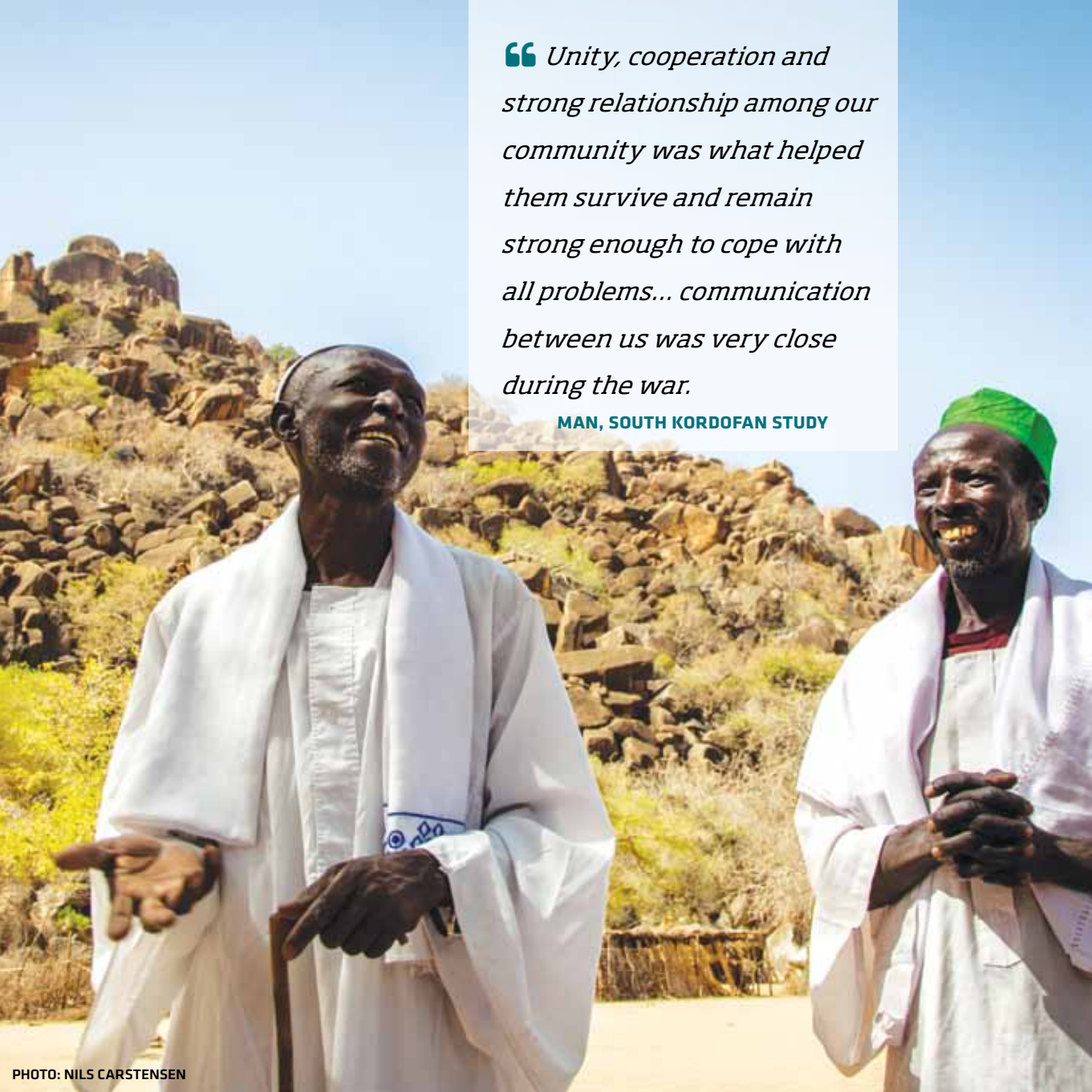
Women often described themselves as especially vulnerable to physical attacks and domestic and sexual violence. Moreover, vulnerability changed with age, e.g.

the threat of early marriage, lack of a safe place to give birth, or a shelter for the elderly. In Gaza, women saw domestic violence as a main protection threat. In South Kordofan, rape was common during military attacks on villages, and gender-ascribed duties of water and firewood collection exposed many women to risk of rape and abduction by soldiers.

Social and cultural roles also mean that women and men cope with threats differently. In particular, in South Kordofan, women saw themselves as better equipped to endure the mental hardships of the war. Men, because their primary role to provide for the family was impossible to fulfil, were more prone to getting depressed. Women as crucial protection actors are also clearly seen in Burma/Myanmar where they acted as village leaders - a stressful and dangerous role that involved negotiations with armed groups, state and non-state actors alike. Despite the risk, women leaders confronted armed personnel, sometimes being able to redress injustices, successfully demand compensation from soldiers, and prevent military relocations.

“ *Unity, cooperation and strong relationship among our community was what helped them survive and remain strong enough to cope with all problems... communication between us was very close during the war.* ”

MAN, SOUTH KORDOFAN STUDY



RECOMMENDATION 4

Put local people in the lead for planning, implementation, and coordination of protection interventions.

The importance of understanding how local people organise and govern themselves and know how to engage with them is emphasised in the studies. Local people know the context, the conflict dynamics, and their community's resources, knowledge and capacity better than anybody else does, and supporting them to lead in protection contributes to appropriateness, effectiveness and sustainability. From the initial assessment of a crisis therefore, community structures, networks, groups and local leaders should be identified to lead planning, implementation, and coordination of activities.

South Kordofan provides an example of an effective way in which an intervention can be locally-led. When conflict re-ignited in 2011, remembering they had been let down by outside actors during the last war, local civil society groups and in particular a local Women's

Association developed a project to strengthen the capacity of communities to protect themselves. They organised themselves to spread information and hold trainings on survival strategies, such as eating wild foods and digging fox holes. Working with its existing network, the Women's Association set up a system of training and training of trainers that gradually expanded to significant parts of the area. Over a couple of years, this community-led project reached several hundred thousand individuals with a holistic and autonomous self-protection strategy.

There are numerous good examples where communities have the capacity to lead, plan, implement and coordinate effective initiatives. In situations such as these, the international community must take a more facilitating or enabling role - or risk undermining the cohesiveness which allows people to survive in the first place.



“ *Internationals did nothing to protect us during the war. They promised things to us but did nothing - we could only depend on ourselves.* **MAN, SOUTH KORDOFAN STUDY**

RECOMMENDATION 5

An informed, flexible and risk-willing approach is vital if a community-based response is to be effective.

Protection threats and strategies are highly contextual and can change rapidly. Standardised approaches are therefore often of limited value. To ensure an adequate response, there is a need for greater flexibility among humanitarian actors. Community-based protection is about individuals and communities identifying protection threats and needs themselves and then acting on them with their own means. International actors with a genuine interest in supporting this will have to relinquish a significant degree of control over activities and funds if communities are truly going to take the lead.

However, most external actors are constrained by their own institutional mandates and structures, and specific donor requirements, which leave little room for flexibility. External actors may be willing and

able to consult and include the perspectives of local communities to a certain extent, but to go further than that is often challenging.

To transfer direct management of budgets can be seen as quite threatening, particularly when the risks are not fully understood. However smaller, local organisations are often more knowledgeable about these risks, able to work closer to communities - monitoring and adjusting activities as required. To support and fund such organisations is one way forward. External agencies must be willing and able to take calculated risks; and promote innovation, while ensuring learning from positive and negative outcomes. The benefits of that will go beyond more effective programming and contribute to communities' self-confidence and longer-term capacity.

“ They give food items like rice, oil, and flour. What to do with these items when we do not have kitchens? We want cash; we want to feel as human beings and not humiliated all the time. I want to buy chocolate and candies to my children as I used to do in Syria. I do not want them to feel deprived all the time, and I do not want to feel that I cannot bring them anything.

MALE SYRIAN REFUGEE, ONGOING RESEARCH



RECOMMENDATION 6

Explore the relevance of rapid micro-grants to promote locally led protection. Consider individual and/or community cash assistance to provide affected populations with options and flexibility.

Supporting community-based protection requires the use of humanitarian assistance that enables the greatest choice and flexibility. By definition, community-based protection initiatives vary from one family to the other and from one locality to the other, and may change rapidly with time, season and conflict dynamics.

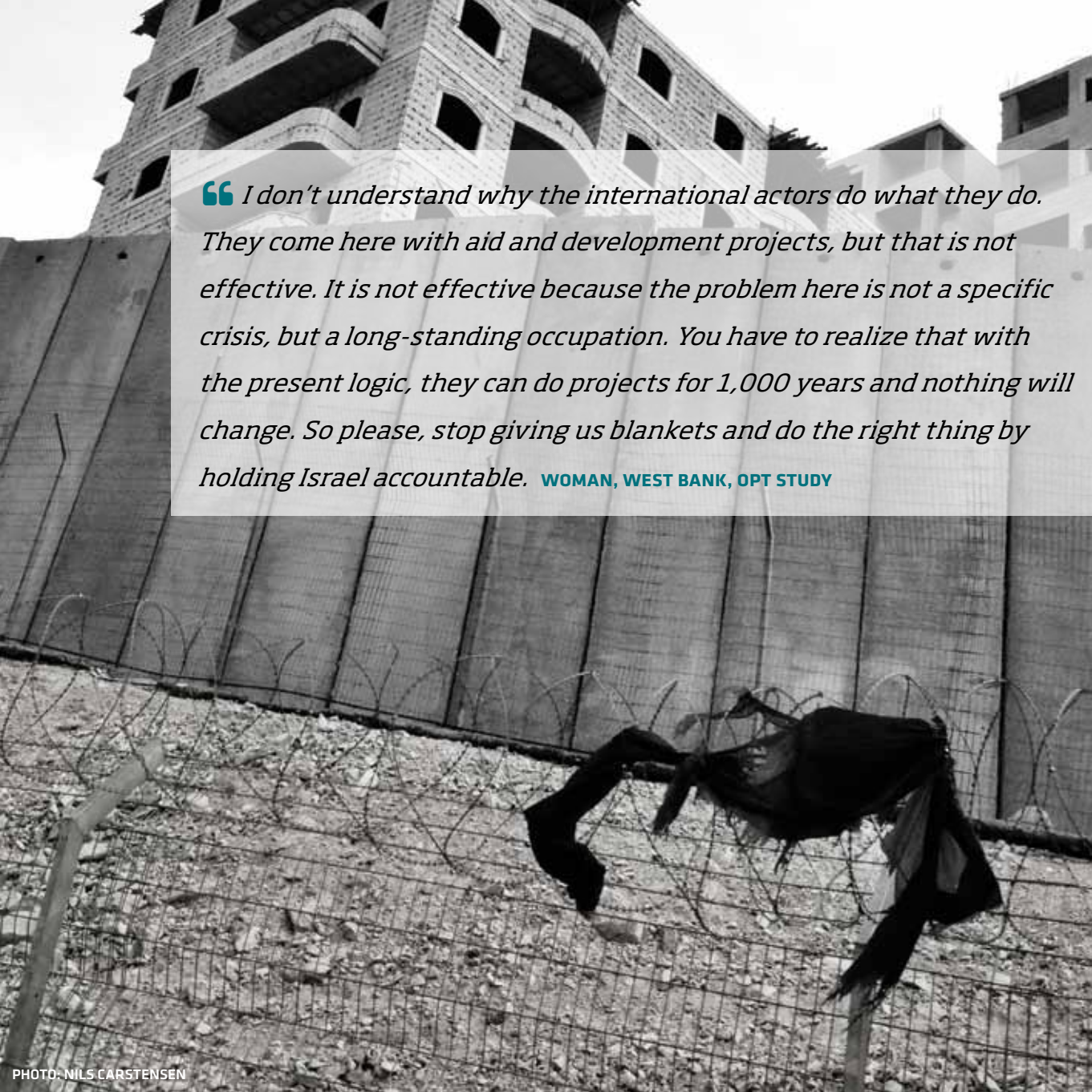
There is a growing appreciation of cash assistance as one way of responding that allows users to adjust to changing contexts, including families' and individuals' specific priorities. Under certain conditions, cash assistance can stimulate local economies, actually increasing supply.² In conflict situations, affected populations often make use of informal markets crossing borders or front lines. This trade can be an important source of otherwise inaccessible life-saving food and non-food items. Cash can increase access to these markets. Cross border trade may also facilitate interaction and dialogue across conflict lines.

Small community cash grants can be an excellent tool to assist self-help groups' initiatives, local emergency responses, and enable locally led protection strategies. Piloting micro-grants in a protection crisis is one way to explore the potential of local initiatives and strategies, test capacities of local groups, and provide space for experimentation and learning-by-doing so that local good practice can emerge in real time. If activities prove

effective and capacities are sufficient, rapid disbursement of micro-grants at scale should be explored.

However, it is crucial that cash interventions are based on a market analysis that confirm the accessibility and availability of needed goods, and that a Do-no-Harm assessment does not indicate a risk of contributing to social frictions and tensions or put individuals at risk.

One example of rapid disbursements of micro-grants to local groups, is the Paung Ku response to Cyclone Nargis in Burma/Myanmar in 2008 that killed 150.000 people and severely affected another 2.5 million. Within hours of the storm, thousands of self-help initiatives within the Delta were spontaneously providing life-saving assistance. A second wave of support came from organised civil-society actors and the wider public of Burma/Myanmar. While the international humanitarian community was not allowed access in the initial period after the cyclone, a group of international and local NGOs saw the opportunity to respond through local groups, primarily with micro grants. They piloted a set of procedures for grant disbursement, engagement with and practical skills-building support to existing CSOs and emerging self-help groups formed by survivors.



“ I don't understand why the international actors do what they do. They come here with aid and development projects, but that is not effective. It is not effective because the problem here is not a specific crisis, but a long-standing occupation. You have to realize that with the present logic, they can do projects for 1,000 years and nothing will change. So please, stop giving us blankets and do the right thing by holding Israel accountable. **WOMAN, WEST BANK, OPT STUDY** ”

RECOMMENDATION 7

Support local civil society in promoting human rights activities.

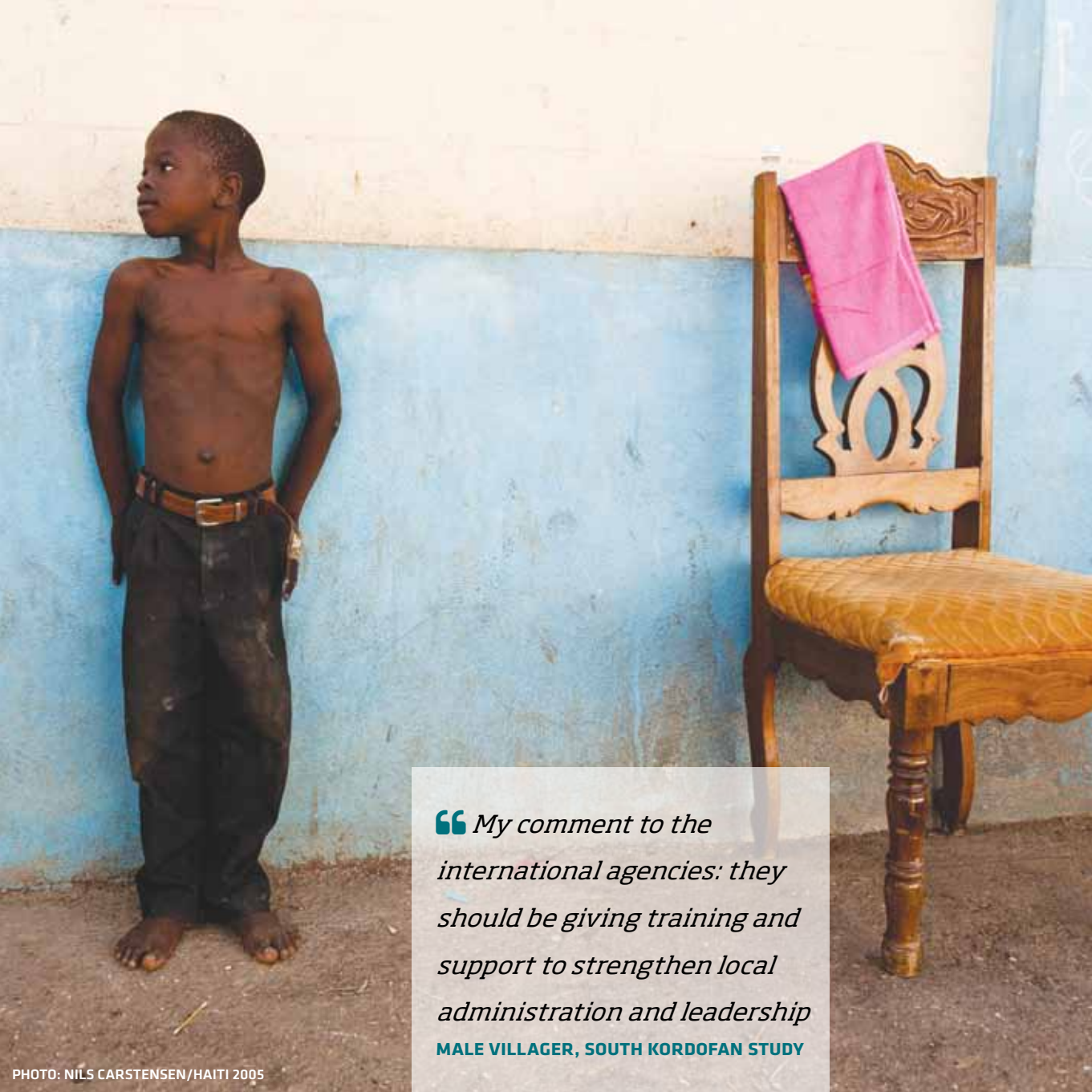
Even within an active war zone, support to civil society and emerging human rights groups from affected communities can generate important opportunities for promoting human rights and - to some extent - address local human rights violations.

In the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis, when the army tried to forcibly recruit young men, awareness of the threat and mutual care helped communities to resist. In Zimbabwe, local organizations provided training on community security strategies. People formed protection groups to warn each other of threats, for example by sending coded SMS alerts. Syrian women's networks advocate against gender-based violence and warn strongly against under-age girls forced into marriage as a "survival strategy" for their families.

During the Karen conflict in Burma/Myanmar, local NGOs and CBOs facilitated community networks and reinforced 'human capital' in ways that contributed to

conflict-mitigation at the local level. Local CSOs worked with community leaders (especially monks and pastors) to expand local 'protected space'. Civil society actors mobilized agencies operating outside Burma/Myanmar by passing on human rights information. Such informal 'protection and advocacy networks' helped reduce the incidence of human rights abuses³.

The South Kordofan study noted communities were interested in learning more about human rights, not only to understand about global rights-specific values, laws and legal systems but also to strengthen a local sense of dignity in the face of great suffering. Not long after the onset of war in June 2011, active young men and women involved in the community protection work formed their own Human Rights Monitoring and Promotion teams. These teams participated in a series of human rights trainings and have since been collecting data and defending human rights within their own communities and with local authorities.



“ *My comment to the international agencies: they should be giving training and support to strengthen local administration and leadership*

MALE VILLAGER, SOUTH KORDOFAN STUDY

RECOMMENDATION 8

Explore options to work with local duty bearers, including non-state actors, to address threats against livelihoods, health, and safety.

Affected communities often know that political and armed groups can be a source of threats, but at the same time may offer protection. Faced with this dilemma, the studies show that communities, individuals and families can be forced to make terrible choices – mitigating one risk while compromising other rights and the wellbeing of individuals, families or communities.

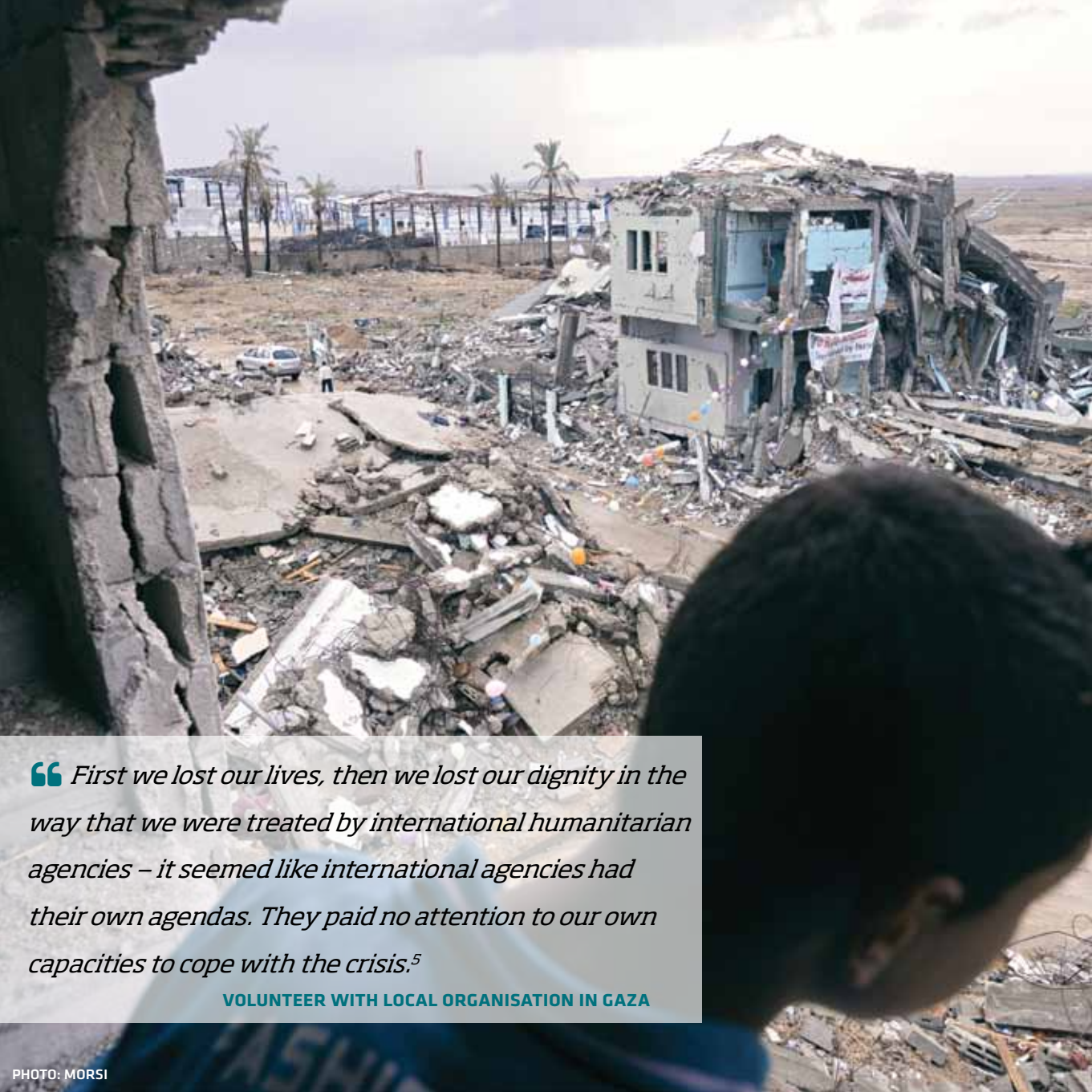
Many respondents in the studies reported that having the right relationship with power-holders/authorities is crucial to protection and the studies show that affected communities often demonstrate sophisticated skills in navigating the complex relationships with de-facto power-holders.

Findings show that in some situations there is a potential for mitigating violations at the local level such as forced military recruitment or relocation of villages, and improve the discipline of military groups. The studies also indicate that even in war zones there may be space to work on the continued delivery of basic services such as schools, health, etc. through a dialogue with local duty bearers, be they formal local authorities or non-state actors.

Therefore, options to strengthen local duty-bearers knowledge of and role in maintaining civil law and

order and upholding civil rights are important to explore. That said, investments in good governance and capacities of local duty bearers, de-facto power-holders and governance structures should always be based on participatory assessments with local actors and communities, to ensure recognition of the complex relationships and dilemmas this entails.

A defining feature of the local response to the crisis in South Kordofan has been the extent to which the local civil administration has attempted to maintain public service delivery despite being cut off from national or external resources while also being frequently targeted by aerial bombardment. Many of the civil servants, health workers, teachers, water technicians, veterinary staff, judiciary, civilian police and prison personnel who were part of the government secretariats remained at their posts on a voluntary basis and continued to do what they could. With no transport, communications, electrical power, and only the most ad hoc and limited supply of essential material and equipment, they are of course unable to meet adequately the needs they face. Nonetheless, in all sectors they are able to do something, however limited.



“ First we lost our lives, then we lost our dignity in the way that we were treated by international humanitarian agencies – it seemed like international agencies had their own agendas. They paid no attention to our own capacities to cope with the crisis.⁵

VOLUNTEER WITH LOCAL ORGANISATION IN GAZA

RECOMMENDATION 9

Apply a continuous participatory process of research, action and learning to support local actors' own analysis of protection threats, constraints and opportunities.

Outside agencies rarely acknowledge locally led protection efforts. A survey⁴ on community-based protection showed that the vast majority of respondents could not identify any examples of genuine community-based action. Instead, they suggested examples that originated from within an external agency and only included informing or engaging communities at different stages of the activities.

But support to locally-led protection initiatives shows that, while new skills are appreciated by the communities, the most important support from outside is the help provided to identify, locate and disseminate skills and knowledge already present in the community. However, a significant number of self-protection strategies come at a very high cost. These strategies may offer short-term relief but are likely to leave individuals, families or entire communities more vulnerable and worse-off in the longer-term.

One way of addressing this dilemma is by using communities' experiences as an opportunity to explore how communities protect themselves. Working in a structured way with youth groups, women's associations, CBOs and community leaders can turn initial assessments into on-going Participatory Action Research - a constructive and applied way of learning.

Participatory Action Research is an approach focused on capturing the concerns of a particular community. It promotes empowerment through development of common knowledge and critical awareness, and aims at change by enabling local actors to become researchers of their own reality. Through continuous dialogue, research, action, reflection, and revised action, this approach offers a mechanism for local learning, strengthening of local practices, and mitigation of risks from negative coping mechanisms.

The Local to Global Protection studies:

“Local to Global Protection in Myanmar (Burma), Sudan, South Sudan and Zimbabwe”, Ashley South and Simon Harragin, with Justin Corbett, Richard Horsey, Susanne Kempel, Henrik Fröjmark and Nils Carstensen, Humanitarian Practice Network Paper No 72, London, 2012

“Conflict and Survival: Self-protection in South-east Burma”, Ashley South with Malin Perhult and Nils Carstensen, London, 2010

“Myanmar – Surviving the Storm: Self-protection and survival in the Delta”, Ashley South, Susanne Kempel, Malin Perhult, Nils Carstensen, Copenhagen 2011

“Learning from the Nuba, South Kordofan: Civilian resilience and self-protection during conflict”, Justin Corbett, Copenhagen, 2011

“Local protection in Zimbabwe”, Richard Horsey, Copenhagen, 2011

“South Sudan; Waiting for peace to come: Study from Bor, Twic East & Duk counties in Jonglei”, Simon Harragin, Copenhagen, 2011

“Women-led protection during war in South Kordofan”, L2GP, Copenhagen, 2014

“Protection in the occupied Palestinian territories: They can do projects here for 1,000 years and nothing will change”, Rafael Eguiguren and Luna Saadeh, Copenhagen, 2014

All the L2GP studies are available at the L2GP website: <http://www.local2global.info/>

Protection:

“Safety with dignity: Integrating community based protection into humanitarian programming”, Kate Berry and Sherryl Reddy. Humanitarian Practice Network Paper No 68, London, 2010.

Safety with Dignity; A field manual for integrating community-based protection across humanitarian programs. Action Aid: www.actionaid.org/publications/safety-dignity-field-based-manual-integrating-community-based-protection-across-humanit

Humanitarian Protection Policy, ACT Alliance, 2010,

“Enhancing Protection, for civilians armed conflict and other situations of violence”, 2012
www.alnap.org/pool/files/icrc-002-0956.pdf

“Protection: An ALNAP guide for Humanitarian Agencies”, 2005: www.alnap.org/resource/5263

Other resources

Participatory Action Research Toolkit: An Introduction to using PAR as an Approach to Learning, Research and Action, Rachel Pain, Geoff Whitman and David Milledge (Durham University) & Lune Rivers Trust: www.dur.ac.uk/resources/beacon/PARtoolkit.pdf

The ACT Alliance website on community based psychosocial support: www.psychosocial.actalliance.org/

IASC Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings, 2007.
www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc

“Helping the heroes: practical lessons from an attempt to support civil society emergency response after Nargis.”, ATP Staff, Humanitarian Exchange Magazine Issue 41, London, 2008

Footnotes

1. This definition was originally adopted by a 1999 Workshop of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) on Protection. See for instance: “Professional standards for protection work carried out by humanitarian and human rights actors in armed conflict and other situations of violence.” ICRC, Geneva, 2013, Page 12.
2. See for example Hedlund (2012) A Meta-Evaluation of ACF’s experience in Emergency Fresh Food Vouchers, Action Contre le Faim.
3. “Conflict and Survival: Self-protection in south-east Burma”, Ashley South with Malin Perhult and Nils Carstensen, London, September 2010, Page 47; www.local2global.info/area-studies/burmamyanmar-karen
4. Community Based Protection, Survey findings and analysis, prepared by a joint UNHCR-NGO-Academia team for UNHCR’s 2014 Annual Consultation’s session on Community Based Protection. www.unhcr.org/ngo-consultations/CBP-Survey-Findings-Final-June2014.pdf, Pages 2 - 3
5. “Safety with dignity: integrating community-based protection into humanitarian programming”, Kate Berry and Sherryl Reddys, page 5, HPN/ODI Network Paper No.68 London, March, 2010

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Local to Global Protection 2015



Church of Sweden 

member of
actalliance

“ *There are many problems we face for our survival, but these also provide an opportunity to bring everyone together in solving issues related to security and welfare of the whole community.*

30-YEAR-OLD MAN, ZIMBABWE

Local to Global Protection (L2GP) is an initiative, which works to promote effective, efficient and sustainable responses and solutions to humanitarian and protection crises with an explicit focus on enabling locally-led responses. L2GP was initiated by a group of organizations within the ACT Alliance in cooperation with other organizations and individuals where the studies have taken place. The initiative has among other been financially supported by Church of Sweden, DanChurchAid, Sida (Sweden) and Danida (Denmark). **CONTACT:** info@local2global.info **READ MORE AT:** www.local2global.info

