Understanding and supporting community-led protection

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Supporting locally led protection strategies can significantly improve the impact of protection interventions. External actors first need to acknowledge the capacity of people at risk as independent actors themselves.

In recent years, there has been growing evidence of the effectiveness of locally led protection strategies and actions… A local women's association in Sudan advises communities on how to seek protection in foxholes or mountain caves to escape aerial bombardments. A minority Christian family chooses to travel with friends belonging to the Buddhist majority in government-controlled parts of southeast Myanmar. And self-taught local bomb-removal squads in opposition-controlled parts of Syria remove or neutralise unexploded cluster and barrel bombs in densely populated neighbourhoods.[1]

In such cases, some of the communities are already displaced and are trying to avoid being forced to leave their homes yet again, while other communities are trying to minimise the risks that might otherwise make flight and displacement inevitable. In crisis situations, there are multiple and often quite different understandings of what 'protection' means and what strategies and actions might bring about a degree of protection. Particularly in situations where the parties to conflict and national or local authorities show little or no respect for international or national law and norms, locally defined needs, strategies and understandings of protection may differ significantly from what an international 'normative' protection approach usually entails.

According to the most widely accepted definition, humanitarian protection aims to prevent or, failing that, limit or mitigate the impacts of abuses. This approach tends to see protection as something that outsiders try to provide for vulnerable members of a particular community in order to promote compliance with relevant bodies of international law. Such activities by

external actors are, when they work well, crucial for protecting and saving lives. This approach, however, is defined by translating different international laws, rights-based approaches, institutional mandates and generalised guidance into protection activities in highly complex local realities and does not always resonate with local realities and the experience of people at risk.

> The growing evidence base of locally rooted protection strategies and action includes the 2009 Oxfam paper on community-based protection in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the Cuny Center's inventory of self-protection strategies, several documented cases in Colombia, and the Local to Global Protection (L2GP) and the Overseas Development Institute's Humanitarian Practice Network studies of self-protection in Burma/Myanmar, Palestine, Sudan, South Sudan and Zimbabwe; recent work by the Stimson Center, the Sudd Institute and the Center for Civilians in Conflict has also contributed to the understanding of self-protection in DRC, South Sudan and Syria.
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> This growing appreciation for locally led protection has also manifested itself in practical guidance for humanitarian programme staff (and partners), while recent policy papers such as the Global Protection Cluster Strategic Framework 2016-19 and ECHO's new Humanitarian Protection policy document reflect the importance of self-protection with humanitarian policymakers and donors.[2]

When exploring the potential and limitations of communities' self-protection strategies, it is crucial to be mindful that the growing appreciation for self-protection must never undermine the primary responsibility that the state has for protection. Existing international law, conventions and norms constitute indispensable legal cornerstones for the protection of civilians. From a more pragmatic point of view, it is also important to note that while community-based and

individual self-protection strategies may be crucial for survival, they do not by themselves provide the degree of safety, security and dignity that people need and are entitled to. Thus, though vital, local agency must never be regarded as a substitute for the protection responsibilities of national authorities or – failing that – relevant international actors.

"We stay alert and informed so that when we hear of possible attacks from war veterans we flee from our homes with our children. But we still live with fear." (Opposition activist, Zimbabwe)

Local understandings of protection

The most important and inspiring findings in the self-protection research available to date are about what vulnerable people do to protect themselves and their communities, and how they do it. The main factors here are:

First, the range of assets available to them: This will be affected by the extent of sharing within and between families and communities, and by the level of community cohesion and the quality of local leadership.

Second, the key protection and assistance roles played by indigenous civil society networks: The activities of armed groups and national authorities are often perceived as having mixed impacts; in Sudan and Myanmar, for instance, armed opposition groups were seen as both potential sources of threats and as important agents of protection.

Third, access to material, financial and natural resources: Communities identified livelihoods and protection as intimately linked, that is, that the ability to protect oneself and one's community depends on the kind (and magnitude) of resources that communities and families can draw on when crisis hits.

Fourth, the relative importance of local culture, religion, tradition, values and social norms, and customary law: These often matter more than formal rights, particularly when dealing with threats from within the family and the wider community such as domestic violence and gender-based violence.

Often, local understandings of protection differ from – or extend significantly beyond – how protection is understood and applied by

international actors. When one respondent in Sudan stated that, "If we could not defend ourselves with weapons, we would not be able to survive", he identified a protection strategy which no principled rights-based humanitarian actor could support. But when a woman in the same area explained that, "We are not animals. We don't just need food and water to live. We like to make ourselves look beautiful and dance even when we are hungry", her strategy for surviving and preserving dignity through the use of perfumes, hair extensions and guitar strings might resonate with an aid worker with an appreciation for the psychosocial aspects of protection, including the importance of social connectedness and agency. Being able to maintain one's dignity and one's identity as part of a distinct community, without losing hope, was shown to have a major influence in determining whether people had the wherewithal to protect themselves, their family members and their wider community.

When viewed from a local perspective, protection threats – and associated self-protection and survival efforts – are highly contextual and change rapidly with time, season and conflict dynamics. Protection needs and strategies thus have to be continually analysed, and be addressed at national, community, family and individual levels. Gender- and age-disaggregated analysis, for example, shows significant variations in both what are perceived as the most important threats and what are deemed relevant and feasible self-protection strategies.

As much as self-protection is important, there are also numerous examples of what are often referred to as 'negative protection strategies': strategies which, while achieving short-term protection 'gains' for some in the family or community, come at a very high risk or human cost. Examples include accepting the risk of attack to fetch water for the family; allowing early child-marriage to reduce family expenditure or gain money; or sending a young family member to fight for an armed group to secure the family's protection. While outside actors should not support such strategies, understanding them and then working with communities,

families and individuals to develop less negative strategies remains crucial.

"Sometimes we knew when we went to get water that they [enemy soldiers] might be waiting to rape us. But we had no choice." (Woman, South Kordofan, Sudan)

Another frequent finding is that many locally led protection efforts do not fit into externally defined categories or 'sectors' (protection, livelihoods, shelter, nutrition, etc). Nor do they fit nicely into a particular phase of emergency preparedness, response, recovery or development activities. A community perspective will naturally defy such aid industry classifications, with the result that self-protection and other locally led responses are often not eligible for external funding.
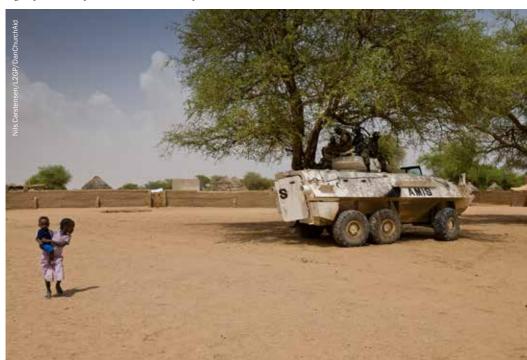
"First we lost our way of life, then we lost our dignity in the way that we were treated by international humanitarian agencies – it seemed like international agencies had their own agendas. They paid no attention to our own capacities to cope with the crisis." (Volunteer with a local organisation in Gaza)[3]

Different approaches, similar goals

Affected individuals and communities are faced with the imperative to act here and now in order to survive and protect themselves and their families, communities and assets. Guided primarily by experience, people make instant decisions in response to an urgent need to act.

International humanitarian protection agencies, however, are usually guided by a complex mix of humanitarian principles and international law; national, regional and international geo-political realities; availability of resources; restrictions dictated by logistics, access and staff security; and

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Darfur: A young girl with her brother watch the African Union peacekeepers (AMIS) in 2006. The peacekeepers withdrew to their base in late afternoon but most attacks on civilians occurred in the evening, night and early morning – the very times when peacekeepers and international aid workers were absent. During these times, the communities themselves were the only providers of protection.

institutional mandates, policies and donor restrictions. Their actions must be measured, monitored and justified – all time-consuming processes which may not keep pace with either the threats faced or the urgency with which communities need to act.

While it is important to acknowledge such differences in understanding and practice, it is equally important to note that, despite their different practical, contextual and conceptual backgrounds, these approaches are to a large extent trying to address the same protection threats and challenges. They should therefore be seen as complementary, rather than mutually exclusive.

However, despite the increased attention given to self-protection activities and their obvious complementarity to international efforts, L2GP and other research – such as a 2014 survey about community-based protection conducted with protection practitioners[4] – has found that truly locally led protection efforts are rarely acknowledged or supported by outside agencies. While the majority of respondents to the survey understood community-based protection as activities "originating from within and being led by communities to protect themselves", only a handful could refer to concrete cases which they knew of and/or had supported. Rather, the vast majority of respondents suggested examples of 'community-based protection' which actually originated from an external agency but which included informing or engaging communities at different stages of implementation.

Given the documented lack of real support to truly locally led protection efforts, it seems all the more pertinent to recall the hierarchy of factors affecting the safety of civilians:

"The first, and most critical, [factor] concerns the actions and motives of the parties to a conflict; the degree to which warring parties adhere to the rules of war is the fundamental factor in the level of risk facing civilians. The second concerns the steps that civilians take to protect themselves from the direct and indirect consequences of the actions of warring parties. The final factor concerns the interventions of third parties aimed at protecting civilians."[5]

A crucial first step to improving the synergy between local and external protection agency is for outside actors to acknowledge people at risk as independent actors with significant capacity. However, for any true progress to take place, outside actors must go further and place local understanding of protection threats and local strategies at the very centre of their own activities by giving affected communities and individuals actual control and decision-making power over programmes and projects. If based on humanitarian principles and done with sufficient caution, sensitivity and mentoring, such a move would not only strengthen local agency but would also inform and improve external agency.

This is a demanding process and some external protection actors may be better suited and more able to take forward a locally led protection approach than others. Still, even small steps in this direction will help to overcome the current gap in both understanding and action between local agency and most outside agencies.

"The mountains protected us. We ate wild food and treated ourselves with traditional medicines. We depended on our communities, collaboration and unity to help each other to survive and not give up." (Man, South Kordofan, Sudan)

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1. This article partly builds on the chapter 'Community self-protection' co-authored with Aditi Gorur for (2016) *Protection of Civilians*, OUP. http://bit.ly/OUP-Protection-of-Civilians-2016 The article also draws on published and unpublished research produced for L2GP. Where not otherwise indicated, quotations come from L2GP studies. Thanks to James Thomson, Kerren Hedlund and Sofie Grundin for their contributions.

2. See resources on p62.

3. See Berry K and Reddy S (2010) 'Safety with dignity: integrating community-based protection into humanitarian programming, HPN/ODI Network Paper No 68, p5. http://bit.ly/ODI-Berry-Reddy-Paper68

4. (2014) *Community-Based Protection: Survey Findings and Analysis*, prepared for UNHCR's 2014 Annual Consultations www.unhcr.org/en-us/574308244

5. Pantuliano S and Svoboda E 'Humanitarian Protection – Moving beyond the Tried and Tested' in Willmot H, Mamiya R, Sheeran S and Weller M (Eds) (2016) *Protection of Civilians*, Oxford University Press. http://bit.ly/OUP-Protection-of-Civilians-2016