Rethinking support for communities' self-protection strategies: a case study from Uganda

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Local communities will continue to find ways to address the risks that confront them with or without humanitarian support but the international community may be able to enhance these solutions.

In every crisis people find creative ways to protect themselves. Examples include digging trenches in market places in Sudan for protection from aerial bombings; establishing underground schools and medical clinics in Afghanistan and Syria to continue lifesaving services; using radio in the Central African Republic to convey critical messages for those at risk; and negotiating directly with armed groups in Colombia to prevent the use of children in armed conflict. While humanitarian actors recognise the importance of community-based protection or self-protection, they struggle to tap into these solutions. Too often, their programmes neglect to identify and build on existing protective strategies, and may consequently undermine what is keeping people alive and safe.

The component parts of addressing risk include reducing the threat, reducing vulnerability and increasing capacity. Too often, humanitarian action tends to emphasise addressing vulnerability and building capacity while neglecting to address the threat component of risk.

In Colombia, for example, while humanitarians invest in education programmes to reduce the vulnerability of children who might turn to armed groups, members of the community establish networks or engage in dialogue with armed groups to reduce the threat. While both efforts are necessary, the balance of effort is often skewed, with communities taking on a significant role in finding solutions to some of the most severe and pervasive risks.

While humanitarian programmes do provide life-saving support and services like shelter, food and medical treatment, programming is not often focused on preventing or reducing exposure to the most severe risks people experience in a crisis, like abduction, sexual violence and indiscriminate attacks.

For several years, a number of NGOs have sought to strengthen humanitarian action to reduce the risk that people experience in a crisis. One initiative, the InterAction-led Results-Based Protection Program, seeks to promote a fundamental shift in how humanitarian interventions to enhance protection are assessed and designed and how theories of change are developed, implemented and monitored. The aim is to change how humanitarian action prevents and responds to violence, coercion and deliberate deprivation that people experience in crises. Current practice can often be rigid and too generalised, and can prioritise checklists over problem-solving techniques to understand and respond to protection problems. The Results-Based Protection Program emphasises problem-solving methods that are participatory, analytical, reflective, adaptive and iterative. Central to this approach is the need to identify what people are already doing for themselves and to establish a conversation that can illuminate what is needed to support these solutions.

Solutions that work are often organically driven and grow from those closest to the problem. Problem-solving by humanitarian actors therefore needs to shift the starting point of action back to the people themselves. External actors need to establish relevant methods for communicating with affected people; this includes understanding who the 'gatekeepers' of information are and how they may support or become barriers to the reduction of risk. They also need to ensure the meaningful participation of affected populations at the earliest stages of a response, as well as throughout the response. This helps humanitarian actors ensure that communities' information needs are met, thereby enhancing their capacity to act and to reduce their exposure to risks. Information needs to be relevant, accurate,

from a trusted source, and accessible to different groups within the affected population. Information can promote confidence by enabling populations to assess their own threat environments and it can empower populations to design community-led solutions through collaboration, negotiation and practical solutions.

If humanitarian actors start with the experience of the affected population to identify specific threats, who is vulnerable to these threats, and why, it is then possible to disaggregate risk patterns beyond sex and age to include gender, ethnicity, time, location, political affiliation, religion, disability, economic status and other factors which have implications for exposure to threats. Humanitarian actors need to identify what capacities people can bring to bear to reduce the threat and/or their vulnerability to a threat, and recognise the importance of establishing relationships and partnerships – including with affected populations – for collaborative problem-solving across different disciplines to reduce risk. Solving protection problems demands a conscious approach to mobilising relevant actors to cultivate complementarity between their roles.

A case-study from northern Uganda[1]

During the height of the crisis in northern Uganda in 2003, many young girls were abducted into the LRA and made to be wives of military commanders. Where this resulted in babies being born, some of the girls found ways to ensure the survival of their babies by secretly dropping them off near churches and convents. As in most crises, it was the people most severely affected that came up with solutions – but there were ways in which their solutions could be enhanced. This case study illustrates one example of how a problem-solving approach can enhance community solutions.

- **The problem:** Children in captivity, trying to escape from the LRA.

- **The community-based protection solution:** Children held in captivity used their own ways to secretly communicate with other children in order to inform each

other of safe places: areas where they could escape, and locations (near churches and convents) where they could drop off their babies so that they would stay alive.

- **The enhanced solution:** Engaging formerly abducted children in the design and use of communication technology to send messages to their friends and others still in captivity as a way to assist with their escape.

The process of starting a dialogue with the affected population – in this case, children – took an enormous effort to build trust and acceptance. The purpose was to ask questions and, by listening without judgement or preconceived ideas, to understand what helped children escape and what created more risks. Through focus groups, one-to-

one interviews (by peers) and workshop-like activities, the children shared their stories and it emerged that while in captivity children were usually able to access radios and listen to messages coming out of local radio stations. Although many of the messages focused on 'asking children to return' and not to fear retribution, some of the information they heard was about services and rehabilitation centres; the children said that knowing about these support services helped to motivate them to continue to find ways to escape and to not give up hope or to fear that their communities would reject them if they did return.

Through this dialogue the children pointed out that while the radio programmes were informative they did not communicate (safely) where or how children could escape.

Sister Angélique Namaika (UNHCR Nansen Refugee Award laureate) accompanies an internally displaced rape survivor and her young son for a prenatal checkup. The young Congolese woman was abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army, was raped and became pregnant, before being freed from captivity by the Ugandan army. When she first returned, her family turned her away and she was forced to live on the streets, attempting to feed herself and her infant child by selling charcoal. Sister Angélique took her in, taught her income-generating skills, and helped her to care for her malnourished son. Two years later, the young woman is now married, is able to support herself, and is pregnant with her second baby.

Key relationships, safe locations, useful skills that children could apply such as methods of persuasion, and forthcoming events that could be used as opportunities for escape… all these could be crafted into relevant and informative messages if done carefully.

Following the dialogue, the children started organising a radio talk show particularly aimed at supporting children who had already returned. The aim was to provide psychosocial support and share experiences that formerly abducted children could relate to and learn from to strengthen their reintegration. There were already radio programmes organised by child rights clubs that aired talks on children's rights; this new effort was to expand on these initiatives and to engage formerly abducted children as 'guest' speakers.

To do this required a careful analysis of the risk that these formerly abducted children could face. Would their voices be recognised – which could lead to further harm or re-abduction? If children in captivity heard a particular child speaking, would they trust the source – and, conversely, if they did not recognise the voice, would they dismiss the message? If the voice was recognised by the community members, would that expose them to stigmatisation? Analysing these risks with the children allowed each child to make an informed decision about whether or not they would participate in this form of communication.

When the child rights radio programmes aired, the children were able to share their experiences and provide critical messages for children who had already escaped. In doing so, however, they knew children in captivity were likely to be listening to these radio shows and so they crafted messages that a child in captivity could pick up on and relate to, identifying skills they could use and sharing information about locations that were deemed safe places for escape and where support could be easily accessed.

Using the lessons

While the effects of this initiative were never assessed to determine whether or not the messages contributed to the escape or

release of children from the LRA, there are things of value that can be learnt from a problem-solving approach to protection that supported and built on existing community-based protection mechanisms.

As part of the analysis and understanding of the contextual patterns of risk, dialogue with survivors of a particular risk (child abduction) enabled their experiences to inform the response in order to address these particular patterns of risks. Furthermore, listening to survivors' stories and coping mechanisms enabled humanitarians to better understand how to strengthen coping mechanisms to minimise risk and how to best communicate information, and allowed for strong ownership – by survivors – of the design of the initiative.

Engaging locally owned media sources that were used by the community and the children in the LRA (and building on already existing communication channels accepted by the community) was important not only in delivering the messages but to enhance the possibility of continuity. And analysing the protection risks and ethical considerations with the affected population was critical to enhancing the likelihood that the initiative would promote protection and be sustainable.

Community-based protection is not new. People will continue to find solutions with or without humanitarian support but the international community can enhance these solutions. By adopting methods that promote listening, engaging in meaningful ways and analysing the problem starting from the perspective of the affected population, we can recalibrate our thinking and redesign our approach to more effectively support a community's protection strategies.

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1. The example provided is based on an initiative led by several actors including Save the Children-Denmark/UK, Quaker Peace and Social Witness, World Vision and the author (who at the time was an independent researcher).