

Challenges of protection

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Local protection committees in North and South Kivu are tackling – with some success – a range of protection challenges.

Since June 2010, Mukungu¹ village in Kalehe, South Kivu, has welcomed 1,150 displaced households fleeing FDLR² attacks during military operations in the area. A battalion of the national army arrived recently; they have set up checkpoints demanding a fee, do not speak any local language and have moved in with local families unasked. Forced labour and arbitrary arrests are widespread. Meanwhile, locals cannot farm fields near the forest as FDLR soldiers rape women who try – and have killed men who accompany them. The local community takes in IDPs but they warn that resources are limited.

Life in many communities in eastern DRC seems a constant negotiation between different threats. Communities report looting, theft, rape, forced labour, murder, abductions, burning of houses and destruction of fields; even in areas where the state retains some control, communities are

vulnerable to illegal checkpoints, taxation, arrest and extortion. Perpetrators include the myriad of armed groups but also those who should protect: members of the national army (FARDC), police, local government and customary chiefs.³

Humanitarian response in this context faces many challenges. How do we address such a range of abuses? How do we prioritise when often the whole population is vulnerable? How do we avoid discrimination and stigma within communities? How do we avoid promoting dependency?

In trying to addressing these questions, Oxfam works with local protection committees in 33 communities across North and South Kivu. During annual protection assessments from 2007 to 2009, communities identified key barriers to their protection as a lack of information about national and international laws, difficulty in approaching military

and civilian authorities, and lack of knowledge about where to refer victims of abuse. Since then Oxfam has worked with local partners to:

- ensure the transparent election of local protection committees
- support communities to identify protection threats, analyse risks and implement activities to combat threats
- train community members and authorities on laws and human rights, and how to raise awareness of these locally
- improve relations between community members and authorities
- provide basic information about local referral services.

A recent review of progress suggests – tentatively – that, with flexible support and information to bolster local initiatives and local capacity, communities can find ways to address a range of issues. Results have been varied, with outcomes

in areas we did not foresee, such as women's empowerment and helping IDPs to integrate into host communities and advocate for better security in their return zones. We think this is because of the community drive behind the project. In one case, an entire community which had been displaced negotiated with local chiefs to ask for FARDC patrols in their area to discourage FDLR attacks. Another community has mediated land disputes between displaced people and locals, and negotiated return for IDPs accused of collaboration with the FDLR in their home villages. Women who, when displaced and separated from their husbands, have had to seek protection by another man

medical attention quickly. Several communities report men bringing women to health centres after rape.

Meanwhile, communities say that they have also significantly reduced the number of illegal checkpoints locally by raising awareness of the law. In one community, relatives are no longer arrested for the alleged crimes of others, and the committee has persuaded prison authorities to accommodate men and women separately. All communities report improved relationships with authorities, most markedly amongst women, 30% of whom now report reasonable relations with the FARDC, compared to 10% previously. On the other hand, there are problems

of sexual violence with food whilst they get medical treatment; walking 20km to talk about national laws in neighbouring villages; tenaciously challenging authorities over arbitrary arrests; visiting remote villages to find out more about the situation of IDPs there; insisting that the influence of the project should reach beyond population centres. They say the project gives them status in the community and that they, and others, can see the results. Women in particular say they are able to negotiate more effectively and persuade men to take up women's concerns.

We don't have all the answers. The mass of abuses facing communities in DRC is complex and debilitating. However, when communities are given the information and space to find solutions, they do. We think that this project, to date, has achieved successes in part because it does not target any particular group of supposed victims or specific abuses but enables communities to identify and respond to a whole range of issues affecting them. Men take up problems initially seen as women's problems because the issues are identified by the whole committee; host communities support IDPs, not because an NGO asks them to but because they have pinpointed the issues themselves. Protection programming in DRC is having some success by supporting local populations and authorities to create the space to come together to find their own solutions to the spectrum of protection abuses.

That said, we have far to go. It's a dark day when we arrive in Mukungu for a committee meeting and the committee is rebuilding the FARDC commander's house. Coupons – proof of having worked on the house – are handed out; woe betide you if you have no coupon when they check your house tomorrow...

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1. Not its real name.

2. Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda/ Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda

3. Oxfam and Partners Protection Assessment 2010 North & South Kivu
<http://tinyurl.com/OxfamDRC2010>



Children in Kalonge look at a sign about Congolese laws protecting people against unlawful arrest and imprisonment.

have been enabled to return to their husbands on return to their home community. In Mukungu at least three displaced women raped during FDLR attacks and abandoned by their husbands have found shelter with committee members.

Another outcome is that all communities anecdotally report that there are fewer cases of rape than last year. The very fact of it being made known that rape is illegal seemed to reduce its incidence. They also say that men no longer abandon their wives if they are raped and that they know they must seek

they cannot solve, such as looting and burning of houses by armed groups. But they can, and do, take some action to mitigate the problem, asking local authorities to talk to armed groups, asking the FARDC to patrol, and so on.

The motivation of volunteer committee members, a perennial challenge in community-based programmes, remains impressive. (As with most organisations adopting this model, we continue to face questions about whether we should pay volunteers incentives.) They continue supporting victims