

## Effective community-based protection programming: lessons from the Democratic Republic of Congo

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**Oxfam's work with local communities in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo has prompted the organisation to develop guidance for themselves and for others working in similar situations.**

The ways in which communities respond to risks vary widely, and their protection strategies can be positive or negative in the effects they have on people's lives. In eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), positive community protection strategies include women moving to fields in groups or changing the times of their movements. In a number of areas in South Kivu, women use coded signs to alert others to areas which are not considered safe and should be avoided, for example by drawing a cross on a tree trunk. In Irumu, in Orientale Province, where armed group incursions, violence and looting were common in 2011, traditional early warning systems included banging pots or using whistles when people became aware that bandits were near.

In many cases community members work with local authorities to find responses to protection threats.<sup>1</sup> In one South Kivu community, authorities banned the sale of alcohol before midday after women denounced the contribution of alcohol consumption to domestic violence and community conflicts. In another community, after cases of animal theft increased tension in the area, local authorities agreed to establish a commission (which included the local vet and a traditional leader) to ensure that documentation for livestock being sold in the local market and at abattoirs was checked. And in another, authorities supported the population in negotiating a reduction in fines demanded when community members failed to pay the 'security tax' imposed on the population by an armed group.

Other community protection strategies can create new threats, or have negative effects on some or all of the community. The absence of FARDC (Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo, the national army) in many locations has led communities to establish

local self-defence groups which conduct night patrols. The members of these groups, however, are often at risk of attack, and they in turn have also been implicated in abuses including arbitrary arrests and detention, exacting illegal fines and torturing detainees. Some leave their communities and form armed groups themselves, adding to a wider problem.

Individuals often pay a number of illegal taxes in order not to place themselves at further risk of abuse. This includes people who have been arrested having to pay for their own transport to the police station, and survivors of sexual violence being forced to pay to obtain a medical certificate.

In cases of sexual violence, a common response is the forced marriage of survivors to perpetrators. Although the predominant narrative in DRC is that of sexual violence perpetrated by armed groups or FARDC, survey data reveal that in most cases of sexual violence against women or girls, the perpetrator is known to the survivor. Although forced marriage is illegal, custom, lack of knowledge of the law and widespread impunity perpetuate this practice. Reasons cited by community members in South Kivu include parents fearing that after rape their daughter will have no marriage value, and poverty pushing families to accept a dowry from the perpetrator instead of starting a legal process (which has an uncertain outcome and can entail paying transport costs to court for both survivor and perpetrator).

### Pragmatism in the face of threats

Some strategies cannot be simply defined as 'positive' or 'negative'; they may be positive for one group within a community and negative for another. In some communities, men going to market risk being tortured and killed as

they pass through checkpoints; families have reported making a conscious choice that women would take produce to market instead of men, even though women in turn risk sexual abuse and assault, judging this a more acceptable risk. Some other communities have instigated formal dialogues with armed groups to find solutions to protection problems in the absence of FARDC; they might make agreements to supply these groups with food or money in order to stop abuses – but this does not fully address the threat as it often leads to accusations of complicity and abuse by FARDC.

Displacement is a common strategy in DRC in response to imminent threats or as a pre-emptive measure. But while displaced people may find new livelihood opportunities in the place they flee to or have greater access to services, displacement removes people from their social networks and from what they know, and may create further risks. Women and children are often separated from their husbands and other family members during displacement, whether as a deliberate strategy ('women and children first') or as a result of confusion during the process. To prevent this, some parents in Masisi, North Kivu, have begun to carry a long cord which they can tie their children to during displacement. Separation can increase exposure of women and children to sexual violence and theft, and men to being killed or accused of being a member of an armed group. During displacement, members of armed groups may also try to assimilate into the population, again exposing the latter to the risk of being accused of complicity.

These examples demonstrate that community protection strategies often reflect a pragmatic decision to find a 'least worst' solution to a protection issue where those responsible for protection are either absent, are unable to fully play their role or are perpetrators themselves. Organisations working in community-based protection should endeavour to a) mitigate the risks or discourage the use of negative protection strategies, b) reinforce existing positive strategies and c) support new positive mechanisms.

### Community Protection Committees and good practice

Since 2009 Oxfam's Community Protection Programme<sup>2</sup> has been establishing and supporting Community Protection Committees in DRC to identify, prevent and respond to risks within their environment. This includes: systematising existing positive self-protection strategies; local advocacy; raising awareness of human rights, the law and medical, legal and psychosocial services; and promoting participation by different citizen groups in decisions relating to protection. In this way, local civilian and military authorities become more receptive and responsive to protection issues and civilians' needs, while community members become better informed of and able to access appropriate referral services. Reviews and evaluations of this work (including, most recently, research involving 32 communities which had previously hosted a full programme cycle and which Oxfam had by then exited from) have enabled Oxfam to draw out guidance for good practice in community-based protection work.

Community-based protection models are not one-size-fits-all. Protection Committees work extremely well in DRC but may not be appropriate in contexts such as Syria, where committees are commonly associated with the state security apparatus and viewed with suspicion. Elements of good practice, however, can be transferred across contexts to ensure the quality of any community-based protection intervention:

Any action must be informed by **proper analysis of the risks** faced by a specific community. The analysis should explore local strategies and solutions used to mitigate risks, requiring a nuanced understanding of the context and the actors involved (both formal and informal). In some areas, for example, customary law may be a community reference point because implementation of the national law is not possible or is riskier than customary practices. In Haut Uele, remote communities rely on traditional mechanisms because the nearest magistrate's court is over three days' walk away, and the police are unable to provide staff with either food for the journey or arms to defend themselves or prisoners against

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Lord's Resistance Army attacks. In such cases, advocacy to encourage better service provision by the justice system must be undertaken before suggesting that a community follow due process in addressing crimes.

Furthermore, there should be ongoing training and support on risk analysis. Community members should be trained to identify the potential risks of any action which they take, so that they can decide when an action is too risky. In Mulenge, South Kivu, after conducting a Risk Analysis, the Protection Committee decided not to directly approach the armed group responsible for extorting money from passers-by. Instead they raised the issue with customary leaders, who went to meet the armed group in their place. The customary leaders agreed to give the group a field which they could use to cultivate crops, putting an end to the extortion.

It is important to **engage all stakeholders** in a community in analysing risks and developing responses. 'Community' protection strategies do not necessarily consider all groups within a community, and some groups may benefit from one strategy to the detriment of others. Ensuring participation may mean protection structures are made up of representatives of different groups, or may entail giving some groups a separate forum in which their concerns can be discussed openly and then included in wider actions. Oxfam's strategy in DRC includes separate women's fora in each community, which discuss protection issues which affect women specifically. These issues are then incorporated systematically in community protection plans. Oxfam is also currently considering how best to ensure that youth are able to participate effectively in the programme. Other groups may include ethnic minorities or displaced persons, depending on the context.

**Volunteerism** gives committee members substantial credibility in their work and should be the bedrock of community-based protection – but must be implemented realistically. Where an activity takes all day, some compensation should be given to participants; they should at a minimum be fed or, for example, given some transport money. Participants in Oxfam's recent research showed

high degrees of motivation and commitment due to the inherent value of the work they were carrying out; in contrast, in areas where people are paid monetary incentives for protection activities, the motivation to continue often dies along with the project funding.

Behaviour change and community empowerment take **time, human resources and funds**. Ideally, engagement in a community should be maintained for two to three years depending on the context, although lesser gains are achievable in a shorter time. Regular training, coaching and collaborative problem solving are essential. The time and the staffing needs, as well as the intensity of activities such as training and awareness raising, mean that the financial investment should not be underestimated.

Community-based protection should **complement other activities** aiming to reduce vulnerabilities and exposure to risk. Activities could include improving physical access to services and resources, and should also include training for authorities on their roles and responsibilities in protection. Most significantly, they should include advocacy around protection risks and gaps in services or barriers to them which have been identified by the community.

Community protection interventions should **not replace community actions or remove responsibility from authorities**. Levels of engagement of external actors should reduce over the lifetime of a project as the capacity of communities and authorities is built. The implementing organisation should not be, and should not be perceived to be, a substitute for those with a responsibility for protection, and community structures should not be seen as a substitute for or a parallel system to authorities.

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1. Threats here are defined as violence or the threat of violence, coercion and deliberate deprivation.
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