'And then they left': Challenges to child protection systems strengthening in South Sudan

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International child protection work has undergone a paradigm shift, moving from addressing issues such as trafficked children, street children and child labour separately to a more integrated systems approach. As a young nation still marked by conflict, South Sudan offers insight into how the interplay between a fragile national child protection system in a conflict-affected country and the efforts of international humanitarian actors can promote or undermine systems strengthening. From June to August 2012, 52 semi-structured key informant interviews with international-, national- and community-level actors were completed. Eight community-level focus group discussions were also conducted separately with men, women, boys and girls. Interview guides were designed to explore participant perceptions of child protection system functioning. Data were analysed using a grounded theory approach. Four dimensions emerged as crucial pillars for child protection systems strengthening: coordination, capacity, funding and community inclusion. These factors were found to have taken root in unequal measure. Respondents at all systemic levels indicated that child protection systems strengthening efforts operated largely in isolation from the quotidian realities of children, families and communities. The humanitarian apparatus — marked by short-term funding and accountability to the international community — will require significant reform to situate humanitarian efforts in a systems strengthening framework. If the objective is to strengthen national child protection systems, emergency response activities must better align with household- and community-level efforts to protect children. © 2016 John Wiley & Sons Ltd and National Children's Bureau

Keywords: accountability, capacity, child protection systems, community inclusion, coordination, fragile states, humanitarian funding, South Sudan, systems strengthening.

> [Humanitarian agencies] came here [during the period of LRA abductions]. They went around to find a volunteer health worker, and they volunteered, and then they left.
>
> Woman living at community level in Western Equatoria

> [Our mission] is a short duration with a burst of energy, and then we leave.
>
> Woman working with UN agency in Central Equatoria

Background

The past decade has witnessed a paradigm shift in international child protection. Previously, humanitarian and development workers had addressed child protection concerns thematically, focusing on issues such as child trafficking, street children or child labour separately. Recognising the limitations of issue-based programming, international agencies have increasingly sought to promote a 'systems strengthening approach' that focuses on the complex, cross-cutting challenges that heighten children's vulnerability to exploitation, abuse, violence and neglect (Davis and others, 2012; Save the Children, 2010; UNICEF, 2008; Wulczyn and

others, 2010). In humanitarian policy documents, systems strengthening approaches focus on developing effective mechanisms and processes for prevention and response service delivery by integrating previously fragmented programming and engaging diverse actors at multiple levels (Barnett and Wedge, 2010; Save the Children, 2010; Wulczyn and others, 2010).

Despite growing support for a systems framework, how to conceptualise and implement this approach in practice, especially in states that are fragile or conflict-affected, remains an area of ongoing discussion and learning. Existing literature on child protection systems overwhelmingly examines North American and European contexts (Cooper and others, 1996; Freymond and Cameron, 2006; Gilbert and others, 2011; Stafford and others, 2012). These analyses demonstrate that countries' and regions' varied conceptualisations of child protection translate into differentiated modes of service provision for children and families. An emergent body of literature is focusing on child protection systems in low- and middle-income countries (Krueger and others, 2014; Wessells, 2015). Analysts note that child protection systems, be they in high-, low- or middle-income countries, 'mirror the cultural and institutional contexts in which they have evolved' (Freymond and Cameron, 2006, 4). Some researchers note that post-colonial contexts represent contested arenas in which community caring systems, which pre-date colonialism and which centralise notions of community harmony and family well-being, have been — and continue to be — disrupted by statutory welfare policies rooted in more individualistic conceptions of 'child protection' (Freymond and Cameron, 2006, 209; Love, 2006).

Within this discussion about the nature and scope of child protection systems, an emerging line of inquiry examines how efforts to strengthen national child protection systems have adhered in humanitarian settings (Barnett and Wedge, 2010; Eynon and Lilley, 2010). Humanitarian responses create arenas in which representatives of the international community — represented primarily by United Nations (UN) agencies and international organisations (IOs) — have significant interaction with national governments and emergency-affected populations. They represent, therefore, an opportunity to probe the extent to which there is shared understanding and appreciation of what 'systems strengthening' means to various actors and how such efforts should be undertaken. Research on children's rights, for example, suggests that children's rights represent contested conceptual territory in which international norms do not consistently coincide with local realities and perceptions (Una Children's Rights Learning Group, 2011; Wessells, 2015). Children's rights, which are intrinsically individuated in their iterations in international human rights documents, can seem anachronistic in systems of community care in places with more collectivist orientations. Put another way, where community norms promote 'ensembled individualism', a worldview in which the line between self and others is not central to concepts of identity, the notion of individuated children's rights contrasts with caring systems that embed children's welfare in the context of families, clans and community systems (Love, 2006). If concepts of children's rights are contested, more so are the understandings of the national and international systems required to ensure such rights; one group of researchers described attempts to suggest a common understanding of child protection systems as 'problematic' (Krueger and others, 2014, 147).

This research explored how systems strengthening approaches promoted by humanitarian agencies were perceived to have transpired in South Sudan during the country's transition to independence.[1] It examined how international humanitarian actors conceptualised and implemented this approach and to what extent actors at multiple levels perceived 'systems strengthening' to have been relevant, appropriate and successful. In addition to analysing the perceptions of representatives of the international community and the Government of South Sudan (GoSS), the research also sought to determine whether community members — mothers, fathers, adolescent boys and girls, and community leaders — perceived changes in the child protection services and supports available to them as a result of this work.

Fragile, conflict-affected states like South Sudan pose significant challenges for those working to enhance national child protection systems, including fragmented structures, the need for rapid intervention, constantly shifting leadership and priorities, and complex humanitarian ecologies and funding structures (Barnett and Wedge, 2010; Wulczyn and others, 2010). Studying systems strengthening efforts in such settings, however, also presents the opportunity to better understand the interaction between emergency responses and longer-term efforts and to identify potential ways to enhance both in the future.

South Sudan

Between 1899 and 1956, present-day South Sudan was a British colony administered jointly with what is now Sudan; in 1946, the British reversed its previous 'Southern Policy' and administered Sudan as a single entity, a strategy that some researchers have argued laid the groundwork for northern dominance in the post-colonial era and subsequent conflicts between Sudan and South Sudan (Hallinan, 2014).

In 2005, the Government of the Republic of the Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, ending a 22-year civil war between the north and south (Government of the Republic of the Sudan, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Sudan People's Liberation Army, 2005). After six years of autonomy, South Sudan became the world's youngest nation in July 2011, following a public referendum for secession. Despite hope that the separation would result in peace, ongoing border clashes and internal violence — aerial bombing and movements of the Lord's Resistance Army — caused persistent instability and displacement (OCHA, 2013).

Together, armed conflict, seasonal flooding, influxes of refugees and returnees as well as the challenges of establishing a new government left South Sudan with a crippled social welfare system and minimal infrastructure (OCHA, 2013). Nevertheless, policy-makers and the humanitarian community continued to pursue child-focused policy frameworks. Structural initiatives included the following: the passage of the Child Act (2008), regarded as the backbone of South Sudan's child protection system; the creation of child protection units within the SPLA; the formation of a child lobby group in parliament; and the establishment of the Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare (MoGCSW) in 2011.[2] Additionally, the GoSS undertook disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration projects, established state- and national-level child protection working groups, trained and deployed social workers, and installed gender desks in police stations.

Factors including ongoing armed conflict, inaccessibility due to rains, and food and fuel shortages limited the efficacy of such efforts (UNICEF, 2012). Economic forces also impeded child protection advances. For example, given that 98 per cent of South Sudan's total revenue is derived from oil, austerity measures implemented in 2012 due to halted production resulted in a 98 per cent national budget deficit (Southern Sudan Centre for Census, Statistics and Evaluation, 2011). Researchers have noted that grave child protection concerns — including conscription into armed forces and groups, abuse and severe deprivation — remain salient (Ryan, 2012; UNICEF, 2012).

Methods

The use of a variety of qualitative methods enabled multiple perspectives to be captured and served to triangulate the data. Data were collected in three stages: (i) a literature review of published and 'grey' literature; (ii) a workshop to introduce the study to child protection actors in the national 'child protection working group' and to map the system from their perspective; and (iii) semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). Findings from the national workshop informed the structure and content of the interview and group

discussion guides. A technical advisory board comprising representatives of leading humanitarian agencies provided feedback on research questions and tools.

Key informant interviews and FGDs were conducted across South Sudan from June to August 2012 with national-, state- and community-level actors. Beyond national-level data collection in Juba, data collection sites for state and community levels were selected based on three criteria: (i) a diversity of agencies working in the area; (ii) a lack of acute emergencies occurring within the area and (iii) accessibility. Unity State, Western Equatoria and Jonglei State were selected.

Interviewees were identified by purposive sampling targeting their expertise working with the child protection system or directly with children, including snowball sampling following the national workshop. At national and state levels, respondents included UN representatives, representatives of IOs, government and civil society representatives. At community level, key respondents included community-based organisation (CBO) workers providing child protection services and traditional leaders. Fifty-two key informant interviews were completed, 22 in the capital and 30 at state and community levels in the three additional states.

Convenience sampling was employed to identify FGD participants at community level in two specific sites in Unity State and Western Equatoria. Separate FGDs were conducted for men and women as well as boys and girls between the ages of 12 and 17. Groups consisted of 7–10 participants and lasted 1–2 hours. FGD participants completed two exercises to generate data about emergency response efforts and community protection strategies: a time-series discussion of emergency preparation and response around a specific event in their community; and a vignette exercise in which participants discussed where a child could go for help before, during and after the event.

Interviewees and FGD participants provided verbal consent to participate in the study. Interviews and FGDs were recorded and transcribed. Translators, required for most interviews and all FGDs, were staff of an IO trained on interview techniques and the objectives of the research. The research is covered by Columbia University's IRB exemption protocol AAAB-7134.

Grounded theory was utilised to analyse the transcripts through independent coding of the data set by two researchers (Corbin and Strauss, 2014). Four dimensions of child protection system functioning were identified, and the codes were applied to the entire data set in Atlas.ti: (i) coordination; (ii) capacity; (iii) funding and (iv) community inclusion. The extent to which these dimensions was considered to have enhanced the child protection system varied by groups of respondents.

Study limitations

The data may suffer from various biases. Interviewees from IOs may have highlighted programme successes and diminished failures because the research team was working in collaboration with two specific IOs to coordinate research logistics. Insecurity and travel restrictions due to the rainy season limited both site selection for the FGDs and the time that the research team could spend with community members. At times in more remote communities, staff of local organisations provided translation services, creating additional potential biases during translation and transcription.

Findings

Dimension 1: coordination

Respondents at the national and state levels cited improved coordination among child protection actors as an example of how the emergency response in South Sudan enhanced the

national child protection system. The actors operating in the child protection arena included government bodies, UN agencies, IOs, national organisations and CBOs. Coordination between these entities was perceived to be necessary for service delivery because '[t]he Ministry of Gender can only cover the state level through partnerships', as a GoSS representative explained. Consequently, cluster coordination mechanisms at the national and state levels were perceived to have facilitated close collaboration between the GoSS, the UN and IOs. Respondents reported that improved coordination in advocacy and accountability resulted in three key achievements for child protection policy reform: (i) passage of the Child Act (2008); (ii) the establishment of child protection structures and Ministries; and (iii) implementation of the SPLA Action Plan. That some coordination efforts to advance such child-focused policy items were able to take root in a country affected by armed conflict, and thus substantially marked by societal tendencies towards segmentation and divisiveness, is noteworthy.

Despite these advances, coordination was an area in which many respondents perceived more challenges than successes. A number of respondents reported that coordination across government levels was hindered by a decentralised system without clear communication channels:

> It's difficult because ... the communities outside of Juba ... have their own system of government. They have their own tribal government, and they don't always talk to ... the national government.... There is a huge disparity between [the state governments and the national level government], ... and information doesn't flow down.
>
> (IO)

> There is no functioning communication from the national to the state and lower levels.
>
> (UN)

> Coordination, I don't think there is really a link because there are so many different levels and agencies to report to, and it's unclear who you are reporting to and if that information is shared.
>
> (CBO)

UN agencies and IOs reportedly played a dominant and unsustainable role. A UN representative stated, 'The child protection cluster is supposed to be chaired by the Ministry. I don't recall the last time that I saw them at one of those meetings. We want [government] in the driving seat, but you need the job to get done'. An IO representative likewise noted that 'the GBV [gender-based violence] sub-cluster ... is non-existent, ... and coordination is chaotic. Working with Ministries is super-challenging; they never show because it's not considered a part of their job'. Conversely, a government representative noted that she had been invited to a coordination meeting that she was expected to 'chair' with only one day's notice.

The data revealed that information sharing about programming activities occurred largely between UN or IO agencies and CBOs. One CBO representative noted that the organisation reported to the GoSS as a courtesy: 'What we do is we act directly with [a UN agency], [but] we can't forget the government; if we are sending any report to any agency, we copy them [the government] so they know what is going on'.

Several IO representatives reported that coordination and information sharing were essential to avoid duplication of services and to increase service coverage, therefore optimising the impact of combined resources. Indeed, most respondents considered the lack of duplication of services in South Sudan as a benefit of the coordination prompted by the emergency response. Other respondents — primarily from the UN and IOs — noted the development of 'non-traditional' partnerships with churches or other community-based actors in child protection efforts to ensure service provision in insecure locations.

Additionally, respondents from IOs and UN agencies claimed that the lack of established civil society in South Sudan was a significant barrier to child protection systems development and a crucial missing component for effective coordination. 'The whole civil society hasn't really developed yet.... In other countries you have more civil society, bigger actors, and more funding and capabilities ... it's easier to link up with them while here ... everyone is starting from zero', one IO representative described. Another noted,

> In countries where civil society is very strong and national NGOs are very strong, the dynamic is much different. The role that the international community plays is much smaller — which it should be — and it is much more guided by the government and civil society actors themselves, which is protective [against] neo-colonialism.... It's going to be a long time before South Sudan has enough resources and those systems are strong enough to affect the daily lives of people in the community.
>
> (IO)

Several data sources, however, challenge the assertion that civil society is undeveloped and argue for a broadening of the notion of civil society to include community-initiated mechanisms (Ajawin and Waal, 2002). South Sudanese chiefs, community leaders and CBO representatives reported that humanitarian response efforts had largely sidestepped them, missing an opportunity for enhanced child protection work at the community frontlines.

> When it comes time to give funding, [donors] don't mind about the CBOs; they only consider international NGOs.
>
> (CBO representative)

> I have seen during the war and this time nothing has changed; the rule [of law] I was using before is the same rule I am using up till now.
>
> (Traditional chief)

Dimension 2: capacity

IO and UN representatives were nearly unanimous in their claims that limits on 'capacity' were a key issue hindering an effective humanitarian response, assertions that were echoed by government officials but rarely by community-level actors. Unpacking the term 'capacity' revealed challenges perceived to be rooted primarily in human resource concerns.

'Capacity' issues often referred specifically to the relatively small numbers of trained personnel within government and civil society organisations perceived to be able to both deliver services and to oversee child protection service delivery. One UN representative noted, 'Capacity, if you look at the MoGCSW, in the directorate for children, there are three people. That's it! This is very limiting. [They need] to have people around that are linked to the states'. Respondents reported that the GoSS had pledged to increase human resource capacity for child protection but that such efforts appeared to be thwarted by austerity measures.

At state and county levels, GoSS social workers were described to play a coordinating role rather than a service delivery one. 'The government can't provide services right on the ground', explained one GoSS representative, 'but we coordinate. In the future, the Ministry will be more service-oriented'. One UN representative indicated that the absence of IOs and CBOs in some states had led the agency to work directly through GoSS social workers, a system that was considered preferable for reasons of sustainability. IOs and CBOs spoke highly of the professionalism and responsiveness of GoSS social workers. One CBO worker who referred complex cases to MoGCSW social workers at the state level confirmed that 'we have never had an instance where the MoGCSW can't take on a case. They usually respond, whoever's there'. In some cases, GoSS social workers served not only at the state level but also county level; this trend was identified as promising. The establishment of special police units

for women and children was highlighted as a positive development for child protection although many actors noted that these units were not yet fully functional.

Four other capacity issues emerged. First, there was reportedly high turnover in GoSS personnel. 'Today we have a lot invested [in capacity-building], but tomorrow it is taken away. Maybe [government employees are] out of the system completely, or maybe [they go] to a different ministry', said one UN representative. Second, outside of the specific 'standard operating procedures' for cases of child sexual abuse, there was a lack of clarity about various actors' mandates and roles within the system. As one IO representative asserted, 'The government needs to be proactive about informing actors about what they do and how they should be involved [in the national child protection system]'. Third, the lack of consistency in the functioning of government agencies across states was noted. One national-level GoSS representative said that 'some of [the state-level agencies] are very good, and some of them are not very strong'. Fourth, respondents often described a complex accountability system that overstretched service providers' capacity. 'There are too many systems, too many reporting structures. ... Some . . . organisations are really stretched', said one UN representative. Building upon these points, one IO representative explained:

> People were trained, and capacity was there, and once the emergency was over, the capacity disappeared. This is an example of how the system is not maintained and the localised capacity isn't transferable between states because of the ethnic, tribal divides. People also move, especially if they become educated. All of this challenges capacity and support.

The key 'capacity-building' response from the international humanitarian community was training, described as necessary for systems strengthening. The descriptions of training that emerged in respondents' interviews depicted these initiatives as issue-based, short-term training modules. Examples of trainings included the following: training on children's rights and child protection, case management, psychosocial support, child-friendly spaces, juvenile justice, disabilities, monitoring and evaluation and gender-based violence. The conceptual frameworks for these training modules were often rooted in or linked to notions of the impact of armed conflict on children; for example, trainings on child-friendly spaces focused on the establishment of such spaces in areas affected by conflict, and the key concepts presented in gender-based violence trainings were often embedded in the country's history of armed violence, including rape by armed actors.

Study respondents indicated that training and capacity-building initiatives lacked a coordinated, overarching framework aligned with the national system. One IO respondent indicated that child protection actors had been 'trained and retrained by different [organisations]'. A UN representative indicated that international humanitarian actors were 'building capacity in one area, then an emergency happens and [they] turn to the emergency'. The term most frequently invoked to describe training schemes was 'unsustainable'.

Finally, it is notable that national-level actors almost never spoke about community-level capacities, skills or functions in a favourable way. Rather, they described community-level actors as failing to understand international child protection standards. National-level actors spoke frequently about harmful traditional practices — especially early marriage — as evidence of the need for 'sensitisation' and 'awareness-raising' about the Child Act, children's rights and child protection. At the same time, some IO and UN agencies noted that protective initiatives started at community level. 'In terms of direct protection, their [community members] first call is to themselves', said one IO representative, adding, 'They don't have anyone else to call'. However, this study revealed that national-level actors had an extremely limited understanding of community-level protective capacities, such as natural helpers supporting vulnerable children and families. Functions played by community leaders, women's leaders

and other community members are yet to be explored by the international humanitarian system, a finding corroborated by other recent research (South and others, 2012).

For their part, actors at community level described their engagement with national-level actors as one that waxed and waned with humanitarian funding. CBOs described emergency-related employment as short-term and donor-driven. 'Local staff are hired on these contracts', said one CBO representative, 'and once the contract ends because the emergency is over, they will look for other things to do, and they will not sustain the services or activities'.

Dimension 3: adequate funding

Limited national funding was unanimously reported as one of the biggest barriers to child protection systems development. Moreover, even the meagre resources available for child protection were overwhelmingly directed toward conflict-related expenses rather than longer-term systems strengthening initiatives. In general, the GoSS was described to have limited financial capacity: 'The resources are so thin in the government that I think [child protection is] one of the first things to get chopped', explained one national-level GoSS representative. The national child protection system was perceived to be weakened by the demands of responding to conflict-related events, a response that one state-level GoSS representative said 'changes the state level [budgetary allocations], then it also affects the national level. The state level [had less resources] because most of the resources we used [were directed] ... to respond to the emergency and not any other activities'. One CBO representative lamented, 'How is it that a government doesn't put anything aside for child protection? It is not fair. If it puts a good amount for the soldiers and puts something for the civil servants and doesn't put anything for child protection, what is the future of the country?'

Indeed, the MoGCSW received just 2 per cent of the government's FY2013 budget with the rest largely reserved for security purposes (Ministry of Finance, Commerce, Investment & Planning, 2013). The MoGCSW reported using most of its annual child protection budget — a fraction of the 2 per cent — for child protection services in emergency response, supplementing with UN and IO funds. One analysis noted that GoSS funding for basic social services for children during the period just following this study decreased in direct proportion to increases in military spending at points when the conflict spiked (Muchabaiwa and others, 2016). Moreover, a Ministry of Finance representative noted that any Ministry was likely to use at least 65 per cent of its budget for salary costs, leaving just one third of the budget for services. Austerity measures and security issues undermined the transition to an independent, government-run system. As one GoSS representative explained, '[We are] not independent. Politically we are independent, but socially we are not, economically we are not. Without economic power, we can't do anything without support'. Giving one example of the extreme imbalance between international and national funding, budget analysts recently noted that the funding committed to humanitarian agencies in South Sudan in 2015 alone would fund the MoGCSW for 66 years of operations at its 2012–2013 budget levels (Muchabaiwa and others, 2016).

Data suggested that existing international funding strategies focused mainly on emergency response rather than systems strengthening. Respondents noted that most funding from the international community rarely surpassed a one-year timeframe. UN representatives indicated that around 80 per cent of available child protection funding was through donor mechanisms related to the conflict, making humanitarian funding by far the largest component of child protection funding disbursed. One UN representative noted that while 'child protection in emergencies [could be] an entry point for covering other [child protection issues]', many key areas — such as psychosocial support — were ignored because 'funding is always for the more sexy areas'.

The UN was identified as the primary donor for child protection in South Sudan, causing concern about the sustainability of child protection systems development efforts:

> We just don't know how these ministries will function without support from [the UN]. The lion's share of their funding and technical support [are] from [the UN]. Without them there, would [the GoSS] fill in that gap on their own, or would it just fall and fall away?
>
> (IO)

> Child protection is not prioritised because children are the property of the mother and the father.
>
> (GoSS)

> If [the UN] pulled out, [child protection] would not remain a priority as child protection issues are a new concept for national actors. The UN is a major donor for child protection; without them, agencies, including INGOs, would not be able to sustain these efforts.
>
> (IO)

Donors expected IOs to partner with ministries, but few donors required IOs to establish transition strategies for increased government oversight.

The funding landscape for IOs was limited in vision and capacity; many IOs reported providing services outside of their mandates, spreading themselves thin. Moreover, many noted that CBOs could only access funding through IOs, limiting long-term sustainability and creating additional administrative burden:

> [The donor] at times encourages a pass-through mechanism in which the INGO would get the funding and those funds would use the funds to build local capacities ... this can be a bit helpful and at times this can be a bit patronising. Each additional layer that [the funding] passes through though is another administrative cost that is stripped away, and by the time it reaches the ground it's much less. Direct programming money on the ground is significantly reduced in the number of pass-throughs that have happened.
>
> (IO)

Dimension 4: community inclusion

Many of the participants recognised the capacity of local communities to identify and respond to child protection risks — as well as the need to include community practices, beliefs and processes in child protection programming — as integral to sustainable national child protections systems. However, the data revealed a significant disjuncture between the discourse of working with communities and on-the-ground efforts to do so, a finding consistent with other recent research on community-driven protection efforts in South Sudan (South and others, 2012). Importantly, the data analysis indicated that IOs were often unaware of — or at least did not speak of — basic protective measures that community members were taking to protect their children on a daily basis as well as when conflict-related incidents, such aerial bombings or abductions of children by armed groups, arose. Analysis of the research data revealed that IOs and community members perceived themselves to be operating in separate spheres of action.

Conceptually, representatives of humanitarian agencies believed in the importance of community-level structures and processes for supporting children and families. One UN representative explained that 'the community structure is there before [external actors] get there, and it's accepted by the community. The government structure changes ... and [can be] disrupted, but ... the community structure is there and is still most valued'. National-level respondents uniformly agreed, however, that efforts to understand and build upon these community structures were nascent. Others expressed scepticism that community-level efforts were actually happening: 'When you go in, you see very little by way of child protection systems at the community level', said one IO worker. IO representatives, however, frequently

noted that fragmented infrastructure in South Sudan, including for communication, impacted their inability to consult communities in a systematic way.

Representatives of IOs often claimed to be the 'only' agency working in a given geographic area. Many IO representatives perceived their role as 'gap fillers': as one said, 'The needs are so great and the playing field, in terms of service providers, is quite thin [with] respect to the needs and the geographic coverage. [IOs] have been asked to do more and fill ... in the gaps'. Many respondents spoke about the division of child protection work among agencies; responsibility for child protection service delivery was geographically divvied to avoid duplication. Nonetheless, international actors' discourses of acting alone served to highlight the extent to which these agencies were failing to take into account the endogenous practices and processes in the areas in which they worked.

For their part, community members described humanitarian efforts as short-term and prescriptive in nature. One woman in Western Equatoria described, 'They came here [during period of LRA abductions]. They went around to find a volunteer health worker, and they volunteered, and then they left'. A respondent from a community in Unity State echoed, 'Some NGOs intervene, and they don't come back again. They just take information, and then they go. They don't report. We may not see them'. Such extractive practice created some community mistrust or avoidance of international actors.

Tensions between community members and representatives of humanitarian agencies were not rooted simply in the short-term nature of humanitarian assistance. The data also revealed deep-seated differences in various constituencies' beliefs about what constituted 'child protection'. IO representatives often described community members as not 'understanding' child protection. One international actor highlighted that the Child Act 'just doesn't matter to [communities]'. Another representative of an international humanitarian agency explained:

> It is a bit difficult to identify the needs for child protection because the community may tell you the very basic needs — 'my child needs food, and my child needs to go to school'. The playground or the child-friendly space, they may not tell you about, so those are [designed] from experiences from other agencies and best practices and child protection manuals. Our child protection specialist works with those materials to apply them to emergencies.
>
> (IO)

Formal rhetoric from government and service-providing organisations included catchphrases — notably 'clients', 'case management', 'psychosocial support', 'child-friendly spaces', 'gender-based violence', 'family tracing and reunification' and 'child protection committees' — that were completely absent in the community members' FGDs. FGD respondents were likely to mention the need for more teachers and for expanded livelihoods options as primary child protection needs. One area in which community members disagreed with service-providing organisations was in the conceptualisation of 'children's rights'. While IOs touted children's rights awareness raising as a core child protection intervention, adults in communities expressed open displeasure with these sessions. 'Because of the LRA [attacks], organisations came in and said, 'This is children's rights', and now children no longer listen to parents', said one man at community level in Western Equatoria. In his estimation, the conflict opened the door for IOs to 'come in' to the community and to prescribe solutions for protecting children. A national-level GoSS representative essentially concurred: 'The international community is trying to mislead. They are trying to give unnecessary rights to children'.

Conclusion

Child protection efforts in South Sudan in the country's first year of existence as an independent nation revealed fundamental tensions between emergency processes designed to

respond to conflict and longer-term systems strengthening approaches. The humanitarian apparatus — marked by short-term funding, the importation of predetermined concepts of child protection and accountability to the international community over local communities — requires significant reform if humanitarian child protection efforts are to be situated in a systems strengthening framework. The data revealed that efforts to strengthen the country's child protection system through humanitarian efforts are dysfunctional; one first step in looking for solutions must be for actors at all levels to recognise the severity of the problem.

Currently, humanitarian interventions are designed and funded in such a way that international actors bear asymmetric power relative to their South Sudanese counterparts in the government and civil society. For a reorientation towards systems strengthening, new strategies must allow for endogenous concepts of child protection to emerge; ensuring that at least some funding is available for local and national organisations will also be critical. Future efforts should ensure that a variety of stakeholders' voices are included in the development of consensus around child protection priorities and strategies.

If they hope to sustainably strengthen national child protection systems, humanitarian programmes clearly must better integrate and align with household- and community-level efforts to protect children, including those efforts that represent families' and communities' existing responses to conflict, which humanitarian actors understood only minimally. Recent humanitarian efforts and child protection practice have been defined by the international community with rare consultation even in a cursory way; the inclusion of community perspectives is a particularly weak element of these efforts and a key gap impeding systems strengthening efforts. Although the most typical discourse suggests that conflict 'erodes' or 'destroys' community-level networks, another framing would posit that conflict in fact activates family and community networks to establish protective mechanisms insofar as possible. Many representatives of IOs and UN agencies indicated that they wished to better understand community- and household-level protective practices; research examining community- and family-based mechanisms for child protection — including documentation of linkages between formal and informal systems — should be a high priority.

Failure to design humanitarian interventions to more coherently support existing systems lies not with individuals or specific agencies but with the humanitarian system as a whole. Reform efforts themselves will need to be systemic, and, given current power imbalances, likely need to be initiated from within the humanitarian system itself.

Notes

1 This research does not encompass the civil conflict that erupted in December 2013 or more recent events.

2 In 2013, the MoGCSW became the Ministry of Gender, Child, Social Welfare, Humanitarian Affairs, and Disaster Management (OCHA, 2013).

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