



IF WE DON'T DO IT, WHO WILL?

A study into the sustainability of
Community Protection Structures
supported by Oxfam in the
Democratic Republic of the Congo.



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What happens when an NGO returns a few years later to see the longer-term effects of Community-based Programmes? This is what Oxfam's Community Protection Programme did in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), conducting research in 30 communities to find out which protection activities continued after the original programme, and what influenced this.

Oxfam has worked with different national partner organisations to implement the protection programme in three DRC provinces since 2009. The programme supports elected Community Protection Structures ('Protection Structures') to develop Community Protection Plans, which outline context specific protection threats and engage with local authorities on actions that can be taken to mitigate these.

Protection threats range from illegal road barriers and taxes to denying women's inheritance, arbitrary arrests, and different forms of Gender Based Violence (GBV). These threats are perpetrated by armed groups, other community members, and state authorities.

'The project was finished, but the work isn't finished. We decided to continue because there are still some people who don't yet know their rights.'

Women's Forum member,
South Lubero

Given that the programme was implemented from 2009, and exit from the first communities took place in 2011, in 2015 Oxfam decided to undertake research into communities that the programme had exited from in order to understand the programme's sustainability, and re-design its approach as needed. Sustainability was conceived of in terms of the extent to which Protection Structures were still active, and what evidence there was of the programme's long-term outcomes within communities.

In early 2016, Oxfam conducted 198 interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) in a sample of 30 communities where the programme was previously implemented.

WHAT DID WE LEARN?

The research found that **a large proportion of Protection Structure members in the majority of communities continued with activities** in some form but this varies both between communities and amongst Protection Structures in the same community. A total of **51 Protection Structures in 23 communities** (out of 67 Protection Structures in 30 communities¹) continued **regular weekly or monthly planning meetings**. In several other communities, and some structures in the same communities, meetings had stopped but **members either continued working individually or integrated protection activities into wider community development activities**, such as development committee meetings. Although confidential referrals to local medical, psychosocial and legal services were common (as were awareness raising and advocacy actions), regular engagement with local authorities is an activity that needs to be reinforced.

BOX 1: WHAT IS PROTECTION?

The most commonly accepted definition of protection is that used by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), which refers to all activities aimed at obtaining full respect for the right of all individuals, without discrimination, in accordance with the relevant bodies of law, in humanitarian situations (Oxfam 2016).

Populations may be put at risk in humanitarian situations due to threats from armed actors, government authorities, or other civilians. The state has the legal responsibility to make sure that the people within its borders are safe; however when it can't or won't fully fulfil these responsibilities, then national and international humanitarian organisations can assist.

¹ Nb. This total does not include the Women's Associations and community health workers who were trained as part of an alternative approach tried in one project in Dungu.

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It appears that members feel motivated by protection activities very quickly. For the majority of members, this motivation to help others keeps them active.

A large proportion of Protection Structure members interviewed described how they continued activities in order to share the knowledge gained during the programme on human rights and the law. They had also seen that change was possible, and they didn't want the situation to return to how it previously was.

A proportion of members stopped participating due to de-motivation, moving away from the area, or illness. In some areas the level of activity of Protection Structures reduced or changed in nature for various reasons. These include a lack of leadership, in cases where the President of a group became inactive, or where the security situation meant that group meetings were no longer feasible. Key challenges identified by Protection Structure members that continued activities include: the frequent change in local authorities, with new arrivals often having a very low knowledge of the law; intimidation and fear of reprisals from authorities and perpetrators of abuse, who were arrested following advocacy actions; and challenges associated with a lack of materials, such as legal texts, or raincoats and boots.

Although specific changes can be made to the programme to address these challenges, a key learning point from the research is that what **makes the programme sustainable in the long-term is closely tied to what makes the programme of good quality and effective in the short term.** After project closure, Protection Structures and activities are likely to evolve in response to need, their perceived usefulness, and to wider changes in the environment. Sustainability in protection activities, and the longer-term outcomes of the programme, can be supported by providing good quality support and accompaniment during the project period.

Although there is **no evidence from the research that support with Income-Generating Activities is necessary for activities to continue**, initiatives that require minimal external input, such as member contributions and revolving savings schemes, could be encouraged to support basic running costs, such as the purchase of batteries or paper.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR OXFAM?

As part of the research a restitution workshop was held with representatives from partner organisations and Oxfam staff, during which the results were not only presented and discussed, but recommendations were formulated

together on how to address the challenges that Protection Structures raised. This resulted in the identification of a series of practical recommendations, examples of which are outlined in Box 2.

More widely, the research results have implications for some things that we will continue to do, and some things that we will do differently.

We will continue to:

Recognise the importance of context and enable sufficient flexibility in the programme approach to respond to contextual differences even in relatively small geographical areas. For example, in some areas, supporting Protection Structures to participate in weekly Security Meetings with local authorities may be appropriate, and in others, the space may be too politicised.

Work with national partner organisations who demonstrate an understanding of the context and provide longer-term support following exit in their operational areas.





BOX 2: EXAMPLES OF PRACTICAL CHANGES TO THE PROGRAMME

- Provision of durable reference and training materials to communities earlier in the project period
- Routinely train all Protection Structure members, not just Focal Points, on confidential referral, as all individuals appear to carry out this activity.
- As part of exit planning, ensure different scenarios are discussed, such as the departure of one of the group leaders, and different actions the Protection Structures can take to minimise negative impact.
- Before the project finishes, hold a meeting with the Protection Structures and local authorities to decide what types and spaces of engagement they would like to continue after the project.

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We will start:

Providing a minimum of two years support to each community whilst recognising that the length and type of support required can be highly context specific.

Developing exit plans to outline key steps to take at different points in the project cycle. This includes reinforcing conversations with the Protection Structures about whether they would like to continue after the end of the project, and in what form.

Systematically building support visits to exit communities into new project proposals to support Protection Structures, who decide to continue with advice in problem solving and advocacy.

Engaging with local authorities at a higher than local level so that they can reinforce messages within the local leadership – this could include training representatives of authorities at a higher level on the same protection topics as local authorities, and/or piloting the establishment of committees of authorities who can undertake simple actions to support positive behaviour amongst their units and colleagues.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR OTHER NGOS AND FUNDERS

For other NGOs and interested funders, we have identified key factors to take into account when designing, implementing and evaluating community-based protection programmes.

Ensure that expectations of sustainability are realistic

Given the systematic problems that underpin protection threats in Eastern DRC and ongoing insecurity, ensure that expectations of the sustainability of community groups' activities is realistic and that some form of longer-term support may be required. If the security situation deteriorates, renewed support to former communities may be needed.

Ensure that definitions of sustainability don't focus on a narrow definition of activities

Recognise that sustainability can not only refer to the ongoing organisation of group activities, but also the wider knowledge, attitude and behaviour changes in a community, even if activities are not ongoing after project closure. It is not necessarily useful for an organisation to define sustainability itself, but to be open to how activities and groups evolve over time, and what they see as most relevant to their situation.

Have realistic expectations of what changes are possible and how these can be reflected in M&E Frameworks

The nature of many protection threats is that they may return as the wider environment changes. Don't see this necessarily as a failure of a project, but recognise what incremental change is possible and realistic in this environment and then make sure that objectives, outcomes and indicators in log frames and M&E frameworks reflect this.

Move beyond one-year funding time frames

Recognise that although changes can be achieved in one year, in the context of a chronic crisis in Eastern DRC, ideally a minimum of two years of support is required. Working within annual funding cycles to provide multi-year support to communities can be a significant resource drain on partners and teams.

Ensure that the principle of voluntary participation is respected and that any remuneration is appropriate

Plan project activities to minimise the impact on participants' normal activities and their ability to earn an income. Make sure remuneration provided during a project is appropriate and coordinate with other agencies where possible. This may include providing some form of compensation for time spent during training sessions, but ensure that this amount is not so much as it is perceived by other community members or local authorities as a 'salary'. Encourage remuneration 'in kind' by covering basic equipment, such as raincoats, boots, bicycles and T-Shirts.

Budget for sufficient staff support

Recognise that often the support most valued by community members, and which can have the strongest impact upon both process and outcome sustainability, involves a large amount of staff time, but not necessarily high activity costs. This can mean that a greater percentage of the budget is dedicated to staffing and logistics costs, compared to activities. Acknowledge this, and support project teams to reflect these costs in their budget in ways that meet donor requirements but don't require cuts to these costs.

'When we started, SOPROP accompanied us and presented us to the authorities, but the authorities have changed...if you don't buy them a drink you can't speak with them.'
Male CPC member, Rubaya, Masisi

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The information in this publication is correct at the time of going to press.

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Oxfam GB is a member of Oxfam International.

Front cover photo:
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Feedback on report: Melanie Kesmaecker-Wissing, Richard Nunn, Rachel Hastie, Emma Fanning and Joanna Trevor.

Donors that have funded the standalone protection programme in the past (alphabetical order):

DFID
ECHO
European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR)
Individual European women's organisations
IrishAid
Music Circle
Pooled Fund
Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA)
Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC)
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