



COMMUNITY PROTECTION STRUCTURES

Influencing for local-level change in
conflict settings in the DRC



OXFAM

COMMUNITY PROTECTION STRUCTURES IN THE DRC

1 Overview

Programme information

Name	Protection Programme
Country	Democratic Republic of Congo
Budget	Annual budget: approximately \$2.5–3m
Start Date	May 2006
End Date	March 2020 ¹
Donors	UK Department for International Development (DFID), IrishAid, Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC)

Problem analysis

For more than two decades, armed conflict has devastated large sections of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Often fuelled by ethnic-community divisions, this appalling violence is perpetrated by militia groups, government armed forces and police. It has claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of people and forced millions to leave their homes, fleeing to other provinces or neighbouring countries.

The statistics are shocking. In March 2017, UNOCHA estimated that 3.7 million people had been internally displaced. Civilians, especially in many parts of the eastern provinces, face constant threats of forced displacement, sexual violence, abduction, looting, illegal detention and extortion. The conflict in eastern DRC, in particular, is notorious for the high levels of sexual violence and brutality inflicted by those involved in the fighting. A wide range of horrifying abuses are being carried out against men, women, boys and girls.

Despite the government approving a progressive sexual violence law in 2006 – which includes a broad definition of sexual and gender-based violence – women and men are frequently subject to sexual violence, with increasing evidence of violent rape and sexual assault against men and boys.

These practices are fuelled by the DRC's deeply patriarchal society. A combination of deep-seated cultural and social norms, attitudes and beliefs perpetuate gender discrimination and gender-based violence, while also stopping women from accessing services and opportunities in education, health and public life. Civilian populations rarely understand their rights or know about the legal and policy frameworks, power structures and advocacy spaces that could help them. As a result, they simply do not have the capacity to hold duty-bearers to account. Meanwhile, a combination of impunity, corruption, a dysfunctional judiciary system, and even the state itself, leave people with little or no protection.

Brief programme description

Using learning from protection programming in Colombia, Oxfam has been implementing its community protection programme in the DRC since 2006. It aims to help individuals prevent, and respond to, violence and abuse, while also holding duty-bearers to account for the protection of civilian populations.

The programme is currently being implemented in mainly rural eastern DRC in North and South Kivu (38 communities). Oxfam is also conducting a pilot intervention in more stable contexts in Équateur (four communities).²

The programme uses a community-based approach that involves building Community Protection Structures (CPSs). Supported by Oxfam and partners, these are designed to identify the main threats faced by communities and find the best way of addressing them, while engaging with local authorities.

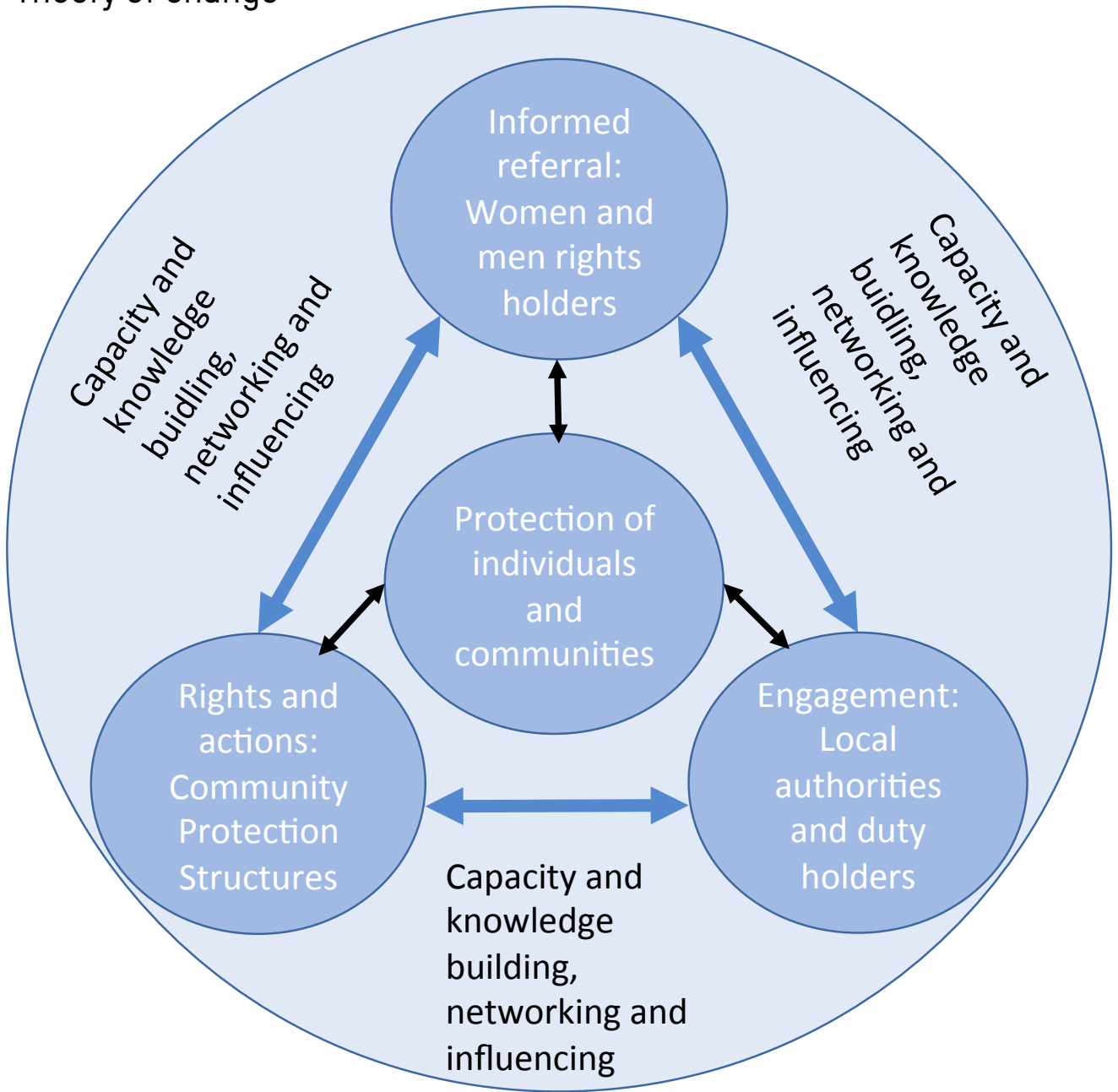
The programme seeks to address power imbalances, between men and women and also between rights holders and duty-bearers. Its core premise is that communication among community members, and between them and local authorities, is key in order to find pragmatic ways to uphold people's rights while also holding authorities to account. This communication must be informed by a shared understanding of human rights.

This communication is designed to protect displaced people, returnees and host communities from violence and abuse. To make this happen, the programme aims to facilitate change in three core outcome areas:

- **Rights and actions:** CPSs help prevent, and respond to, protection risks within their environment. They do this through community mobilization and training and capacity building, while also developing solid action plans.
- **Informed referral:** Community members know about, and can access, appropriate legal, medical and psychosocial referral services. This will happen by mapping services, training people who can act as focal points and providing information and referrals.
- **Engagement:** Local civilian and military authorities are more receptive and responsive to the protection issues and needs of civilians. This will require training authorities, facilitating joint meetings and supporting advocacy networks.

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Theory of Change



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2 Achievements and challenges

Achievements to date

Oxfam's protection programme in DRC has brought about many positive changes. The CPSs have increased communities' awareness of their rights and responsibilities as well as helpful legal and policy frameworks.

Programme evaluations and review processes have confirmed that this increased awareness – coupled with capacity building on protection, gender and social accountability – has improved community members' confidence and empowerment levels, while making them less vulnerable to abuse.

By facilitating interaction between CPSs and local authorities, and creating spaces for engagement and influencing, the programme has brought about a number of serious improvements in local-level governance. Indeed, advocacy at this level has led to concrete changes in protection situations. People have easier access to sexual and gender based violence-related services and prisoners are being treated better. It has also led to the release of individuals who were being held on an arbitrary basis.

The programme has also significantly improved gender justice, challenging the discriminatory practices surrounding women's and girls' inheritance, and reducing levels of early or forced marriage. It has also sought to address ethnic discrimination between groups, such as Pygmies being discriminated against by Bantu communities in Équateur province.

External evaluation evidence has also revealed a shift in unequal gender relations at a community level. While it has been difficult to assess impact accurately, an internal evaluation in 2012 found a reduction in sexual violence in six of the 11 communities surveyed, and a reduction in domestic violence in six. Meanwhile in eight communities, gender relationships were felt to be more equal.

Thanks to Oxfam's commitment to learning in DRC, the protection programme has helped other sector teams to better understand protection issues in the communities and adopt a more community-based approach to protection.

The programme has also led to great improvements in ownership and sustainability. The model ensures interventions are focused on communities' needs, and owned by them, as they identify the protection issues they want to engage in. The combination of community ownership and people's determination to address the problems and abuses they face will help sustain the programme in the long term.

Specific challenges

The programme's mid-term review (MTR) and MSC exercise The programme's evaluation and learning processes have highlighted challenges at several different levels. The first lies in governance and accountability. While the programme has

successfully engaged with duty-bearers at a local level, many of the authorities still think CPSs should focus on community sensitization, rather than social accountability, illustrating the need for continued engagement with authorities about their responsibility to respond to community needs.

Furthermore, the programme's success in advocacy is largely influenced by the individual personalities of local leaders, so high turnover among targeted authorities could undermine achievements. In practice however, CPSs simply keep forging ahead. Demonstrating empowerment, motivation and ownership of the issues they advocate for, CPSs adapt their strategies accordingly.

Despite this success at the local level, the programme has not yet demonstrated national advocacy success and currently there are only limited links between local and higher-level advocacy. The programme has begun to explore advocacy engagement at territorial and provincial level and is currently developing its national influencing strategy, in coordination with the Rights in Crisis Campaign in DRC. In future, this will analyse stakeholders and powers and devise strategies for creating stronger links between these critical levels.

Another major challenge is engaging youth. Despite having pilot interventions specifically targeting young people, the programme has not yet managed to involve them sufficiently. It is likely that young people think these structures will be dominated by adults, offering only limited space for them to raise issues that are relevant to them.

Finally, in the most conflict-affected areas, it can be dangerous for protection committees to raise sensitive issues. It could mean the individuals involved risk being targeted. To address this issue, risk management strategies are discussed very carefully with CPSs, and community members reshape activities as needed.

Lessons learned

Helping communities identify the issues they want to address means they really 'own' the intervention, driving sustainability.

Flexibility and adaptability are key to ensuring interventions in fragile and conflict-affected areas remain relevant.

Some of the problems communities face at local level require higher-level advocacy. Influencing at provincial and national level should be linked to work at community level.

Building trust and using a positive engagement strategy with local authorities helps bring about change in fluid contexts.

3 Partnerships and links with other programmes

Partnerships

Oxfam implements its protection programme in partnership with a number of local non-government organizations. This involves providing them with close technical accompaniment and capacity development. It also means including them in the programme design and implementation stage, and monitoring, evaluation and learning.

Because financial mismanagement and fraud are high risks in DRC, the programme has developed a financial monitoring and follow-up system that helps partners strengthen their financial systems and ensures accountability.

Pairing the need for close financial monitoring with partnership principles has been challenging at times, but the partnership reviews and discussions undertaken by the programme have helped Oxfam and partners to jointly identify areas that need strengthening, while also developing strategies for support.

Furthermore, as the programme has developed, partnerships have evolved, moving from the initial full joint implementation at the outset of the programme to the capacity development and accompaniment approach used now. With its current focus on linking local-level advocacy to national influencing work, the programme is gradually establishing alliances and strategic partnerships with civil society actors, which will ultimately help secure national-level change.

Links with Oxfam programmes

The protection programme is aligned with Oxfam's active citizenship and good governance work. It fits with the country strategy and priorities, and has significantly contributed to learning within Oxfam.

At the country level, it has reinforced the need for safe programming (i.e. taking proactive measures to avoid inadvertent harm, ensure conflict sensitivity and mitigate risks of gender based violence) in other sectoral interventions such as water, sanitation and hygiene, as well as emergency food security and livelihoods. It is also clearly linked to advocacy and campaigning work at national and global levels (under the Rights in Crisis campaign).

The approach used has also been the subject of several reviews and reflection exercises on protection, gender justice and governance, and has been adapted for use in Oxfam's programmes in other contexts. In addition the programme has informed wider discussions in the humanitarian community on protection and governance in fragile states.

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4 In focus

Community Protection Structures: influencing for local-level change in a conflict setting

The programme builds Community Protection Structures (CPSs) that comprise three key components:

1. Community Protection Committee (CPC): six women and six men.
2. Women's Forum: 15 women, two of whom are members of the CPC.
3. Change Agents: 10 women and 10 men from surrounding villages.

We help these protection structures identify key protection threats they would like to address and provide training on a range of topics, such as protection (including referral), gender and advocacy, depending on relevant protection threats.

These protection structures then develop Community Protection Plans that outline intervention strategies and influencing targets. The Community Protection Plan is shared with key members of local civilian and military authorities to promote engagement, rather than confrontation.

Issues and identified risks are discussed at regular coordination meetings between the CPSs and members of the local authorities. These 'mixed meetings' initially require external facilitation with Oxfam partners, helping participants jointly agree how they will address protection concerns and implement solutions.

The programme has been very successful at ensuring these committees largely reflect the populations they are expected to represent before authorities, with particular attention paid to the inclusion of women. Indeed, the programme has sought to promote and formalize women's participation by having an equal number of men and women on protection committees. Initially, programme reviews revealed that issues women care about were being ignored and critical issues such as inheritance rights, marriage registration and girls' right to education simply weren't being included in community action plans. Women's fora were established as a response to this challenge, providing women with a space to focus on their own priorities and express themselves more freely before these issues are included in broader CPS meetings.

Furthermore, because men and women involved in the CPSs decide together the issues they would like to focus on, men are offered the opportunity to get involved with protection problems – something that is often seen as a 'women's issue'. The programme's approach also demonstrates that women can be active in areas more traditionally associated with men, such as negotiating with authorities and representatives of the state.

Feedback from communities suggests that the programme's broader approach to gender – recognizing the impact of conflict on men as well as women – has brought about positive results. In particular it has strengthened women's feelings of security and empowerment by enabling collective engagement and addressing of the issues, paving the way for broader transformational change at local level. This is particularly of note because the protection programme is not a gender programme in the traditional sense, but including a strong gender approach has supported change for women's rights overall.

Another element to highlight is the way positive engagement with local authorities has helped bring about change – not an easy thing to do in such a highly fluid context. Understanding that direct confrontation with these authorities would be counter-productive, the programme instead sought to build relationships slowly and carefully. It has focused on building trust by positioning CPCs as cooperative, rather than casting blame for what has gone wrong in the past.

A good example is the strategy of using training and sensitization activities to target authorities and community members and ultimately persuade them to address protection concerns. Accurate power analyses have also been helpful, allowing CPCs in certain cases to 'influence the influencers' – enlisting support from officials or leaders who have more authority.

Using different engagement approaches for local-level advocacy has been very successful, especially when dealing with potential 'blockers' – for instance authorities or leaders who stand to lose income from illegal taxation. While this approach does not represent a systematic change in power relations, it has nonetheless brought about positive practical changes in people's lives.

Learning and experience from the programme has also changed the team's vision of success. If they are dealing with a situation where the government has either no desire, or any ability, to help, Oxfam's success may involve compromise. For example, such local compromises may include capping the amount of illegal taxes people have to pay, or providing soldiers with available community land if they agree to stop extortion and violence at road blocks.

The programme has sought to learn and adapt consistently. Most recently it conducted research into the sustainability of the approach, and has also tested the model in the non-conflict setting of Équateur province. The results of programme evaluations, learning reviews and exit research will be incorporated into a sustainability plan and the national influencing strategy.

For further information about this programme:
www.oxfam.org.uk/protection-drc

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Notes

¹ Though current project funding ended in March 2017, the programme remains a priority for Oxfam in DRC and is actively fundraised for.

² Oxfam's protection programme has included interventions in Province Orientale between 2011 and 2013.

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This paper was written by Sarah Barakat. Oxfam acknowledges the assistance of Melanie Kesmaecker-Wissing in its production. It is part of a series of papers written to inform public debate on development and humanitarian policy issues.

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

Published by Oxfam GB for Oxfam International under ISBN 978-0-85598-979-8 in July 2017.

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