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Self-protection outside community protection structures

 Yemen

Supporting community initiatives to ensure their own protection in Yemen

By Oxfam's Protection Team

From May 2018 to February 2019, Oxfam – in partnership with Creative People Solution Foundation (CPS), Al-Aidroos Association and Ability Foundation – implemented a protection project in five districts of the Aden and Lahj governorates of Yemen. The project aimed to strengthen the protection and psychosocial support capacities for women and young people, while strengthening social cohesion in their communities.

Community-based protection network (CBPN) members play an important role in raising community awareness, as well as representing them and advocating for their needs to authorities and humanitarian actors. As part of this project, CBPNs and their members in Lahj and Aden were connected with each other through exposure visits and meetings. Dialogues were led particularly by community women and youth, with the support of Oxfam, local partners and CBPN members. They provided an opportunity for CBPN members to discuss the protection and social cohesion needs of their communities, and agree on a plan of action. Several community initiatives were then developed jointly by CBPNs and their communities.

Communities and CBPNs had the opportunity to propose their initiatives to Oxfam, with the possibility of securing small grants. A committee – made up of staff from Oxfam, UNDP and implementing partners, as well as local authorities and community leaders – was established to evaluate the proposals.

The proposals were evaluated based on the extent to which they would:

- Respond to protection threats by implementing preventive, mitigating and responsive measures;
- Contribute to the social cohesion of the targeted communities;
- Ensure effective participation and consultation with community members (women, men, youth and other vulnerable people), together with CBPN members;
- Be implemented according to a clear workplan, objectives and budget, which should be shared with the committee; and
- Ensure sustainability.



Community initiatives

Safe spaces

In 2018, together with local partners, Oxfam established five safe spaces for women and youth in Aden and Lahj. These served as venues for CBPN meetings as well as for the provision of psychosocial support (PSS). Community volunteers were trained to provide PSS for their community. Some of these spaces continue to host CBPN meetings and to be used for the provision of PSS even after the end of the project, thanks to the voluntary support of our partners.

These safe spaces were aimed at ensuring that women and youth could:

- Socialize and rebuild their social networks;
- Receive social support from each other;
- Acquire contextually relevant skills;
- Access safe and non-stigmatizing multi-sectorial gender-based violence response services (psychosocial, legal, medical); and
- Receive information on issues relating to women's rights, health, and services.

Our local partners conducted several consultations community members, which informed the selection of the safe spaces' locations and volunteers/facilitators. CPS conducted several capacity strengthening activities on awareness raising, psychosocial support and protection for the volunteer team. CPS was also responsible for technically supervising psychosocial support activities.

Campaign on sexual harassment, sexual violence and child marriage

In August 2018, CBPNs in Lahj developed a community campaign on sexual harassment and domestic violence targeting 500–800 students (boys and girls) in five schools. They also conducted a campaign on the risk of child marriage, reaching more than 50 parents. This campaign raised awareness on the negative effects of child marriage, especially how it curbs girls' right to education and poses risks to their health (for example, in the event of child pregnancy). The key messages of these campaigns were delivered through sensitization sessions for the students and parents by the CBPN members, youth volunteers selected by local partners, and the partners' staff.

In Al-Mualla District, Aden, seven young men and women led the implementation of another activity aimed at reducing exposure to the risk of sexual harassment and sexual violence. This included raising awareness among men and women about the risks of sexual violence and sexual harassment against women and girls, through sensitization sessions. In addition, Oxfam and partners installed solar-powered lights in the areas where sexual harassment and sexual violence were most common. Solar-powered lights were chosen due to their greater sustainability, as they do not need charging or fuelling.

Risk reduction at night

Another initiative aimed at reducing protection risks at night-time took place in February 2019, in Crateer district, Aden, where some community members had been assaulted as they walked through a graveyard at night. Similar to the above, solar-powered lights were installed, and the cemetery was connected to the public electricity network.¹ The cemetery is a shortcut for more than 1000 families, all of whom benefitted from this initiative.

Ensuring the protection of students

In Crateer, there were reports that older children were abusing younger children whenever they used the bathroom. Only one of the four bathrooms in the school was functioning, forcing children of all ages to use the same one. In response, in February 2019, CBPN members and other people from the community, particularly young men and women, repaired the other three bathrooms, thus allowing for younger children and adolescents to have separate designated bathrooms.



In another school in Crateer, students were exposed to traffic risks, particularly at the end of the school day, as the exit area would get crowded with students and force some into the road. In response, CBPNs and community members built a metal fence around the school perimeter, thus ensuring students would stay away from the vehicles.

Above: Building of metal fence in front of the school gate, February 2019. Photo by Al-Aidroos Association

Risks of drug use

In July and August 2018, two community initiatives in Aden ran campaigns on the risks of drug use, targeting more than 700 community members in Crateer and Al-Tawahi districts. These campaigns recognized and built on the potential of Musjid (places of worship) and religious leaders, such as imams, to raise awareness. For example, in Al-Tawahi, the imams of two mosques agreed to include the dangers of drug use in their Friday sermons, and to offer guidance lessons after prayers.

The campaign also had an advocacy component targeting primary duty bearers. Specifically, CBPNs organized demonstrations in front of government buildings, asking the authorities to take action against drug dealers.

The campaign also included sensitization sessions targeting 50 young men and women who became volunteer youth educators, helping disseminate key messages on drug use among their communities. The community was further involved in the campaign by helping distribute information, education and communication materials in pharmacies, public transport and other relevant locations. Information on drug use was also disseminated to community members via mobile phone text messages, in coordination with mobile telecommunications companies, who agreed to deliver the messages for free.

¹ Even though the cemetery was connected to public electricity network, solar-powered lights were still needed because public electricity used to be off for 2–4 hours per day.

Promoting social cohesion

CBPNs, in their very structure and representative making, strengthen communities' social cohesion by bringing together people from different backgrounds to work together as volunteers. The initiatives briefly outlined above further testify to the potential of CBPNs in strengthening social cohesion through their work. For instance, the inclusive and participatory way in which the campaigns were developed, supports greater cohesion within the community, which becomes united around a cause.

Further, the very issues some campaigns seek to address may contribute to social cohesion. This is notably the case with the safe spaces, which allowed for women and youth groups to socialise and strengthen their solidarity ties. Furthermore, it could be argued that drug use may lead users to distance themselves from their families, due to their addiction; or that victims/survivors of sexual violence may be marginalized in their communities due to stigma. Therefore, other campaigns also contribute to strengthening social cohesion by addressing issues that may weaken solidarity within the community or within households.

Providing material support for protection purposes

This project also testifies to the importance of material resources in ensuring protection from violence, coercion and deprivation. The very premise of the project – supporting community protection initiative through small grants – demonstrates that communities' own solutions to protection threats need funding, just like any protection response implemented by formal humanitarian actors. Thus, cash appears as a material resource of first importance. Also, the initiatives explored above also show that resources such as lights, latrines and fences played a key role in preventing or mitigating protection threats, and ensuring the availability of safe spaces where people can come together, mobilize, and fulfil their rights.