Enhancing community-based social protection for sustainable use of aid in South Sudan: Guidance for conflict and context-sensitive aid

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Contents

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Acronyms

- CSRF   Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility
- FAO   United Nations Food and Agricultural Organisation
- FGDs   Focus Group Discussions
- GBV   Gender-Based Violence
- GPAA   Greater Pibor Administrative Area
- IDPs   Internally Displaced Persons
- INGOs   International Non-governmental Organisations
- KIIs   Key Informant Interviews
- L/NGOs   Local/National Non-governmental Organisations
- NBeG   Northern Bahr el Ghazal
- R-ARCSS   The Revitalized Agreement for the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan
- WFP   United Nations World Food Programme

Executive summary

As donor aid is shrinking, the importance of social protection is growing, with more focus on how the most vulnerable members of communities can survive. The purpose of this research is to analyse how humanitarian aid-based social protection interacts with community-based social protection, and the conflict sensitivity risks involved. The CSRF team conducted focus group discussions (FGDs) and individual key informant interviews (KIIs) with representatives of I/NGOs, community, local authority, church, traders, among others in three locations, namely Lafon, Pibor and Northern Bahr el Ghazal (NBeG) – Aweil East, Aweil South and Aweil West. In total, 240 people participated in the research, including 27 KIIs and 24 FGDs. The research finds that although there is no agreed upon definition of social protection, it is broadly understood as the steps taken to care for the most vulnerable members of the community in times of crises or shocks. Also, the research found that social protection in the study locations is under strain due to the combination of factors, including dwindling aid, influx of returnees and refugees and economic and climate-induced food insecurity. This research report contributes to a better understanding of the interaction between aid-based social protection and community based social protection amid dwindling aid. Based on the findings, the report serves as a basis for further research on the interaction of social protection and conflict sensitivity. It also provides key insights, including relevant recommendations for policy makers and practitioners in the fields of food security, social protection, livelihood support and conflict sensitive aid.

Key Findings

- **The understanding of social protection is varied:** Although social protection is a widely used concept in the context of humanitarian and development interventions, several respondents reported different understanding of the term 'social protection'. As one respondent[1] in Lafon said social protection is "**A way in which people help those who are vulnerable, including, disabled, widows, elderly, the sick and the barren**." Meanwhile, an organisation in Aweil confined the definition of social protection to child protection; while in Pibor, social protection was viewed in the realm of community structures such as age-sets caring for their members.
- **Community-based social protection is under strain, and traditional social protection structures not adequately empowered**: While fewer respondents argued that social protection remains intact, most participants noted that social protection has undergone serious changes in the last 10 years due to various factors, including the endemic food insecurity, plaguing economic crises, the changing modes of social interaction and, most importantly, due to armed conflict. One participant said, "**Because of the conflicts that affected everyone, no one is willing to help one another like before the wars or other crises**." Although aid actors sometimes engage with relevant actors, there was a feeling that they have not adequately engaged and empowered traditional structures such as clan leaders and age-sets.
- **There exists an intersection between social protection and gender, men are largely left out:** Several participants noted that gender plays a key role in shaping informal social protection networks. However, a key challenge faced in delivery of community-based social protection is the shift in gender roles, with women taking up most of the responsibility. This has been exacerbated by the tendency of aid models to target women more than men. This has allegedly contributed to conflict sensitivity risks including alcohol addiction among men, gender-based violence (GBV), and increased frustration resulting in some younger men opting to go into Sudan, and perhaps being willing to join the warring factions. One participant in a women's focus group discussion in Aweil described the experience of women facing the challenge of taking up men's roles of social

protection: "**Even right now if you visited the market, you would find women selling items like charcoal, and roofing materials. And you will see men sitting and drinking**".

- **The mixed perceptions of the impact on social protection of potential aid cuts:** Most respondents identified a possible impact of the reduction of aid, with some saying that it will affect their livelihoods and wider community social fabric. Participants believed that the frequent, prolonged and severe droughts and floods have not only fuelled rural-urban migration, but they have also led to tensions and breakdown of the social fabric. Moreover, a section of respondents argued that aid in some cases undermined community-based social protection structures.

Summary Recommendations

Based on the insights gathered from this research, the following key recommendations have been formulated:

- **Strengthen the existing community-led social protection and social service facilities.** To minimize the negative impact of reduced aid-led social protection on the longstanding community-led social protection, aid agencies need to work in collaboration with the caregivers through creating awareness on the importance of maintaining their role. This is because humanitarian led social protection has reportedly led to the weakening of community-led social protection by taking the place of caregivers as well as in some cases, working in parallel with the traditional community structures.

- **Ensure aid is provided equitably to those who are in need**. Aid agencies need to consider aligning their vulnerability criteria with local concepts of vulnerability. For example, identification of vulnerable community members was a purview if chiefs in many locations, who understood the community's definition of fair allocation. This may require some understanding and flexibility from the side of aid actors. In the current context across the Aweil counties for instance, providing support to the host communities who might shoulder the responsibility of taking care of returnees and refugees, thus exhausting their own resources, was viewed as a fair consideration.

- **Foster social cohesion among communities.** Strengthen social cohesion between communities, especially between vulnerable groups and their caregivers as well as between vulnerable groups and the wider communities as these relations have been affected by armed conflict, disasters and displacement. By strengthening these connections and networks, aid agencies will be able to enhance community-led social protection to the benefit of the most vulnerable community members. It is also important for actors in the social protection sector to recognise the potential growing disconnect in the role of men in the community, and nurture models that engage and encourage men's participation.

- **Provide sustainable livelihood support, including skills transfer**. Aid agencies working on social protection should invest in livelihood interventions that can be sustainable. For example, providing farming items, such as seeds and tools like ox-ploughs, along with skills for improved and climate-adapted farming methods, can lead to self-reliance. As much as aid agencies should target vulnerable groups with these items and skills to enable them to become self-reliant, it is also imperative to identify functioning community groups or strong individuals to increase production and ability for caregivers.

Additional recommendations from this research are included in last part of the recommendation section of the report.

Introduction and background

While the concept of 'social protection' is commonly associated with activities and programmes of donors and aid agencies, it is well grounded in South Sudanese societies.[1] For centuries, community-based social protection practices have cared for society's vulnerable members, such as widows and elderly. As such, community-based social protection is critical to South Sudanese people, as well as being a foundational practice among its communities. Thus, both aid-based and community-based social protection practices are critical for the survival of all community members as their interplay acts as social welfare for those in dire need. In this configuration, community-based social protection has multiple advantages in catering for the community's vulnerable groups. Among these, we notice that, firstly, at the core of the practice of social protection largely across South Sudan is the principle that each community member is expected to assist those in need, at various degree of responsibility depending on the geographical zone, and respective practice, and link of kinship. Secondly, community members hold the most immediate knowledge on individual and group needs, and as such can mobilise within the framework of the traditional societal structures to put in place preventive or supportive measures.

The aid-based social protection practices can and have in the past sustained and strengthened these mechanisms. Entrusted with the responsibility of caring for the lives of community members, chiefs play a key role in social protection and local justice. This is because chiefs are expected to be impartial, attend to every member who has a problem and resolve disputes between community members. On the one hand, they support vulnerable people with contributions from community members, while on the other, they can force affluent families to assist impoverished community members, also during hunger, by reallocating assets.[2]

Why is this research important?

As humanitarian aid is expected to reduce due to funding cuts, integrating and strengthening more community-based social protection practices could be a way forward. This approach would allow for a more sustainable use of aid resources and build on existing knowledge and practices. To identify entry points and opportunities, donors and aid agencies need to better understand how community-based social protection works, how humanitarian aid interacts with it and how more integrated approaches could look like. Moreover, to ensure that humanitarian aid, not unintentionally undermines or weakens community-based social protection; donors and aid agencies should critically examine the interactions between the two. Some institutions, principles and norms of community-based social protection align with the principles and norms of humanitarian aid, while others conflict with it, yet they are crucial for people's survival.[3]

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[1] https://www.csrf-southsudan.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/CSRF-Analysis_Why-do-chiefs-matter.pdf

[2] Santschi M (2023), 'Why do chiefs matter for aid actors and conflict sensitivity? The role of chiefs in conflict-sensitive aid and peacebuilding', November 2023: https://www.csrf-southsudan.org/repository/csrf-analysis-why-do-chiefs-matter-for-aid-actors-and-conflict-sensitivity-the-role-of-chiefs-in-conflict-sensitive-aid-and-peacebuilding/; Pendle N (2023). 'Law and famine: Learning from hunger courts in South Sudan', May 2023: https://www.csrf-southsudan.org/repository/law-and-famine-learning-from-the-hunger-courts-in-south-sudan/

Literature review

What does "social protection" mean?

Social protection is a widely used concept in the context of humanitarian and development interventions. Generally, social protection is defined as a range of public and private policies and programmes undertaken to support the most vulnerable members of the community. However, several studies have tried to offer specific definitions. One group of studies define social protection as a tool to protect the most vulnerable and poor groups who are deprived from income, including children, women and people with disabilities through the provision of safety nets and aid assistance. Other studies define social protection in terms of measures to avert livelihood and vulnerability risks through the provision of social security and public services, such as education and health.[3] Yet other studies find social protection as strategies to empower the disadvantaged groups. Therefore, there is no commonly agreed definition of social protection. However, the more acceptable and broad definition of social protection, which incorporate all the key elements from the varied definitions is "Social protection describes all public and private initiatives that provide income or consumption transfers to the poor, protect the vulnerable against livelihood risks and enhance the social status and rights of the marginalized; with the overall objective of reducing the economic and social vulnerability of poor, vulnerable and marginalized groups."[4]

The CSRF will adapt the broad definition of social protection. This means that the research will focus on both "formal social protection, including cash and food transfers, cash for work (CFW) and food for work (FFW), school feeding programmes, as well as informal social security, such as burial societies, rotating credit associations, credit to meet consumption needs and sharecropping arrangements)."[5] Above all the research will investigate the linkages between formal (aid-led) social security and informal (community-led) social protection.

Literature synthesis

Several studies focus on the intersection between social protection and armed conflict. One study has argued that armed conflict and displacement have a negative impact on social protection. However, one study in 2010 challenged this assumption, arguing that conflict and displacement has no impact on social capital.[6] Despite this different view on the impact of conflict and displacement on social capital, these studies illustrate that these factors can disrupt social protection. Some studies have gone further to explore measures taken to minimize the disruptive effect of conflict and displacement on social protection. In order to deal with the impact of conflict and displacement on social capital, a study has shown that displaced people can cultivate relationship with their fellow displaced as well as with strangers while in displacement,

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[3] World Bank (2018) 'the state of social protection systems in South Sudan', September, 2018

[4] Devereux S and Sabates Wheeler R (2004), 'Transformative social protection', October, 2004

[5] Carpenter S, Slater R and Mallett R (2012), 'Social Protection and Basic Services in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Situations', January

[6] Luka Biong Deng (2010), 'Social capital and civil war: The Dinka communities in South Sudan's civil war', February 2010

which in turn facilitates their access to the resources they need.[7] Similarly, another study has documented instances where communities can resort to 'hunger courts' to enable them to force their relatives to provide for they much needed help.[8] This is partly because chiefs' courts are said to uphold the social capital through holding accountability those who violate it. Another study focuses on the impact of aid on community-based social protection. It has found that aid can have both positive and negative impacts on community-based social protection.[9] Overall, there were limited literature on the intersection between aid-based social protection and community-based social protection in South Sudan. This paper attempts to provide field perspectives in this regard.

Methodology

Using the qualitative research approach, the research included semi-structured focus group discussions and key informant interviews with a wide range of people, including representatives from N/INGOs, donors, community members and leaders (chiefs, youth leaders, women leaders, etc.), local authorities and representatives of civil society. The respondents were selected through purposive sampling. The data collection was conducted in three case study locations, namely Northern Bahr el Ghazal (NBeG), specifically in the counties of Aweil East, Aweil West and Aweil South; Pibor (Pibor town) and Lafon (Lafon Centre). These areas were selected after a list of case studies was generated, which was then assessed against the inclusion criteria, such as, but not limited to, experience with IDPs and return, experience with a long-term and shrinking aid assistance and experience with a persistent food insecurity and lack of aid assistance.

The research was led by three CSRF staff with support from six South Sudanese research assistants from August 22nd to August 30th, 2024. The key questions asked during the interview included the following: 1) what is social protection? Who are key actors involved in community-based social protection; 2) what are the guiding norms and principles associated with community-based social protections? How are these practices of community-based social protections linked to humanitarian aid and principles? 3) How does humanitarian aid interact with community-based social protection? What are the risks and opportunities of humanitarian aid related to community-based social protections? 4) How can humanitarian aid strengthen and undermine community-based social protection in view of the funding cuts? What are the potential avenues and approaches? How can these opportunities be taken? 5) How can aid actors ensure that they do not undermine or create any harm related to community-based protection?

At the end of the research, 27 KIIs and 24 FGDs were conducted in the three areas. Specifically, NBeG accounted for 7 KIIs and 13 FGDs; Lafon for 10 KIIs and 6 FGDs and Pibor for 10 KIIs and 5 FGDs. Generally, 240 participants involved in the research, with men representing 125 and women 115. If distributed according to case study areas, each area accounted for the following: 126 from NBeG (52,3% of 240); 56 from Pibor (23%); and 58 from Lafon (24%), with women representing 69 in Aweil (54.7%); 23 in Lafon (39.6%); and 22 in Lafon (39,2%). [See the appendix 1] The number of respondents in NBeG was higher compared to Pibor and Lafon due to accessibility of the area in a rainy season, and the fact that NBeG included three counties.

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[7] Mercy Corps, et al. (2020), 'The currency of connections: the role of social connectedness among South Sudanese refugees in West Nile, Uganda.' January 2020

[8] Elizabeth Gray, et al. (2021), 'Hunger courts and humanitarian action in South Sudan.' May 2021

[9] Mercy Corps (2020). 'The currency of connections: Why do social connections matters for households in South Sudan.' August 2020

The research was approved by the Research Review Board of the South Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, and it was guided by the CSRF Research ethics guide. For instance, informed consent was obtained from all the participants who were informed of their rights to feel free to refuse participating or decline answering any questions they might find to be intrusive. Apart from that, the participants were also assured of information confidentially and anonymity aimed at protection of their identity.

The focus group discussions and key informant interviews lasted between 40 to 60 minutes, with a few cases taking longer than expected due to interferences, such as the arrival of visitors or staggered arrival of participants themselves. The data was collected until saturation, and no new insights emerged. The interviews were mostly conducted in local languages (Dinka, Murle and Pari) with translation support from research assistants, with a few interviews also conducted in Arabic and English. The data was collected through live note taking, which was later transcribed. To analyse the data, several rounds of review were undertaken, as well as a workshop with all researchers involved, with the aim to identify crosscutting and salient themes. Through this exercise, five themes were identified, namely: 1) Community-based understanding of social protection; 2) social protection in practice and recent changes and key actors; 3) gender and social protection: changing perceptions and roles; 4) armed conflict, disaster, displacement and the effect on social protection; and 5) A perspective into a future after the exit of humanitarian-led social protection. These them were then further analysed and interpreted in the wider contextual framework, to then highlight their wide-ranging implications.

Challenges faced during the research process

The research faced several challenges. One challenge was the difficulty the team encountered in accessing some rural and remote areas due to extraordinary climate-change induced flooding that made the roads impassable, especially in Lafon and Pibor, but also in NBeG.

The research team also was initially unable to access women for key informant interviews, especially in Lafon and Pibor as they engaged in farms and in food aid distribution centers. Yet, another challenge was the translations of the research concepts, including social protection and conflict sensitivity into local languages despite the attempt by the translators.

To address these challenges, the research team recruited research assistants from hard-to-reach areas, who also were able to engage local communities in the languages they understood. In the future, CSRF will continue to commit to our own Gender Sensitivity in research and analysis, supporting translators, research assistants to test local phrases for research concepts well ahead of the research, as well as ensuring more equity in the participation of women in key informant interviews.

Main Findings

Community-based understanding of social protection

Social protection is a widely used concept in the context of humanitarian and development interventions. However, South Sudanese respondents reported a different understanding of the term 'social protection'. As one respondent[10] in Lafon said social protection is "*A way in which people help those who are vulnerable, including, disabled, widows, elderly, the sick and the barren*." Apart from saving lives through providing food and water, social protection is also being associated with peace. During the focus group discussion with

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[10] An elderly man, Lafon, 22 August 2024

women in Pibor, one participant[11] defined social protection as a "**encouraging peaceful co-existence**." While social protection is seen to promote understanding and harmony, it is also referred to as a means to prevent or address the effect of disasters. For instance, during a focus group discussion in Aweil, one respondent[12] referred to social protection as ways "*To help someone in need at a specific time…in Aweil East when floods hit the area and local people needed help, those that were in high grounds were able to support those whose homes were submerging in floods*." This means that social protection is a help that goes beyond helping with material needs, but also finding solutions to problems, such as disasters and food insecurity. There was widespread understanding across several focus groups, that helping those in need is not in perpetuity. At some point in time, they are expected to gain the ability to support themselves. One women savings group in Aweil West reflected on how its members gave start-up income to a group of women who had recently returned from Sudan, for them to begin selling items in the market in order to eventually sustain themselves.

The Kabarze Women Group in Pibor defined social protection as peaceful coexistence, interaction without external inter-dependency, love, giving assistance to vulnerable e.g. giving food. They viewed social protection as collective responsibility of all the community members to ensure safety and sustainability in the community.

> "According to our Murle culture, age-sets, chiefs, women associations, community members, neighborhood and friends are expected to help one another during a time of need." (A female member of a focus group discussion in Pibor).

Social protection in practice and recent changes and key actors
Participants provided a wide range of views on the changes in community-led social protection. While few argued that social protection remains intact, most participants noted that social protection has undergone serious changes in the last 10 years. Whereas ruling age sets are obligated to provide social support to the most vulnerable members of communities, including widows, elderly and orphans, there has been recent changes, with ruling age groups shifting their priorities. There has been a breakdown in the role of age set in supporting the needy as they are involved in age set fighting and are accused of deprioritising vulnerable groups. One participant said, "**Because of the conflicts that affected everyone, no one is willing to help one another like before the wars or any crisis**."

In Pibor, the concept of social protection has undergone significant changes. A cross section of interviews and focus group discussions in Pibor indicated that several traditional structures and the social fabric for social protection have been destroyed. One key informant asserted:

"Our culture has changed completely! Today, the new generation is not helping anymore, and children take things from their elders, whom they should be helping in times of need."

Others suggested that the coming of humanitarians has made people lazy because they expect to receive money or food from humanitarians. This group of respondents feared that if NGOs were to pull out suddenly, many people would struggle to cope, moreover they recognised that for many years. Even among the age-set groups, which are a strong social fabric among the Murle, members no longer respect the other

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[11] A woman, Pibor, 20 August 2024
[12] A woman, Aweil East, 22 August 2024

age-sets. In fact, one youth respondent put it that respect within the same age-set is now based on personal knowledge and relationships.

Similar changes were echoed in Aweil. Respondents here noted that because of the market effect, where assets have been commercialised, the level of support that the community gives to those in need has reduced. A women leader observed that if somebody has a goat, a chicken or food in excess, they are most likely choosing to take them to the market rather than give to those in need. "Social protection is largely relegated to the immediate family members and humanitarian agencies." This notion demonstrates a significant shift from the past, where social protection thrived if communities had assets to share with those in need. Assets are now viewed from the perspectives of market.

There were also positive changes that were observed by the respondents. One significant change that several groups cited is that the coming of humanitarian agencies brought good things such as health care, education and training, which respondents thought will stay with the communities after humanitarians have left. Another notable change in Aweil that was reported to have been introduced by aid agencies was the use of oxen and ox ploughs for farming. Despite being a cattle community, interviewees agreed that this method of cultivating the land had not been used in this part of the country before, and now they are able to open larger pieces of land for farming and to therefore improve their food security. The appreciation of the use of ox-ploughs was expressed across the counties of NBeG.

Gender and social protection: Changing perceptions and roles
Several participants noted that gender plays a key role in shaping community-based social protection. However, a key challenge faced in delivery of community-based social protection to vulnerable groups is the shift in gender roles, with many women taking up most of the responsibility. This was partly because of a combination of factors, including the lack of jobs for men, absence of men either due to many having joined the forces or traveling outside of the communities, alcohol addiction among men, and the tendency among aid agencies to target more women than men, which allegedly contributes to gender-based violence (GBV). One participant in a focus group discussion with a group of women in Aweil East described the experience of women facing the challenge of the shifting role of men in social protection:

> Even right now if you visited the market, you would find women selling items like charcoal, and roofing materials. And you would see men sitting and drinking. In fact, some men who go for firewood instead sell the firewood to their own wives because of the urge for money to drink (A female in her mid-30s, in Malualkon, Aweil East)

One positive narrative that was discussed by a participant in a key informant interview in Lafon was a story of how one woman who was able to lure her husband out of idleness and alcohol addiction to return to his role as a farmer.

> A woman decided to cook food at the garden for her children as her husband was heavily drinking. After failing to find food at home for days, the man decided to join the wife at the garden. As a result, he began to farm and gradually he became a committed farmer (Head of the youth-Monyomiji-male, aged late 30s in Lafon)

Another positive gender trend that was attributed to the advent of humanitarian agencies in Pibor is shifting community mindset. Several respondents shared examples of women being allowed to work with aid agencies now around Pibor town and outside. It was observed that even married women can now be permitted to attend workshops in hotels, which was not the case in the past. And the school enrolment for

girls has increased, while male youth have joined women in going to the farms, something that was uncommon.

Some participants also spoke about the need for adult education programmes, which would help both women and men to become more empowered, to continue providing the services if the aid agencies reduced or ceased their operations. A youth group in Aweil East appreciated the fact that one agency provided them with knowledge and skills in carpentry, farming, mechanics and basic financial management, which they said were useful for them to work and support their families.

Armed conflict, disasters, displacement and the effect on social protection

The prevalence of armed conflict, disasters and displacement can have mixed effects on social protection. While they can largely disrupt social protections, i.e. within separated families and communities, they can also cement the bonds between people, leading to strong social cohesion. Most participants reported that armed conflict, disasters and displacement can lead to the disruption of livelihoods, which are necessary to provide assets for social protection, and limit the delivery of services and sharing of resources due to breakdown in social fabric and access challenges. As one participant[13] noted:

> **From 2005-2012, the community-led social protection had continued to function well as people were in peace, enabling them to farm and share resources. However, from 2013 to present, community-led social protection has been weakened due to conflict and displacement as well as due to climate change, which continues to affect crop production. (A male respondent aged about 35 in Lafon)**

Besides conflict, disasters and displacement, commercialisation and food insecurity has had a negative impact on the way people help each other. During the focus group discussion with Kabarze women group in Pibor, they all agreed that there is a negative effect of commercialisation on food insecurity. One of the group's participants said that:

> **Many people are now not like before. Money has spoiled them, because when you harvest your farms, the priority is to sell your products and give to the family members rather than giving to vulnerable or a neighbour like before. (A female respondent, aged 64 in Pibor)**

One area where several participants were concerned as not being adequately addressed is the conflict-induced trauma. Many groups argued that provision of trauma awareness and healing services during a conflict situation is an important form of social protection. This is because according to them, trauma reduces productivity and increases vulnerability, hence provision of trauma services would reduce vulnerability and increase production. There were quite significant stories of young men (mostly), who had returned from Sudan due to the crisis, wanting to go back because they were traumatised by the lack of adequate social protection for them.

Another major area of contention was around returnees from Sudan was the level of support provided to both refugees (non-South Sudanese) and returnees (South Sudanese returning from Sudan). Participants argued that returnees are more vulnerable than refugees because they do not get any aid, while refugees receive support from aid agencies in the refugee camps. They recalled that the South Sudanese government pursues a policy that mandates returnees to go back to their places of origin. People who have spent

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[13] Interview with local authority, Lafon, 23 August 2024

decades in Sudan and do not have connections with their places of origin nor with rural livelihoods are left homeless, landless and vulnerable.

The research team conducted KIIs and FGDs in Apada (Aweil South), a resettlement site that government has provided for returnees to settle. Several stories were heard of people not feeling adequately supported. In Aweil West and North, several stories of community members taking returnees into their own families and providing them basic protection support such a place to build a temporary structure to live in, were narrated. However, such families were not able to provide for longer, and beyond housing. It is important to note that the research team made attempts to visit the refugee camp in Wedweil in NBeG, to speak with refugees and have a comparative perspective. This was, however, not successful owing to rigorous access requirements by the aid agencies running the camp.

A perspective into a future after the exit of humanitarian-led social protection
Most research participants identified possible impact of the reduction of aid, with some saying that it will affect their livelihoods and the wider community social fabric. Participants believed that the frequent, prolonged and severe droughts and floods have not only contributed to high levels of food insecurity and fuelled rural-urban migration, displacement and breakdown of social fabric. Describing the likely impact of aid reduction in Pibor, one participant said:

> If the Aid Agencies leave, they will have a gap that will not be filled in the short term and the people will face a lot of challenges. The community will suffer, this is because… the absence of these [sic] will result in suffering. There are many people who are starving to death these days. (A male Respondent, aged 68, Pibor).

While fewer participants attributed the potential severity of the aid reduction to aid dependency, most of them citing the adverse effects on the breakdown in social fabric. As one participant in Pibor said: "Peaceful co-existence is difficult when you don't have food." (Respondent, aged 41, Female, Pibor). While another cited the example of the degrading of culture due to the obsession with money as a factor that has led many people to prioritise their needs over the needs of vulnerable groups.

For Lafon, a unique problem presents for the future of social protection. Lafon is close to the Badingilo National Park, and animal-human interaction increasingly occurs. In recent years, wildlife has moved much closer to Lafon center. The major reason for this is flooding inside the park. Referring to social protection threats, participants decried the loss of their smaller livestock (goats) to the wild animals, as well as destruction of their gardens by wild pigs. They reported that birds are also on the increase, which causes massive destruction to their grains. The community recognised the trend of the growing conservation sector in the country. Respondents hoped that conservation organisations would consider their social protection, and livelihood needs right from the beginning of conservation projects. For example, by building community trenches or electric fences to safeguard human livelihood activities from wildlife and reduce human-animal conflicts. Besides the conservations organisations would need to consider compensating for damage on community farms.

The findings indicate divergent opinions and thoughts on key themes. Respondents seem to dissent on whether formal social protection is better than informal social protection as well as the likely impact of aid reduction on community-led social protection. The point of convergences among respondents from the three case studies locations is the belief that community-led social

protection has been weakened because of food insecurity, armed conflicts, degrading culture of support, and exclusion of men from social protection interventions, leading to gender-based violence. In addition, the respondents appear to agree that more needs to be done to strengthen the community-led social protection through enhancing social cohesion, providing alternative and sustainable livelihoods support and addressing disasters, such as flooding. This they believe would also form a good 'exit strategy' for aid agencies. Respondents further implored that government institutions and structures need to be on board to start taking more responsibility in setting the platform to provide social protection and service delivery in the face of reduced aid.

Conclusions

Focusing on the perceptions on the potential aid reduction on social protection, the results found that the reduction in the level of aid will likely have serious impact on informal social protection. These results imply that this is so because of the impact of disasters such as flooding and droughts that have worsened the situation in recent years, let alone the absence of alternative means for survival. One participant in Lafon said: "*Aid reduction will likely lead to more misery as the area…lacks the ability to produce in large scale…as flooding, droughts and pests continue to affect the production of crops*."
On the link between armed conflict, disasters, displacement and the effect on social protection, the results found that there's an intersection between them. These findings suggest that community-led social protection systems can be vulnerable to these factors. While describing his experiences with disasters, one participant in Aweil town said that "*Less resources, hunger, conflict-this is what separates communities. You cannot help the vulnerable if you have no food for yourself*."

Based on the perceptions on community-led social protection, results showed that there are different understandings of the term 'social protection, among the participants from the case study locations, namely NBeG, Lafon and Pibor. These findings indicate that there is no common definition of the word "social protection" as participants provided varied definitions. This is important for aid interventions to consider, as it could mean that different community structures are relevant in the managing social protection in different locations.

A better understanding of the changing gender roles is needed in understanding social protection. The role of men in providing social protection is unfortunately slipping away partly because of the tendency of many social protection interventions to focus on women. As one participant argued that men are not exercising their role fully because "*Humanitarian assistance…provides support through [sic] the mothers and women, which is different from how the community was set up.*" This model risks leaving deep-rooted social problems in years to come, when men will be required to regain their roles, when the support of aid agencies that come mainly through women stops.

Recommendations

Strengthen the existing community-led social protection and social service facilities. To minimise the negative impact of aid-led social protection on the longstanding community-led social protection, aid agencies need to better understand and work in collaboration with the caregivers to maintain their traditional roles. This is because aid humanitarian led social protection has reportedly led to the weakening of community-led social protection through taking the place of caregivers. In doing this, aid actors might need to revisit their own understanding of vulnerability to ensure it aligns with communities'

understanding. Aid actors may also need to seek deeper understanding of local norms, practices and authorities through which community-based social protection is distributed.

Assess and address any negative impacts of aid reduction. To thoroughly assess the potential impact of aid reduction on communities that have been suffering from food insecurity, conflict and displacement on one side, but also on communities that have been dependent on humanitarian aid for a long time. This assessment is crucial in understanding what kind of aid exit strategies might be necessary to develop and nurture, and how to implement aid programmes in ways that ensures smooth transition to community-based mechanisms.

Provide capacity building and training to promote self-reliance. Provide capacity building through supporting health, education and climate change-adapted agriculture facilities to eventually take over social protection interventions using community-led models. Thus, significant and further investment may be needed to achieve a more sustainable reduction in poverty rates. This is particularly important because any form of social protection is really possible in a context where resources are available for the people to share through their networks. Where the community lacks resources, community social protection falls apart.

Foster social cohesion and community systems to regain community-based social protection. Strengthen social cohesion between communities, especially between vulnerable groups and their caregivers as well as between vulnerable groups and the wider communities as these relations have been affected by armed conflict, disasters and displacements. In practice, this can be done through integrating social protection programming with local conflict resolution mechanisms, as well as social interaction activities. By strengthening community social systems, aid agencies will be able to enhance the currently weakened community structures to regain their role of caring for the vulnerable community members. Humanitarian relief can support peacebuilding efforts and vice versa.

Invest in knowledge and skills transfer within every social protection intervention. Aid agencies working on social protection should invest in livelihood interventions that can be sustainable. For example, providing farming items, such as seeds and tools should go alongside provision of skills and knowledge, to achieve self-reliance over time. Aid agencies should target organised groups with these items to ensure that they become self-reliant in the long run. As one female respondent in Aweil South summarised:

> "we are tired of being given fish, we should be taught how to catch our own fish. Start-up businesses with accompanying basic skills would go a long way toward our sustainability."

Ensure aid is provided equitably through men and women spaces. Aid agencies need to consider providing social protection through the spaces and mechanisms that respect both men and women social roles. This will ensure that men are kept in the loop of their cardinal roles in families and communities, but also reduce the likely risks of increased gender-based violence later when men will need to resume their roles, which currently heavily taken up by women, with more support channelled through them by aid agencies. Aid agencies need to be conflict-sensitive by ensuring that their work does not contribute to further conflict now or in the future.

Appendix

Appendix-1

S/N	Locations	Data gathering method	Number of data gathering method	Number of participants	Male	Female	Total
1	Aweil	Key informant interview	7	16	15	1	126
		Focus group discussion	13	110	41	69	
2	Lafon	Key informant interview	10	10	10	0	58
		Focus group discussion	6	48	25	23	
3	Pibor	Key informant interview	10	10	10	0	56
		Focus group discussion	5	46	24	22	
					125	115	240