HPG briefing note

Complementary approaches between international and local protection advocacy

‘Don’t speak for me, I’ll speak for myself’

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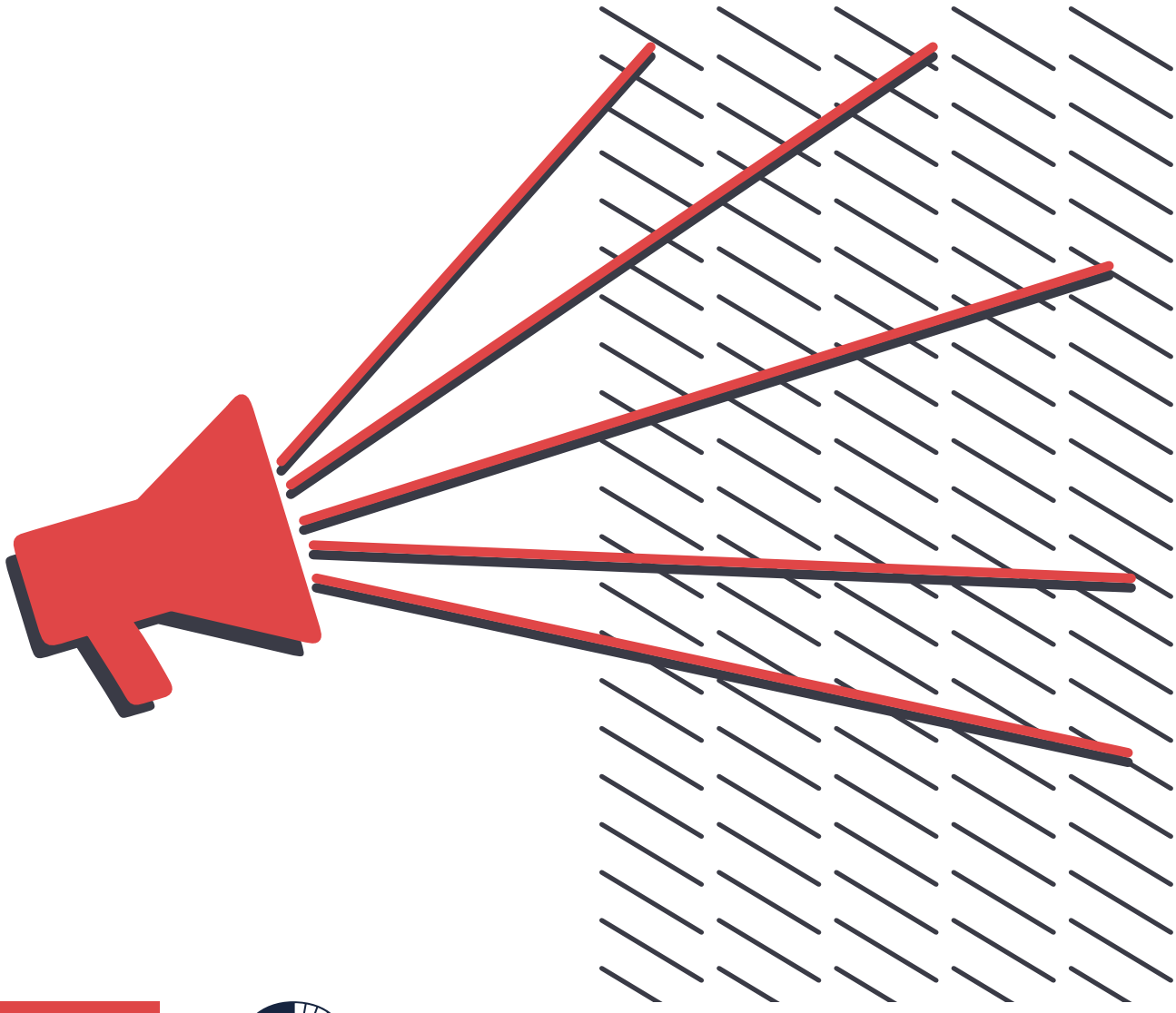

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Introduction

The value of complementary approaches between international humanitarian and local/national (herein referred to as national) actors to carrying out advocacy to strengthen protection of civilians in situations of armed conflict is well-recognised. The growing push to 'localise' humanitarian action has strengthened understanding that national actors are critical frontline advocates for protection of affected populations. Integrating this understanding into the actual practice of international actors seems, however, to be more challenging.

National and international humanitarian actors have different strengths in carrying out advocacy. National actors have greater proximity to and understanding of political, economic, religious, social and cultural dynamics in a specific context, and will remain long after international actors have withdrawn (see IASC, 2016; Bowden and Metcalfe-Hough, 2020; Davies, 2021; Gray Meral et al., 2021; Metcalfe-Hough, 2021). They also typically have stronger access to national interlocutors. International actors can have greater access to regional and international platforms and interlocutors, and greater access to funding. However, all too often, international protection advocacy efforts at best overlook, and at worst undermine, national advocacy initiatives. Where there is collaboration, it is often driven by international humanitarian actors, while national advocates struggle to have their voices heard or to receive the support they require of the international community in undertaking complementary advocacy (Gray Meral et al., 2021).

This paper explores current practice of complementary advocacy between national actors and international humanitarian actors to strengthen the protection of conflict-affected populations, with a particular focus on Jordan and South Sudan. It examines the factors that enable complementary approaches to advocacy, the challenges and risks involved and opportunities to strengthen complementary and collaborative approaches to protection advocacy.

The paper draws on rapid research based on a limited set of interviews and focus group discussions with national and international actors working in and on Jordan and South Sudan. It is complemented by interviews with representatives of national and international forums and platforms. This study is part of HPG's 2019–2022 Integrated Programme of research on protection advocacy, which explores the current practice of protection advocacy by a range of international humanitarian actors and their collaboration with national and international actors within the humanitarian sector and beyond.

Both Jordan and South Sudan have a strong civil society, with national non-governmental organisations (NNGOs) and community-based organisations (CBOs) active in protection advocacy and in delivering humanitarian assistance. In both countries NNGOs, CBOs and civil society organise themselves through a variety of forums. They are part of United Nations (UN)-led humanitarian coordination mechanisms and liaise closely with international non-governmental organisation

(INGO) coordination bodies. In Jordan, the Jordanian NGO forum (JONAF), established by the NNGO Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development (ARDD) in 2016, is fully integrated into the humanitarian response: they co-chair the Humanitarian Platform Forum with the Jordan INGO Forum (JIF), and several of JONAF's 63 NNGO and CBO members are part of the Protection Working Group. JONAF's members work collaboratively with INGOs, UN agencies, donors and the Jordanian government in seeking to influence decision-makers on refugee protection issues, including identifying successes, challenges and adaptations required for the implementation of the Refugee Compact.[1] In South Sudan, national NGOs are represented across the humanitarian coordination architecture, including the humanitarian country team (HCT) and the protection cluster. Beyond the humanitarian response, several civil society forums came together to leverage the momentum of the 2018 peace process, including the South Sudan Civil Society Forum (SSCSF) and the women's coalition.[2] Initially supported by INGOs, some interviewees consider the SSCSF and the women's coalition as some of the strongest civil society voices in South Sudan today.

Complementary protection advocacy between national and international actors

The value of collaborative approaches

Recent years have seen increasing recognition of the need for the international community to use their influence to amplify the voices of national actors. Given their greater funding and international standing, international actors are thought to have more influence with national governments on at least some protection issues. In both Jordan and South Sudan, national actors report they have historically had less influence over national or central governments than their international counterparts. As such, national actors highlight the strengths of collaborative approaches on protection. They note the benefits of international actors supporting their policy positions and the development of policy forums for national actors to directly engage with decision-makers.

In Jordan, JONAF's advocacy with the government helped spur progress in reducing government restrictions on Syrian refugees' access to the skilled labour market. JONAF now regularly engages with the government, including on refugee issues. Jordanian NGOs have also worked to ensure a more equitable response to non-Syrian refugees, albeit one NNGO representative described their

1 The Refugee Compact for Jordan was an outcome of the Global Refugee Compact process, which reaffirmed the commitment of states to collectively address and support refugees. For more detail on the Jordan Compact, see: https://globalcompactrefugees.org/article/jordan.

2 Following numerous efforts to broker peace in South Sudan since the escalation of the conflict in 2013, a peace deal brokered by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) was signed in Addis Ababa in 2018. See: www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/south-sudan/270-salvaging-south-sudans-fragile-peace-deal.

efforts as a 'struggle and a fight'. Thanks to JONAF's advocacy and JIF's support, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and a donor began supporting this. Sustained engagement resulted in a shift in 2019 to explore ways to deliver a more equitable response. This is now coordinated through the One Refugee Approach Working Group, which includes representatives from national and international humanitarian and human rights organisations.

In South Sudan, international organisations have supported national actors to access national, regional and international platforms and decision-makers on a range of issues, including protection. For example, an informal group of INGOs, including Crisis Action, Justice Africa, Oxfam and Norwegian People's Aid (NPA), worked collaboratively to support civil society to directly engage in the peace process. INGOs supported South Sudanese civil society organisations to work collectively and to strategise on influencing approaches, to access funding for advocacy and to engage with national, regional and international mechanisms. For example, INGOs supported national organisations to undertake a regional tour, including to the African Union (AU) headquarters in Addis Ababa, aimed at engaging policy-makers on South Sudan. INGO support contributed to the formation of the SSCSF and a national coalition representing women's organisations, as well as a youth coalition. This was enabled by taking a long-term vision with sustained support from INGOs.

Today, the SSCSF is well-established, has legitimacy, is listened to among the diplomatic community, has strong networks and has direct access to international stakeholders. This was demonstrated by a request for the SSCSF coordinator to brief the UN Security Council in June 2021 (UNSC, 2021). The forum has been proactive in mobilising civil society, broadening their reach including through radio shows, and carrying out direct advocacy with South Sudanese political and military leaders.

The women's coalition sought support from Oxfam, Crisis Action and NPA to use the momentum around the peace process to draw attention to women's rights and empowerment (Oxfam, 2020). Crisis Action supported the women's coalition to carry out the first-ever online summit on issues relevant to women, peace and security in South Sudan (Sawa South Sudan, 2018). These and related campaigns have contributed to a shift in the narrative on the roles and rights of women and girls, while challenging patriarchal norms in South Sudanese society.

Advocacy efforts on sexual violence in South Sudan highlight how international attention to protection issues can create the space for national actors and affected people to engage in dialogue on issues affecting them. In November 2018, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) released a report on the exponential increase in cases of sexual violence they were treating at their clinic in Bentiu (MSF, 2018). While this resulted in the expulsion of one of MSF's staff members, women's rights organisations mobilised to continue to raise awareness on the horrifying levels of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in South Sudan. An INGO representative supporting women's rights organisations spoke to the growing confidence of civil society and survivors of SGBV in raising these issues and demanding change, which they attributed in part to international recognition and

support in attracting attention to this issue. International actors have increasingly recognised and prioritised the urgent need to prevent and respond to SGBV, leading to sustained engagement and funding. One interviewee said that increased support for survivors – whether through health, psychosocial or judicial support – led to concrete changes in people's lives.

Complementary advocacy on SGBV in South Sudan has also included nationally led calls for appropriate mechanisms for redress. Collaborative and sustained advocacy from members of the gender-based violence (GBV) Sub-Cluster, in which both national and international organisations are represented, along with women's rights campaigners, resulted in the establishment of the first-ever Gender-Based Violence and Juvenile Court in Juba in 2020. Accountability had been the advocacy theme of the GBV Sub-Cluster that year, leveraging the visibility of and momentum on GBV in conflict globally and within South Sudan. This has resulted in the referral of cases from state to national level, including through GBV support services, and successful convictions.

Other international and national collaborations in South Sudan have established survivor support groups and initiated direct dialogue between survivors of sexual violence and decision-makers within the government, while support from international allies created additional pressure on the government to act. Part of this initiative involved an internationally supported 'Survivors Speak' conference in Juba in September 2021, where survivors of SGBV engaged officials and policy-makers, including from the government, on the impact of SGBV (Rights for Peace, 2021).

Civil society and survivors' groups continue to work with INGOs to highlight SGBV in South Sudan to regional and international stakeholders, including the UN Security Council and the AU. They emphasise the importance of such stakeholders hearing directly from those affected. As one interviewee said, ultimately they want the international community to 'understand our stories, [and] understand the dynamics'.

Complementary analysis and framing of advocacy positions

Promoting the protection of conflict-affected groups requires robust contextual analysis and clearly targeted advocacy messaging. These were two areas highlighted by interviewees as benefiting from collaboration between international and national actors in Jordan and South Sudan.

In Jordan, interviewees highlighted the international humanitarian community's lack of understanding of how to influence the Jordanian government, with an over-reliance on standard, generalised advocacy approaches, such as public statements based on international frameworks. At times this had had a negative impact on advocacy objectives, including rebukes from the Jordanian government. The informal partnership between JONAF and JIF led to the engagement of national and international NGOs with the UN, donors and government allies on framing and approaches to protection advocacy. NNGO involvement supported progress on, for example, refugees' access to work.

In South Sudan, interviewees reported that local staff and national actors' understanding of population movements, conflict and humanitarian needs contributed to crucial analysis of the likelihood of people falling into severe or catastrophic hunger. In Pibor, for example, increased food insecurity coincided with a period of heightened violence linked to a cultural display of strength among male youths. International actors had tried to influence the behaviour of these youths by referring to international legal frameworks; or, in the case of UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) military peacekeepers, by using military approaches. However, this had little impact and was said to be of little relevance or interest to these groups. Some international actors engaged in dialogue with local stakeholders, including women, to understand ethnic and cultural factors behind these practices, understand what outcomes were linked to violence, and discuss solutions. This enabled discussions to take place on how youths could achieve their aims with less human cost.

When discussing the benefits of nuanced, context-specific analysis, one respondent noted that this requires humility and a willingness to listen on the part of international actors. In the example cited above, this was often absent due to the apparent belief that international and military approaches to dealing with local armed actors were superior to local analysis and solutions.

Factors enabling complementarity for protection advocacy

Leveraging momentum and political will

Examples of complementary approaches to advocacy discussed all leveraged momentum or political opportunities. For example, SSCSF used the momentum of the 2018 peace process to strengthen civil society inputs to the process. One initiative, 'South Sudan is watching', attracted significant attention and international support, creating opportunities for the forum to carry out further advocacy for engaging in the peace process (SSCSF, 2018).

Leveraging international and national attention on SGBV was a key factor in bringing the issue to the forefront in South Sudan. Complementary efforts from international and national actors built and sustained visibility on the scale of SGBV in South Sudan. MSF's report, further international and national reporting and mobilisation of international and national actors and survivors of SGBV led to strong visibility and momentum. The role of local and national actors in involving government allies in this advocacy has also been key. However, while having strong government allies was seen as essential – including for the establishment of the Gender-Based Violence and Juvenile Court in Juba – the key supporters were women, and the lack of male champions with influence remains a major barrier to moving this agenda forward.

Both examples demonstrate leveraging opportunities, including political opportunities: the formation of SSCSF built on momentum and political will within the international community and in parts of the national government, while visibility and mobilisation around SGBV contributed to building political will, including through cultivating allies within government and the international community.

Support from individuals in positions of leadership and/or influence is key to developing protection advocacy initiatives and mobilising support. So, too, is a long-term perspective, as change can take years. This is often where humanitarian-led approaches to protection advocacy fall short, given the short-term funding and planning cycles in many humanitarian organisations. By contrast, national actors are present and willing to engage in such issues over the longer term.

Flexibility is required to maximise opportunities for momentum and to conduct reactive advocacy. This represents a key barrier for larger humanitarian organisations managing restricted programme grants. For this reason, smaller organisations, or organisations with less restricted funding, could be in a better position to support national advocacy. Interviewees highlighted that some of the greatest successes in protection advocacy were achieved by informal groups that had not received programme-related funds and that could leverage momentum, mobilise and react at the opportune moment. A number of interviewees reported that, for related reasons, advocacy that is not 'branded' by organisations can provide opportunities for greater creativity beyond standard organisational approaches.

Equal partnerships and trust

Collaborative advocacy in South Sudan and Jordan often relied on individuals and was built on trust. Support to SSCSF and women's coalitions in South Sudan depended on individuals in INGOs who collectively engaged with civil society to support a long-term vision, providing funding and technical support. In Jordan, JIF's incoming director invested in building relationships with JONAF and its members, listened to the challenges facing national actors and sought collaborative solutions. In both examples, building trust through long-term engagement was key. Individuals involved spoke of the need for similar values and aims between organisations and individuals to facilitate collective advocacy. Such high levels of collaboration can often dissipate when the individuals involved move on. As the examples of Jordan and South Sudan show, translating success based on individuals into success with longevity requires building credibility, networks and equal partnerships, and sustained engagement.

Programming partnerships can also serve as an entry point for protection advocacy. In Jordan, the NNGO Tamkeen had for years been working on labour rights for Syrian refugees, including women's access to the labour market. With the signing of the Refugee Compact and subsequent increased international funding, there were more partnership opportunities for national organisations. Tamkeen negotiated these on the basis that it would maintain its independence in programming and advocacy initiatives, preserving the space to lead protection advocacy when international agencies were not willing or able to do so, and to collaborate with other national and international actors to lobby for the labour rights of Syrian refugees where approaches and priorities aligned.

Legitimacy

Geopolitical shifts, declining multilateralism and decolonising agendas have in some respects led to a waning of the influence of Global North international humanitarian actors and, in some instances, of international standards and principles. As a result, there are both principled and pragmatic reasons for investing more in national advocacy efforts and in ensuring complementary approaches. Interviewees highlighted how international organisations represented by individuals from the Global North are, in many contexts, increasingly perceived as less credible advocates towards national stakeholders.

National actors in both Jordan and South Sudan regularly referred to national actors knowing how to talk with the local community. As Chowdhury (2018: 6–7) argues: 'the truth is local NGOs and local leaders are much more acceptable when it comes to advocacy in a crisis situation'. One interviewee in Jordan highlighted how Arabic translations of internationally devised advocacy messages were often 'robotic' and meaningless to local communities: 'we know how to address these stakeholders and speak their language'. The respondent noted the issue of women's rights: that the international community's focus on early marriage without an understanding of traditional culture had resulted in little impact over the years. National actors spoke of the need to be sensitive to communities and change the way the issue was framed. By 'talking in their language', they reported having greater acceptance, and therefore a dialogue with communities, than had previously been achieved.

Challenges to complementary advocacy

Top-down approaches: voices are not listened to, are excluded or are silenced

The humanitarian sector remains internationally driven, with an architecture and terminology that often exclude local and national actors (Barbelet, 2019). This is the case in South Sudan, where the humanitarian sector has contributed to a hierarchy from internationals to educated South Sudanese to non-educated South Sudanese. Several respondents complained that South Sudanese did not adequately inform discussions, were not listened to or, in some cases, were silenced (see Box 1). For example, in 2020, UNMISS started closing Protection of Civilians (PoC) sites. Under UNMISS jurisdiction and security management, these sites were opened in late 2013 in response to widespread ethnic and political violence, including at the hands of government, non-government and allied groups. The South Sudan National Police Service took over responsibility for security (UNMISS, 2020), raising significant concerns among residents for their safety (Mednick, 2021).

Box 1 Narratives and power

Internationally driven narratives of violence, conflict and peace in South Sudan influence how the international community understands and responds to the needs of civilians. One such narrative has been that the national peace process has been broadly holding, with violence other than that between key conflict parties labelled as localised communal violence (UNSC, 2020a; b), and hence of a smaller scale and intensity than acute armed conflict and with less impact on food systems.

Numerous interviewees pointed to poor conflict analysis among international actors resulting in inaccurate protection and needs analysis. In Jonglei state, for example, the narrative of localised communal violence led some within the international community to miss indications that civilians were experiencing severe levels of hunger linked to high levels of widespread, sustained violence targeting civilian populations and agro-pastoralist livelihoods. As a result, the growing risk of famine was not widely identified or publicly reported (Newton, 2021). A qualified famine was finally declared in December 2020, 10 months after some agencies had begun issuing warnings of rising levels of violence-related hunger (Buchanan-Smith et al., 2021; Newton, 2021).

This privileging of certain perspectives, and the underplaying of others, can also be seen in relation to the return of internally displaced people (IDPs) from PoC sites. The closure of the sites led to pressure from the government to carry out returns and relocations of civilians previously residing in these sites. This research found significant concerns across a number of international and national actors that this would lead to internationally supported returns driving further protection risks. However, national concerns were reportedly silenced. A number of respondents spoke of the marginalisation of national voices within a protection cluster dominated by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), particularly given that many were recipients of UNHCR funding. Protection monitoring to inform advocacy is reported to be 'vetted' and controlled by UNHCR, leaving NNGOs, and even INGOs, little space to independently lead advocacy initiatives.

A series of closed-door advocacy initiatives took place, including briefings to diplomats and donors. An UNMISS, UN and INGO transition platform was established, and discussions on the implications of the closures were held at the HCT. However, this was led by the international community, and direct engagement with UNMISS was limited to a small pool of INGOs and the UN. Many international organisations were reportedly reluctant to speak out against UNMISS. A number of South Sudanese organisations expressed major misgivings about the closure of the PoC sites, particularly in areas experiencing extremely high levels of violence, such as Bentiu

and Malakal. However, there were limited platforms for local and national actors to voice these concerns. Although NNGO representatives sit on the HCT, power dynamics are such that this offers limited opportunities to influence decision-making.

While UNMISS and the UN Special Representative of the Secretary General did engage in dialogue with national and international actors to an extent, such forums were reported to be largely tokenistic in an environment where decisions were perceived to have already been taken. Certainly, respondents for this study agreed that national actors and affected communities had no real influence or oversight over the process. One interviewee observed that the international community 'isn't very welcoming to South Sudanese voices'.

Similarly, in Jordan, national organisations were initially excluded from planning and decision-making within the response when the humanitarian architecture was established in 2011 in response to the mass arrivals of Syrian refugees. Jordanian actors spoke of being treated solely as implementing partners – as is the case in many other responses. They described the long, hard struggle over several years for greater integration in the response. This was in part dependent on sustained collective lobbying over a number of years through JONAF and its members.

Mistrust and lack of respect

The power dynamics between national and international actors within humanitarian responses, and the resulting internationally driven hierarchies, mean that national actors can perceive international actors as having a misplaced sense of superiority. In Jordan, multiple respondents from national organisations said that they felt international organisations treated them as 'lesser counterparts' or 'lower class'. One respondent reflected that, while international actors have been increasingly sensitive to the fact that they may not have all the solutions, 'if they can get away with it [doing things their own way], they will'. One interviewee in South Sudan reflected that internationals perceive that 'the expat is supposed to be the expert' (an assumption the interviewee challenged). Collaborations are often exploitative, with one respondent feeling 'milked'. Numerous interviewees said they had experienced similar issues.

This highlights an urgent need for humility among international actors in considering where they are best placed to support civilians, and to seek ways to better listen, support and complement national actors in analysis and advocacy.

Structural barriers

Structural barriers can also make it difficult for national actors to strategically engage in protection priorities and meaningfully contribute to effective protection advocacy. In both South Sudan and Jordan, senior leadership structures and positions are dominated by internationals. In South Sudan there are just two South Sudanese Country Directors in international humanitarian organisations involved in the response, meaning that international, rather than national, representatives are often undertaking advocacy.

Short humanitarian funding cycles and the lack of flexible funding also undermines complementary advocacy initiatives. For example, in South Sudan, following a series of particularly egregious rape attacks, a women's group mobilised a protest. They approached an international partner they had previously worked with but which, due to bureaucratic constraints, was unable to provide financial support. However, representatives of the international organisation attended the protest, documented it and later publicised it, leading to a perception by those involved that the organisations they worked with had financially supported the protest, resulting in tensions between the groups involved. This raises issues of unforeseen, potentially harmful consequences of the actions of international actors, as well as challenges around non-flexible funding. A lack of funding at national level for carrying out protection advocacy results in national actors having to develop and represent advocacy positions and mobilise national actors with little financial support, if any.

Terminology

The terminology around protection is not well understood by anyone other than technical specialists within the humanitarian system. Many national actors working with international humanitarian actors for the purpose of protection advocacy do not generally use protection language. In both Jordan and South Sudan, national actors spoke in terms of rights, equality, peace and security, rather than protection. As Gray Meral et al. argue: 'at times, international actors interpret (and reinforce) differences in terminology as national actors' lack of capacity, leading to the adoption of top-down capacity-building approaches. It also leads to missed opportunities for mutual learning, understanding and co-creation of work' (Gray Meral et al., 2021: 25). Indeed, as one national interviewee in South Sudan put it: 'listen to my problems, let us come up with a solution together'. Terminology, then, can be another exclusionary factor.

Risks

Advocacy to promote protection carries risks for any actor – particularly when individuals and representatives are carrying out direct advocacy towards duty-bearers or parties to a conflict. Given such risks, many organisations have historically not put nationals at the forefront of direct protection advocacy within their country. While internationals can leave, national staff are limited in their ability to do so, posing risks to those individuals, their families and associates. In South Sudan, for example, calls from the coordinator of SSCSF to mobilise on 30 August 2021, as part of the People's Coalition for Civil Action (PCCA),[3] led to arrests, the freezing of organisational and personal bank accounts of civil society organisations and representatives, increased surveillance of suspected civil society representatives and the heavy deployment of security forces. A number of civil society representatives, including from SSCSF, fled the country (Amnesty International, 2021).

3 The PCCA is a coalition of South Sudanese civil society groups participating in a public campaign to demand political change.

Such concerns have led some international organisations and/or individuals to exclude national actors from protection advocacy initiatives (Davies, 2021). However, while the risks are often higher for national actors, this does not mean that international organisations should automatically assume they should not be involved. As one activist put it: 'don't speak for me, let me speak for myself'. One national actor stated that they did not feel at greater risk and were in a better position to directly advocate with local government and ministries where they had already built a relationship (ibid.).

Even so, the level of risk and risk appetite of national actors to engage in direct advocacy raises questions around how international organisations engaging in advocacy can support their national partners – including to mitigate and respond to potential risks. International humanitarian actors are often poor at planning and resourcing this support, compared to the support international human rights actors provide to human rights defenders (HRDs). International humanitarian actors need to consider their duty of care and moral responsibility to national partners, learning from approaches developed by their human rights counterparts. At a minimum, they should proactively establish a referral system to organisations that provide direct support to HRDs.

This again comes back to listening and developing a partnership approach to advocacy initiatives between international and national actors, including through joint analyses of risks and ways to mitigate them. In South Sudan, sustained proactive engagement with national security and other political actors supported SSCSF in mitigating some risks, but was not enough to insulate them entirely, as the example above shows. Other strategies might include mobilisation, leveraging political support from states with influence, using networks and contacts, carrying out collective advocacy to share risks, or national actors assuming less visible positions. While there is no right answer, individuals and organisations can make informed choices around the level of risk they are willing to take (Davies, 2021).

Conclusion: opportunities for more complementary approaches to advocacy

Experience in Jordan and South Sudan suggests clear benefits to international and national actors working in greater complementarity. With global momentum on localisation and calls to decolonise the humanitarian sector, there are demands for international humanitarian actors to give greater recognition and visibility to the roles and value of national protection advocacy efforts. The international community should commit to understanding whether they are best placed to lead advocacy efforts, play a supporting role through amplifying the voices of local advocacy platforms, or step back to open up space for national actors to lead advocacy efforts.

National actors point to greater efforts by some international actors to listen, understand and collaborate, at least in some instances. Some have given examples of equal partnerships. However, this remains ad hoc, often based on individuals and collaborations of the willing. The architecture, terminology, systems and processes of the international humanitarian system are barriers to greater and more equal collaboration, reinforcing top-down approaches, hierarchies and the very power dynamics that decolonisation and localisation agendas are seeking to tackle.

All national actors interviewed were clear that international organisations should not assume they know what protection issues to prioritise for advocacy or how to influence change better than affected people or national organisations. There can never be a one-size-fits-all approach, hence the need for flexibility and sustained engagement, with mutual ownership and consideration of the comparative advantage of international and national actors in carrying out protection advocacy.

Joint analysis and assessment of risk and strategic approaches to advocacy should be the factors in deciding the advocacy roles of international and national actors. This is all the more relevant in a geopolitical context where the legitimacy of Global North actors is increasingly under question. National actors largely recognise the benefits of collaborating with international organisations, but require an equal platform, trust and to be listened to. As one national actor in South Sudan said: 'we are the drivers of change nationally'. They should be recognised and supported as such.

Recommendations

Recommendations to international actors

- Provide platforms for national actors to engage in protection advocacy, including at decision-making levels or directly with decision-makers. Ensure equal participation of national actors, with the analysis, positions and priorities of national actors adequately informing approaches. This could be through representation on strategic advisory groups on protection, leadership of protection forums or co-ownership of protection advocacy strategies. Proactively ensure such efforts are not tokenistic and that national voices are not marginalised.
- Build equal partnerships, including through the inclusion of national actors in the development of analysis and advocacy strategies. This should include joint analysis of the roles of national and international actors in advocacy. International actors should commit to understanding when they are best placed to lead advocacy efforts, when to offer support by amplifying the voices of national advocates and when to step back to open up space for national actors to lead advocacy efforts. Show humility and listen.
- Ensure joint risk analysis and mitigation with local and national actors. Support mitigation strategies and joint contingency planning. Ensure all partners are adequately informed of potential risks and prepared for them.

- Engage with and participate in ongoing relationships and avenues to refer HRD cases to protection organisations, and vice versa. Consider ways to resource these.
- Invest in multi-year partnerships and national advocacy capacity. Build flexible funding into advocacy initiatives to enable reactive advocacy support.
- Ensure that national actors are fully integrated into the humanitarian response, including at strategic and decision-making levels.
- Commit to meaningfully tackling barriers to national actors engaging equally in protection advocacy. This includes recognising and deconstructing power dynamics, along with the systems, processes and terminology that support them.

Recommendations to donors

- Prioritise funding for advocacy as a tool to strengthen protection. Build flexibility into advocacy initiatives, including for reactive advocacy. Ensure monitoring of the impact of protection advocacy, including through analysis of the range of advocacy approaches, partnerships and activities.
- Fund and incentivise equal, multi-year partnerships between national and international actors. Ensure adequate resourcing of advocacy capacity across national and international actors.
- Encourage national actors' dialogue with states and decision-makers. Incentivise international partners to support this, and take steps to ensure this is not tokenistic. Support national actors to directly engage in dialogue through formal or informal platforms. Listen.
- Ensure donor-driven funding priorities do not have negative consequences. Consider what those consequences could be through direct dialogue with national actors.

Recommendations to local and national actors

- Continue demanding an equal space to engage with, participate in and lead advocacy initiatives. Approach international actors with clear advocacy agendas and requests for how they can support national actors in their advocacy aims through partnerships.
- Demand that any partnerships with international actors are genuine and equal, not tokenistic. Call out international actors when they fail to ensure this.
- Seek South–South learning and exchange opportunities on how to conduct advocacy in challenging contexts, for example through membership of South–South forums such as the NEAR Network and the Alliance for Empowering Partnership.

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