

A close-up photograph of a woman with dark skin and her hair in braids, smiling warmly as she holds a young child. The woman is wearing a vibrant blue and green floral patterned top with a large green fabric wrap around her neck. The child is wearing a light-colored, ribbed short-sleeved shirt. The background is a clear blue sky and a blurred outdoor setting with some wooden structures.

**Auto-Protection:
Lived Experiences of Conflict-Affected People
in southern Unity State, South Sudan**

March 2015

Disclaimer

The contents of this paper are based on perceptions of participants in this research and the impressions and analytic reflections of the author. The arguments and conclusions do not reflect the views of any member of the South Sudan Protection Cluster (SSPC), Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) or agencies providing operational support to the research. As an abridged version this paper reflects summary arguments, perceptions and issues contained in a working paper looking into the linkages between auto-protection and livelihoods and another that contains reflections on displacement. The editing team regret any omissions in the text – referential, analytic or otherwise.

Research Aims

The research was commissioned in an effort to understand decision-making processes and choice pathways of individuals and communities when faced with armed conflict, violence and its humanitarian and protection consequences. In part inspired by the success of studies conducted in Darfur by ODI/HPG and Tufts University in Darfur (2007-2009), this research sought to establish a platform for understanding the interconnectedness in conflict between the threats to people's physical protection and livelihoods and the trade-offs made which imply new risks or exacerbate old ones. Whilst this paper is only foundation-setting it attempts to contribute to the humanitarian community in South Sudan's understanding of how conflict-affected populations perceive their own protection risks and opportunities. The research is also part of an on-going effort to ensure that we see the current crisis through the eyes of those affected by it and not through internationalized frameworks. The findings are based on ethnographic field-based research conducted between October and December 2014 in Koch, Leer and Bentiu towns and in the wider Unity State area; and complementary interviews in Rumbek, Lakes State; Juba, Central Equatoria State; and Bor, Jonglei State.

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Cover design: ©UNHCR/A. McConnell. South Sudanese woman reunited with her niece in the town of Leer, Unity State, after having not seen her for months.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	4
2. Linkages between Protection and Livelihoods	5
3. Displacement as a primary auto-protection strategy	8
Local hiding and protracted displacement.....	9
Evolving Displacement Strategies	10
Coming out of hiding	10
Anticipating Enhanced Violence	11
Displacement as a vulnerability.....	11
4. Vulnerability	12
‘Starting-Point’ versus ‘End-Point’ Vulnerabilities.....	12
Psycho-social status	12
Women on their own.....	12
Separated families	13
5. Core capitals – Fuelling auto-protection capacity	13
Human Capital.....	14
Social Capital.....	14
Natural Capital	15
Financial Capital	15
Material Capital & Livelihood Assets	16
Livestock	16
Failing Crops.....	17
Food Aid.....	18
6. Resolution to the Conflict	19
7. Conclusions	19
Bibliography	21

1. Introduction

In December 2013, barely two and half years after South Sudan's independence, a brutal armed conflict plunged the country into civil war, pitting community against community, and precipitating a large-scale humanitarian crisis. Already underserved, underrepresented and impoverished over 4 million face acute humanitarian needs. Civilians have been made a target in this conflict, and exposed to egregious acts that are tantamount to crimes against humanity: rape, sexual slavery, forced recruitment, extrajudicial killings, torture, destruction of livelihoods, and restrictions on movement.¹ Nascent state institutions mandated to ensure the protection of the citizens have failed leaving civilians having to make untenable choices to secure their safety and dignity. Though capacity to act is one thing more apparent are the historic political, social and economic fault lines that these institutions perpetuate at the local level.

As the current conflict in South Sudan passes its one-year mark this paper seeks to understand what the actual experiences and independent efforts of conflict-affected individuals have been to violence and abuses they have faced. Specifically, it considers the immediate aftermath of violence and during the initial stages of displacement of people in Koch, Leer and Bentiu. It recognises that in South Sudan people have resorted to protecting themselves taking on an array of strategies: avoidance of a threat, reduction of other threats, and absorption of new risks- being amongst the most obvious. These strategies are closely tied in South Sudan to freedom of movement given a large majority of those affected, over 90% are agro-pastoralist groups and reliant on cattle rearing, access to fields, trading and remittances. This point is critical to remember as notions, resources and capabilities to auto-protection are specific to the individual and the context but also overlaid, therefore it is not simply protection verses assistance but how these interplay with each other (see p.6).

The choices people can and do make in the face of direct threats to their safety and dignity varies according to social and political boundaries, identity, gender, historical positioning, social status, amongst other things. In turn, the impact of violence is directly related to the specific vulnerabilities people have. The research concludes that South Sudanese in southern Unity State, the epicentre of some of the fighting, have endured immense violence and consequential hardship, and though people have adapted and demonstrated some resilience to prolonged shocks, available resources and capabilities are being severely tested and are inadequate. Only a full resolution to the conflict, its political, social and economic drivers, accountability for atrocities committed, space to recover livelihoods and build trust across now fractured communities, and trust in state institutions can lead to rebuilding the lives of people in South Sudan.

Broad Observations

- All too often, people at risk in southern Unity State are forced to assume the burden of ensuring their own protection in the almost complete absence of state or other institutional (recognized) forms of protection.
 - Displacement and the ability to move in an unimpeded and safe manner constitutes one of the key strategies that people have relied heavily upon to reduce the risk of physical violence, and access basic subsistence.
- The political and protection drivers of this conflict have meant people are in a constant state of readiness to flee, and make temporary calculations about their lives.

¹ See Human Right Watch reports <http://www.hrw.org/africa/south-sudan>.

- People consider protection in the more holistic sense of ‘human security’, and are constantly juggling the most urgent threats to their personal/physical, food, health, social and material well-being. People draw extensively on whatever resources are available to them - natural, social, humanitarian - and UNMISS to the extent these elements serve the immediate objectives of their auto-protection strategies.
- As such, auto-protection strategies are extremely (sub-) context specific, with each being sometimes dramatically different. There are few absolutes and it is often quite misleading if not dangerous to extrapolate from one sub-context to the next, especially in the case of Protection of Civilians sites.
- People at risk are constantly analysing their circumstances, assessing the threats they perceive vis-a-vis the opportunities available to them in order to maximise their security options – albeit often within the constraints of partial, absent or incorrect information.
- Resolution of the displacement crisis is directly tied to resolution of the broader conflict crisis that originally provoked the displacement. People clearly state that peace is the fundamental condition required to allow for the end to their current condition and eventual recovery. Without this the persistence of displacement, exposure to violence, and inability to secure adequate basic needs will require people to take new and more risks and erode positive strategies for coping with the crisis.

For many readers and protection specialists the issues raised in this paper from a theoretical and personal perspective will not be new. A number of questions remain unanswered that warrant further research and study, as the papers strength and limitations lie in the fact that questions are answered in the way the interviewees understand them, which may not always provide the international community with the answers we are looking for, yet provide insight into the lived understanding and articulation of conflict and capacities. The next sections aim to highlight how people in southern Unity State are facing multiple vulnerabilities as a result of the current conflict, and how their goal of seeking physical safety and security of access to basic means of subsistence, and social networks, and is interdependent.

2. Linkages between Protection and Livelihoods

In order to gain insight into how people in southern Unity State are developing their own strategies to reduce the risk of violence and secure their survival one needs to understand the connection between auto-protection and livelihoods. In South Sudan social, political and economic life is significantly tied to agro-pastoral systems. This section explains what auto-protection is in general terms and drawing from research conducted in Sudan, Sri Lanka, the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) and Chechnya, illustrates the threats and risks people face in situations of armed conflict (violence, coercion and deprivation) and how these risks affect personal security and the capacity to survive and cope with the longer-term consequences of conflict even after peace deals are signed.²

The box below shows examples of different types of protection and livelihoods threats, and their interconnection. Many, if not all, of these have been in evidence in South Sudan.

² Jaspars, S and O’Callaghan, S, ‘Challenging Choices: Protection and Livelihoods in Conflict’, HPG Policy Brief 40, May 2010.

Protection and Livelihood Threats

1. Physical violence, torture, abduction, arrest and sexual violence (affects livelihoods options and productive capacities, access to livelihoods assets, can result in death and injury and the destruction of livelihoods assets).
2. Restrictions on freedom of movement, including forced return, checkpoints and curfews (affects access to land, markets, migration opportunities, employment opportunities, networks, social services).
3. Forced displacement (affects access to livelihoods strategies and assets, can reduce productive capacities, affects networks).
4. Attacks on or theft of civilian assets such as houses, land, hospitals and food, or extortion or exploitative practices (affects livelihoods assets, income).
5. Disruption to property and land rights (affects livelihoods options, in particular people's ability to access land, but also other employment options).
6. Discrimination on the basis of social status (affects livelihoods options such as access to employment).
7. Loss or theft of personal documentation (affects proof of ownership of livelihoods assets, access to services).
8. Landmines (death and injury, lack of access to land and other livelihoods assets).
9. Forced recruitment into fighting forces (death and injury, reduction in productive capacities).

Source: Jaspars, S and O'Callaghan, S, 'Challenging Choices: Protection and Livelihoods in Conflict', HPG Policy Brief 40, May 2010.

Auto-protection

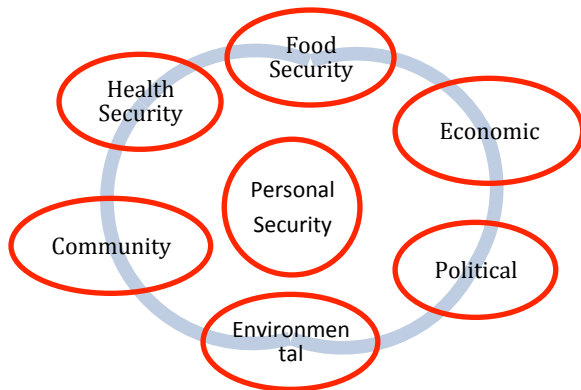
Auto-protection relates to how people at risk and under threat of violence (direct and indirect) generate their own means of protection drawing on available and independent **resources and capabilities** in an effort to avoid, tolerate, cope with or confront the threats they face in their environment. In South Sudan, where the formal protective institutions have largely collapsed, auto-protection has emerged as the central protection mechanism especially for people in rural areas, with many people at risk themselves emerging as the primary protection agents against the risks they perceive in their environment.

Peoples' independent capacity to generate auto-protection options is influenced by a number of factors. The most obvious is the magnitude and diversity of the threats they are confronting, not only in terms of violence, but also in terms of health threats, food insecurity, etc. One's capacity to generate an auto-protection response vis-à-vis threats is fundamentally tied to the independent capacities of the person at risk. Lautze has proposed thinking of the study of livelihoods as 'the management of resources, how such resources are used in productive, reproductive and survival strategies, and the outcomes of such efforts' (2008, p.417). The notion of auto-protection correlates closely with the idea of survival strategies, and can be captured as follows:

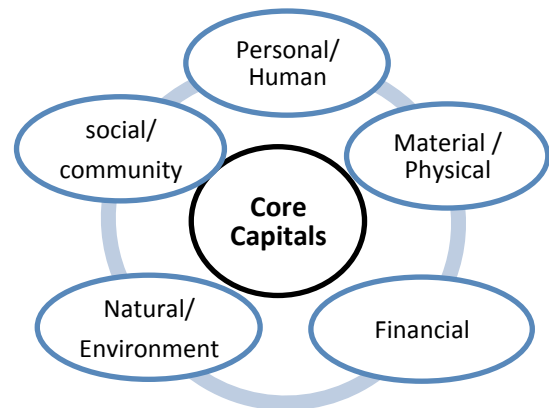
$$\text{Auto-Protection} = \left(\frac{\text{Threats x Vulnerabilities}}{\text{Capabilities \& Livelihoods}} \right) = \text{Human Security}^3$$

The livelihoods notion of “core capitals” that indicates the type of resources that people consider as part of their auto-protection strategies. As a notion of security or human well-being, it includes the core elements of human, health, food, economic, social, political and environmental security – **any of which could be a priority protection concern at any given time**. The more options (resource and capabilities) people have the greater the choice and mechanisms available to reduce risks. As choice decreases risks to safety and livelihoods become severe.⁴

a) Human Security⁵



b) Resources and Capabilities



Another component to factor in is that people experience violence differently, and individuals, households or communities are affected differently depending on their vulnerability. In southern Unity State outside Bentiu town, for example, young men and boys are at risk of killings, torture (including sexual), and forced recruitment, and that in order to secure a household’s access to food women and girls are at risk of rape, and informal taxation as they move across frontlines towards functional markets. As armed conflict persists market failures and limitations to planting and harvesting further exacerbate these risks and make people more vulnerable.

³ This equation emerges from disaster theory (see for example: Twigg 2004, p.20; Wisner et al. 2003, p.49). It has been widely adopted and adapted by humanitarian actors in efforts to make sense of how individuals affected by acute crises are impacted (see for example: Jaspars & O’Callaghan 2010c, p.1; Jaspars & O’Callaghan 2010a, p.5).

⁴ Jaspars, S and O’Callaghan, S, ‘Challenging Choices: Protection and Livelihoods in Conflict’, HPG Policy Brief 40, May 2010.

⁵ The elements of the core capitals are discussed in Wisner et al. 2003, p 96. The diagrams themselves in both cases were developed for the purposes of the document.

3. Displacement as a primary auto-protection strategy⁶

Over two million people have been displaced by the conflict. Displacement is a key auto-protection mechanism that has been resorted to allow people to secure their physical safety and also attain other forms of security - access to food, social networks, and other essential services.⁷ The range, type and frequency of displacement differed depending on the availability of social networks and access, physical capacities to move large distances, the type of violence people experienced, the range of threats they perceived and whether they were being pursued by armed actors. In many of attacks across southern Unity State people reported being chased, pushed out of areas multiple types and coerced to move to other locations. Restricting freedom of movement is a tactic used by different armed actors in South Sudan seeking territorial control and integrity but to exact civilian casualties as a deliberate strategy of war.⁸ One male respondent who fled from Bentiu to Koch, onward to Mayom and back commented that, “people could not simply flee to other villages because the Toro boro⁹ would just find you there” instead “most people went deeper into the forest where they could not be found, and stayed there” (Koch, Dec 07).

Two broad displacement strategies have emerged in southern Unity State and are echoed in the experiences recorded in this research. First, for people able to access it, the UNMISS Protection of Civilians (POC) site (Bentiu/Rubkhona) was seen as an immediate safe haven from armed hostilities and also an option further down the line when other positive options and choices were exhausted. Respondents variously commented, “we came to UNMISS because we thought they could save our lives, where else could we go” (6 females, Bentiu POC, Nov 22). It was clear that people were realistic also about what risks were inherent even in seeking safety in UNMISS, “we know that even UNMISS is not safe” (5 females, Ganyiel, Nov 12). The research was unable to capture nuanced analysis of the different waves of displacement, demographics, and motivations along a conflict timeline in each of the research sites. In broad terms however the pattern of ‘urbanised’ households and individuals seeking UNMISS as an option before considering shifting into the interior was evident. In many cases they remained in urban locations and sought larger moves to other centres in South Sudan or regional options in Sudan, Kenya, Uganda and Ethiopia. Many households made considerable movements back and forth seeking to join with family members, increase access to other options e.g. ability to escape to Sudan or Juba, and access support and services.

Second, those in rural locations fled from satellite towns and villages into the ‘bush’ – forested areas, *toiche* (grazing grounds), and, where possible, islands which are or would be surrounded by water. In these rural localities, micro strategies were developed that led people at risk either deeper into the bush to find local hiding places; or to a series of different displacement locations as they desperately tried to evade the perpetrators of violence. Some moved progressively southward in pursuit of safety. Many had harrowing experiences as they suffered repeated attacks of violence that forced them to remain in displacement for months on end. These rural strategies drew heavily on social capital, family

⁶ Displacement is a critical auto-protection tool. It is studied in an accompanying paper published by C. Huser entitled: *Displacement as a primary auto-protection mechanism in Unity State*, which can be found on southsudanhumanitarianproject.com.

⁷ The experience of protection and the application of auto-protection mechanisms for those staying within the UNMISS Bentiu POC site is described in an accompanying paper published by C. Huser entitled: *UNMISS Bentiu POC sit as a protective option: A critical asset within the auto-protection tool-kit* which can be found on southsudanhumanitarianproject.com.

⁸ See Human Rights Watch reports on South Sudan www.hrw.org.

⁹ A colloquial term that refers to Darfur militia’s and in this case possibly relates to JEM fighter that reportedly pursued civilians along the Bentiu- Koch road in early 2014.

links, solidarity and social safety nets. Unrelenting violence rapidly depleted people's coping reserves, prompting some to eventually make their way back to Bentiu and the UNMISS Bentiu POC, albeit at immense risk.¹⁰ This includes running out of money, inability to reconnect with families, inability to source food and safety.

Other strategies that people employed include alliance building with armed actors to access assets or freedom of passage. Access to armed groups is of particular note both as a means of protection and as a key vulnerability and risk. The way the current conflict is being waged with the combination of formal militaries, local armed group (community defence groups, cattle keepers, youth etc.) increases the possibility that large numbers of civilians had access to familial ties with armed groups that supported access to the interior. The blurring of 'civilian' and 'combatant' is in part derived from this dynamic.

The scale of displacement and civilian exposure to high levels of targeted violence in southern Unity State is both a reality that people are grappling with but also reveals how unexpected the pace of the conflict has been. For some observers the hallmarks of a civil war may have been in the making for some time, with southern Unity State at the epicentre of political struggles and armed rebellions (linked to the process of state formation and consolidation in South Sudan) dating back to the Second Sudan Civil War (1983-2005) and through the interim period (2005-2011). Respondents frequently cited lack of an early warning, or a misunderstanding of the nature of the conflict as not exclusively between armed actors, as a reason why so many people perished. Though there are examples of well-connected people who were able to make decisions faster on their safety this was the exception. One man recounting the early days of the fighting in Koch recalled "I didn't leave (his area in Koch) until the government troops actually arrived here I kept hoping that the opposition would fight them back in Bentiu. In fact, I wondered why they wanted to come here to us civilians. My wife and children had left two days before me I knew to send them because I saw the local captain bring a lorry to his house to move his whole family to Leer, I knew everything was lost when we saw that." (1 male, Koch, Dec 07)

Local hiding and protracted displacement

Auto-protection options significantly improve when people are intimately familiar with their local environment. Each geographic area provides different opportunities for local strategies and local familiarity enables people to draw more extensively and more strategically on the so-called 'natural capital' (see section 4), while providing more tools with which to adapt while under intense pressure.

In the initial phase of the conflict residents in Koch, Leer and Ganyiel all reported fleeing into forested areas, to cattle camps areas and swamped grounds to move out of the reach of armed actors. In many instances on-going fighting and with the occupation of areas by government forces meant that people were forced into micro displacements and quickly drawing down on natural resources. People in Koch town recalled, "they came many times, we stayed in small groups in the bush" (2 females, Koch, Dec 08); and "they came to steal goats, clothing, anything they could steal" (1 male & 1 female, Koch, Dec 06). Others noted, "when the soldiers arrived to our hiding places we again had to keep moving" (2 males, Bentiu-POC, Nov 26).

¹⁰ Although the urgency of violence is extremely demanding, auto-protection strategies are not singularly driven by physical security, but rather reflect a wide range of considerations, including issues such as health, food security, family links and general stability that ensure one's overall survival and well-being.

In Leer, people relied on the inaccessibility of their hiding places, to prevent the armed actors from following them. Respondents in Leer frequently said Leer was “a historic safe place for hiding IDPs, it has water all around, there are many little islands for hiding people. You can stay there, you can be safe” (2 males & 2 females, Leer, Oct 24). It is worth noting that in the immediate aftermath of government troop withdrawal out of Leer that people were still reluctant to move back towards villages and the main town. Humanitarian actors upon accessing the area found untenably high levels of child malnutrition and health complications as a result of hunger. Prolonged displacement required critical trade-offs to be made around securing the family from physical harm and dealing with food scarcity. Whilst people adapt, the negative consequences cannot be ignored. In armed conflict situations where there is chronic displacement higher mortality and morbidity rates are witnessed. People were constantly aware of the risks facing them and the hierarchy of need that had to be satisfied.

Evolving Displacement Strategies

April 2014 saw a significant shift in the conflict dynamics, with government troops withdrawing to the capital Bentiu. Roads opened up allowing risky but greater access to villages. In full recognition of the fragility of the auto-protection strategies available to them in the rural areas, some began considering the option of moving back towards the UNMISS Bentiu POC. The UNMISS POC is seen as a strategic protection asset, it played a central role in the strategic plans of those with links to Bentiu town. Some explained that “we came to UNMISS because we were living in the capital, we cannot go to stay deep in the bush” (1 male, Bentiu POC, Nov 22).

However, for many others, it was “chosen” because all other resources were exhausted and it became a point of last resort. As one group of women stated, “we fled Bentiu to Guit, but we came back to UNMISS because we heard shooting all the time, when you hear the voice of the gun you can be afraid, we were running to the bush every time, we just kept moving, now we are tired, we wanted just to go to UNMISS” (2 females, Bentiu POC, Nov 25).

Closely related is the issue of family separation, which further undermines one’s capacity to face such circumstances. This especially impacts women responsible for the safety and protection of children, with many saying “we don’t know where our men are, without men, we are left alone to care for the family, this is why we needed to go to UNMISS” (4 females, Bentiu POC, Nov 23). Continual exposure to persistent violence and fatigue in the interior eventually led many to conclude that the Bentiu POC might be the only comparatively safe option for them, with a group of women explaining that “we went to Mayendit but the forces followed us into the swamps, there was no safe place, we decided to return to UNMISS” (6 females, Bentiu POC, Nov 22). Although access to UNMISS proved to be feasible for some, as of early December 2014, of the 345,300 IDPs in Unity State only about 44,000 (12%) were in the Bentiu POC (OCHA 2015). However, the circumstances that allowed for movement towards the Bentiu POC also opened up opportunities for people in rural areas to begin to move out of their deep hiding places in the bush.

Coming out of hiding

The dynamics of how people decided to move back towards villages is a complex one but relied heavily on information obtained by women, thereby highlighting the significance of the social protection role women have played. Even in hiding women and children were often ones tasked with acquiring food, accounting for cattle, collecting milk and when possible taking risks to barter and trade goods. Women in and around Koch and Leer were amongst the first to report that government troops had left the area. Even then serious hesitation and reticence informed people’s choices. In Leer people explained that “some came in the day but returned to hiding for the night, we had doubts after the soldiers left,

the men came first, some of the children did not come until July” (1 males, Leer, Oct 24). Similarly, in Koch “some men went back to confirm that the forces had left, some of the women and children followed some weeks later” (2 females, Leer, Oct 25); “the men went back to assess, the women followed, but we left the children in hiding for some time” (3 males & 2 females; Koch, Dec 05). Others simply followed explaining that “our neighbours told us, we saw other people going back, so we followed” (2 females, Koch, Dec 06); “we followed when we saw the others start moving” (3 females, Koch, Dec 09). This captures the precariousness of decision-making when people are trying to maximise their auto-protection opportunities and living with uncertainty.

From an auto-protection perspective, this movement was not a ‘return’. Respondents also noted that “when there is peace, we can return; we will go back and rebuild our households that were burned; we will return to our normal lives” (6 females, IDPs, Nov 10); “but now we can only wait” (2 males, Ganyiel, Nov 12). Sustainable return can only happen if there is a resolution of the crisis. Elements of normalcy in Koch and Leer and partial reconstruction of homes, and the return of IDPs who stay other families are insufficient

Anticipating Enhanced Violence

Most respondents in southern Unity State stressed their worries about the approaching dry season, with most anticipating escalating violence, stating that “we are fearing the dry season” (1 male, Leer, Oct 24); “we are thinking the government will repeat these attacks” (1 male & 2 females, Ganyiel, Nov 12); “people remember last year; they know a car can move from Bentiu to Koch in one night; they can be here fast to attack” (1 male, Koch, Dec 07); and “we hear they are in Bentiu, they have vehicles, guns and bombs, it is in our heads that they will come back, we worry it will happen again with the dry season” (2 females, Leer, Oct 23); “people remember last January” (1 males, Bentiu POC, Nov 27); “we saw what they did in Bentiu” (1 male, Koch, Dec 10); and “with what we saw last dry season, we worry that we will have more violence this dry season; we expect more fighting” (1 female, Ganyiel, Nov 08).¹¹

Thus people were anticipating the need to flee again. Other people responded by saying they would have to stay to look after the elderly and children and would have few alternatives left and others still commented on the need to defend the area. As is well understood a reliance on displacement as a strategy for coping in a conflict situation is vulnerability in and of itself, if not exposes people to the increased potential of experiencing other risks.

Displacement as a vulnerability

It is clear that those auto-protection options in southern Unity have been fragile and inadequate imposing new negative risks on people. Despite the fact that displacement is the primary auto-protection mechanism for avoiding threats, the mechanism itself typically undermines and erodes peoples’ independent capacity to self-protect, often leaving them dramatically more vulnerable. One group of male respondents commented “when a person is displaced, you lose your ability to recover, you lose things needed to fill the gap, people were affected in so many ways, people were killed, people died without medicines, there was too little food and some people died of starvation (8 males, Koch, Dec 09). Reflecting this, one young woman fleeing with two small children, who broke her prosthetic leg along the way explained that “in the bush there is no security, my husband went missing, I lost contact with my brother who was taking care of us; my mother was killed, now there is no one who can help” (1 female, Bentiu POC, Nov 23). As the crisis continues, people’s capacity to engage in auto-protection weakens.

4. Vulnerability

'Starting-Point' versus 'End-Point' Vulnerabilities

There are two types of vulnerabilities. So-called 'starting-point' vulnerabilities being those that were present before the crisis began. Alternatively, so-called 'end-point' vulnerabilities result due to the effects of surviving the crisis.

Below are some of the major vulnerabilities that respondents in southern Unity State referred to.

- Inability to move due to disability, or other restrictions. The vulnerability of elderly persons was noted by respondents, as people were forced to leave homes quickly or walk long distances, the elderly often refused to leave or were left behind.
- Ethnicity: People who self-identified as 'Nuer' were vulnerable to direct targeting.
- Young men and boys: Particular mention was made of the vulnerability of young men and boys who were targeted for humiliating attacks, torture, and killings, based on the assumption they were or would become combatants or "rebels".
- As a result of the targeting of men, adolescent males and boys women, elderly and children became further exposed to risks as family units and social groups separated or altered. The vulnerability of women and children in this conflict are also significant and documented by protection actors. Of particular note is that women were invariably the key providers for their families and a community and therefore critical for social cohesiveness.

Psycho-social status

There is no doubt that the psychological consequences of living the experience of violence are significant and deeply impact how people respond to it in their daily interactions and also more broadly. Respondents constantly remarked, "we are always worried, we are confused about what we should do" onto whatever issues they might be describing. Many individuals have undergone deeply traumatizing experiences. For example, one man who had been captured in Leer by armed forces while trying to help his family flee describes some very brutal killings that he witnessed, shaking his head, saying about one "that one I cannot get out of my mind" (1 male, Bentiu POC, Nov 25). Another respondent described fleeing Bentiu together with his neighbour and then having to make the difficult choice to leave him behind when the neighbour was injured by a bullet. With apparent anguish, he explained that "we have never met since, I think maybe he did not make it. In April many of us met again but I did not see him. I think about these things especially in the evening when I am alone, I do not feel good" (1 male, Koch, Dec 08).

These traumas (and perpetual stress) affect the ways in which people are able to adapt to circumstances and events around them. The research found a high level of resignation and acceptance of violence amongst respondents, and also despondency about the current and future situation. Anger, frustration and justice seeking motivations were also apparent in driving people to violence in an effort to restore power and status. This was captured in the research as a justification for continued fighting, mobilisation, and domestic and community level violence.

Women on their own

Women bear extensive protective responsibilities in the conflict context of southern Unity State. As an 'end-point' vulnerability, women often become *de facto* heads of their households both in flight and at home due to the prolonged absence of their men. A woman in Leer agreed that "many women are here alone because their husbands are on the front-line, they come here because this is the home of the husband's family" (1 female, Ganyiel,

Nov 09). Importantly, these women are not necessarily received as a central member of this family. This dynamic gives rise to a number of other protection related concerns for women who are divested of decision making especially over children, despite also being responsible for providing for them, and being able to control access to critical assets conferred upon marriage e.g. cattle. People further underline that “many women are being left behind when their husbands are killed, these ones are vulnerable” (6 females, Rumbek, Nov 05); and “widows with children are vulnerable, these ones must continue to do their work, there is no one who can support them” (1 female, Ganyiel, Nov 11).

Separated families¹²

The issue of family separation is widely identified as a source of anxiety and vulnerability. As the anxiety of family separation escalates, people indicate an increasing willingness to resort to extremely expensive and high-risk measures to reunite with their families. Many people also see family reunification as a critical factor in strengthening their auto-protection capacity while separation undermines this capacity. That said some families have had to practice separation, splitting families in the immediate instance of violence in order to protect the social unit, and to secure their economic security. Such strategies are used to reduce overall risk but are very much last resort options. Likewise, sending children away has been used to protect them from abductions and mobilization. Such separation is deemed necessary to maximize protection to the unit.

5. Core capitals – Fuelling auto-protection capacity

Due to the prolonged nature of the crisis, the vulnerabilities of the people of southern Unity State are constantly evolving and expanding. This renders individuals more susceptible to the threats in their environment. Although the conflict erupted with extreme violence, people living the consequences have had to equally contend with the secondary consequences of the crisis as well, with one man explaining that “we have one big problem [i.e. the conflict], but this causes many more, now life is very difficult, there is not enough food, no money, no opportunities, no options, we can only just wait” (1 male, Bentiu POC, Nov 25). Indeed, most people see the conflict as the overarching issue and thus remain worried about the continuing threat of violence. However, this vies with other critical threats, with people equally indicating that “we are worrying all the time, we are worrying about security, but we are also worrying about health care, we have no schools, people are hungry” (3 females, Leer, Oct 23); and “we have always to be worried, we have no hospitals, no clean water, we have no husbands to help us get food and the prices are going up in the market” (1 female, Leer, Oct 25);

This section uses the livelihoods “core capitals” (see section 2.1) model as a means of gaining insight into the independent resources that people at risk draw upon in their efforts to operationalize an auto-protection strategy and protect their human security. People draw upon these ‘core capitals’ or resources to absorb, avoid, adapt to and tolerate the impact of the threats. As such, the stronger one’s ‘core capitals’ are, the less susceptible one is to shocks.

¹² With independence, many households adopted economic strategies that included the splitting of families. For example, women often remained in places of origin with the smaller children, while male adults often moved to either the State or national capital seeking livelihood opportunities and education. Equally, children were increasingly sent to other locations to study (e.g., Bentiu, Juba, Yei). Because they were in different locations at the on-set of the crisis, many families are now separated.

Human Capital

The challenges of overcoming the threats faced in an armed conflict draws on human capital in terms of courage, strength and intelligence. For example, one woman explained that after fleeing to a rural area, there was little food available, so she traveled for a day to where she had heard she could buy maize, she paid 50 South Sudanese Pounds (SSP) and received a small amount which she wrapped in a cloth. Unfortunately at that moment the place was attacked by armed actors and she started running with SPLA-in Opposition (SPLA-IO) troops but was hit in the arm by bullets, explaining that “bullets were flying around, I fell and I dropped the maize, one of the SPLA-IO men advised me to go back to get it, he said this could save my children, I did not succeed to do that. I feared they would kill me so I fled. The next day I returned to where I dropped the maize and collected it, they shot at me again, it was even not very good maize, but it was all we had” (1 female, Bentiu POC, Nov 22).

As women bear the responsibility for operationalizing food security at the household level, such scenarios capture some of the deadly trade-offs they are forced into. When confronted with the threat of malnutrition of one’s child, women are repeatedly forced to confront the possibility of rape while they search for food for their children. One of the most risky options described is direct engagement with the armed actors present in their area in order to buy food. Respondents repeatedly cite the multiple risks associated with this, including being kidnapped, beaten, raped or killed. Women explain that “women could come to town to buy food from the government forces but they could be raped, women were trapped” (3 females, Leer, Oct 23); and “they will rape you, even kill you, you don’t know even if you will survive but you think about your children”. (1 female, Leer, Oct 25). This illustrates the extent to which women put the well-being of their children ahead of their own. Clearly, such efforts seriously erode one’s coping capacity.

Social Capital

Social capital, in the sense of families, kinship and economic ties, and political and other networks in southern Unity State are of critical importance to people in times of crisis. In the Bentiu POC many respondents explained an immediate need to reunify with family members. Engaging in trade was often a means to earn an income and to make strategic alliances to potentially increase access to other support down the line and secure immediate safety. Such strategic alliances may also lead to more information, allowing people to plan.

The many cases of women separated from their husbands illustrate how these women must manage auto-protection strategies independently, often with many children, and with significantly weakened social capital. As a single woman whose husband was killed in the first attack on Bentiu, and who is now moving with 7 children, explained “I know that I am not the only one suffering, I know it is like this for everyone now, but now I really have no one to help me” (1 female, Bentiu POC, Nov 26). A woman in Koch further illustrated how this plays out. During the period of acute displacement she was alone with her four small children [her husband is in the UNMISS Bentiu POC], explaining that “I had just given birth to my smallest child, once hiding in the bush, I could not go out to collect food for the children, we had moved with 2 cows but they were stolen while we were fleeing. People could not share with us, I could only go out to get water and wild fruit; that is how we survived in the bush.” However she went on to explain that “when I came back to the town I found my house was burned, people in Koch cannot help me now” (1 female, Koch, Dec 06).

As much as the critical role of social capital is acknowledged, people equally point to its widespread erosion. Exceptionally vulnerable individuals such as the ‘frail’, the ‘elderly’, and the ‘blind’ who are relying on someone else, typically a family member for their survival. When asked who helps these people in the current environment, many said “no one-

without NGOs, they can just die, no one can help them now we are all in difficulties” (2 females, Ganyiel, Nov 10). The above sections have demonstrated that in fact people within families do take extraordinary measures to help those most at risk. However, when one’s social capital is weak, the consequences in the current circumstances are potentially devastating.

Especially those who fall outside of the core family structures may be at risk in acute circumstances. For example, as a result of receiving many IDPs, people in Ganyiel confirm that “IDPs who have no relatives here are the most vulnerable, no one can help them, they can only rely on the UN” (1 female, Ganyiel, Nov 08); and “no one can help these ones if they don’t have their own family to help them, NGOs must look after them” (2 females, Bentiu POC, Nov 24). Thus, an alternative way of thinking about intervention is to consider the role of social capital in relation to auto-protection efforts and thus explore means of supporting this core capital.¹³

Natural Capital

Some of those wanting to return to their place of origin referred to various auto-protection strategies that they could adopt based on their familiarity with the area, with one man stating that “if I can get to Leer, I know there is no UN there for protection but if there is a problem, we know where to run where the government forces cannot find us” (1 male, Bentiu-POC, Dec 13). Others describe drawing extensively on natural resources as a food security strategy, explaining that “we were eating anything, grass, some days we had nothing” (1 female, Bentiu POC, Nov 23). During some of the most acute circumstances, the strategies shift to rely more directly on human capital, with a group of women explaining that “some died of hunger, it was only those who can go without eating who could survive, you have to teach your children to go without food; sometimes they must sleep without eating, sometimes my children went five days without eating, it is only the ones who learned not to eat that came back, these are the ones who survived” (5 females, Leer, Nov 22). This shows the extent to which and how various core capitals are depleted in auto-protection efforts.

Financial Capital

Access to cash was an important consideration as the fighting created displacement. One female respondent noted: “I carried money when we fled from Bentiu, I have a small child; you cannot go without some money to get something for that one” (2 females, Bentiu POC, Nov 24). For some people in Bentiu town the closure of banks meant many fled with little cash. Losing access to material and financial assets was significant especially given the recognition that little could be recovered.

However, cash and material assets also meant that people were more vulnerable to targeting. Countless people who fled, especially between Bentiu–Leer, and Koch–Ganyiel, report violent attacks by unknown armed men along the way. “Local youth with guns stopped us and stole whatever we had, if you had materials or money, they took this by force” (1 female, Ganyiel, Nov 07); “there were men organizing themselves along the road, you cannot know which side these ones are on, they wear no uniforms and masks, they point their guns at you and steal your money and documents and then kill you; we observed that” (3 males, teachers, Ganyiel, Nov 13). Another group confirmed that “they could just ambush you, they saw us on a road and took us to a place where people had their things

¹³ Acknowledging that a range of protection and humanitarian actors have been engaged in providing assistance to conflict-affected communities the quote above is just indicative of the sorts of opinions captured in this research.

stolen. It happened to us three times on route from Bentiu to Leer. When we had nothing left then they beat us, we also think they raped many women” (1 female Ganyiel, Nov 12).

The interruption of salaries as a result of the conflict has had a crippling effect. Many households have adopted a cash-based livelihoods approach in recent years. Many families, having opted for the splitting of families as an economic strategy designed to enhance household wage earning capacity, were caught in different locations at the time of the onset of the violence. Those in the village who were regularly receiving cash in-puts from family members working elsewhere are now suddenly without. For example, one woman explained that “my husband was working in Bentiu with an NGO, I was here with the children here in Leer, I received the salary of my husband here but now my husband is in UNMISS and I have nothing” (1 female, Leer; Oct 24). Another said, “my husband was a trader in Bentiu, he was looted and now we are struggling to get food” (2 female, Leer, Oct 23).

People are trying to restock financial resources despite the on-going crisis. “It is now very difficult to make money, it is only those working with NGOs who can make money, the government salaries have been taken away, many businesses have collapsed” (1 male, Ganyiel, Nov 10). Others noted, “people are arriving here to Koch from Guit because they did not receive a food distribution, they are searching for food or they are trying to get work with NGOs so they can buy something for their family” (1 male & 1 female, Koch, Dec 05). These are complicated calculations as people weigh physical security risks against the need to generate income.

When asking residents of Leer town about larger-scale agriculture activities, some explained that “this is a town, people here do not cultivate a lot it is only those in the rural areas that do that” (1 female, Leer, Oct 23). This reduces survival options. Nevertheless small-scale cash-generating options exist, although they are constrained, with people explaining, “for money we used to sell cows or firewood” (2 males & 1 female, Koch, Dec 05). Further, a woman in Koch who had an impressive harvest of maize, pumpkin, sorghum; tobacco and seeds stored in her tukul (house) explained: “I have not sold any of this produce so far, but I will, this is how we can gain some money for medicine” (1 female, Koch, Dec 05).

Material Capital & Livelihood Assets

In the absence of adequate financial capital, people are forced to draw more heavily on their material or physical capital in order to operationalize their auto-protection efforts. However, material capital was also directly impacted in the violence, with looting of cattle, burning of tukuls, fields and crops, and in some cases polluting water sources. Some said: “the government forces burned all the houses except the ones they slept in; they took only the food they burned everything else; they kept the sheep and goats for their soup” (1 male, Leer, Oct 24); “in Koch the crops were burned by the government troops” (1 males, Koch, Dec 10); and ‘now people lack seeds and tools because they got looted by the Toro boro” (7 males, Koch, Dec 04). This increased people’s vulnerabilities and many were locked into a cycle of dependency: the need to consume existing material assets; reliance on community members with limited supplies, and the inability to recover due to pressures such as flooding.

Livestock

As apparent in preceding sections livestock plays an important role in South Sudan in relation to auto-protection efforts, with some asserting, “those ones who had no cattle [during the very acute periods of violence], some are not alive now” (1 male, Leer, Oct 24). In the cash poor environment, many highlight the trade and cash potential, stating “we traded our cows to the people living in the villages for sorghum” (1 female, Koch, Dec 06);

and “we took ten cows with us when we fled to the bush. We sold these ones for food and we slaughtered others” (1 male, Koch, Dec 08). These practices continued during what proved to be a hiatus in the violence just prior to the dry season,¹⁴ with people noting that “now we can only sell our goats and cows to gain some money” (2 females, Koch, Dec 06); and “now people rely on milk and meat from their cows and animals” (7 males, Koch, Dec 04).¹⁵

Nevertheless, given the central role livestock have played in keeping people alive, the continued erosion of livestock reserves is concerning. A local observer summarized that “the number of livestock are decreasing because they were stolen or killed by armed groups, but people are also still killing their animals to survive” (1 male, Leer, Oct 24). Reduction of cattle herds has also been linked to cattle disease as a result of being forced out of seasonal grazing areas and a severe hunger period in 2014. As one old man stated, “when we have to slaughter our cows we worry, we don’t know how long this problem will last” (1 male, Leer, Oct 24). In efforts to preserve a minimum baseline of resources, some are trying to diversify despite with one household stating that when they relocated to town following acute displacement. “We brought one cow back with us; that one gives milk for the children; we have one goat that is now pregnant” (2F, Koch, Dec 06). A very enterprising elder woman explained that “we sold cattle to buy food while when we were in the bush; then I sold them to purchase seeds for planting here in Koch” (1F, Koch, Dec 05). People are conscious of progressively exhausting their reserves and thus undermining their overall auto-protection capacity within a situation of on-going violence and expectations of escalating violence with the approaching dry season.

Failing Crops

The potential to draw upon food reserves as part of an auto-protection strategy is critical as food insecurity can quickly rival physical insecurity in terms of urgency and intensity of threat. Recalling dire circumstances already experienced, people desperately want to develop food stocks to draw upon both generally as well as in the case of further displacement. However, crop production potential is affected by the on-going violence. The loss and destruction of seeds and tools has been a constraint with some people claiming that “people have lost all their tools; even those who fish have lost their equipment” (2 female, Leer, Oct 23); and “we cannot even do small gardens because even we lost those small seeds” (7 males, Koch, Dec 04).

The fear of insecurity and fighting almost limited the way people, when they could plant did so. Respondents mentioned fear that armed actors would attack fields and homes again, or steal produce, as they had before. In this instance, “most people are now growing very small gardens around the houses and not fields they don’t go far because people are still afraid” (1 female, Koch, Dec 05). Other ways to supplement household access to food also required selling off assets, “we sold a cow to get seeds and we have planted them” (3 males & 2 females, Koch, Dec 05); and “my daughters-in-law walked to Mayom, they sold a cow and purchased seeds for planting” (1 female, Koch, Dec 05). Such coping mechanisms both erode material assets, and escalate exposure to security risks, many noted that “now we have no crops, we rely again only on our animals, which is not how we do things” (5 male, Koch, Dec 04). The above shows core capitals are being progressively depleted.

¹⁵ As an indication of commodity costs, some suggested that “1 cow used to cost 2,000 SSP and is now 1,500; it buys only one 50 kg bag of sorghum; 1 bag of sorghum otherwise costs 350 SSP compared to the former price of 50SSP; 1 goat used to cost 80-100 SSP and now costs 200 SSP” (2F, Koch, Dec 08).

Contending with multiple threats one man commented, “we worry that they will return with the dry season [and the escalation of violence], but for now we worry more about the floods, this is what is disturbing us most today” (1 male, Leer, Oct 24); and “now we worry most about the floods because this causes us to have no food” (5 females, Ganyiel, Nov 12). Cumulative shocks in southern Unity have eroded people’s capacity to support themselves, and access to food. This is one reason why food assistance has been critical in this emergency.

Food Aid

Food aid is highlighted as key in the acute period of displacement, especially when people came ‘out of hiding’ in April-May with some stating that “if it was not for the WFP food when we came out of hiding, we would all be finished”. This reflects the extent of exhaustion of core capitals. Even as the crisis prolongs food aid is seen as an important coping strategy to allow people to subsist under uncertain conditions.

In auto-protection terms, people are devising strategies to gain either direct or indirect access to food distribution resources, often with significant risk. Some explain: “people have moved to Leer or Bauw (at the Koch-Mayom border) because they have food drops there” (1 male, Koch, Dec 04). Indirect strategies are closely tied to one’s social capital, with some explaining that “people are moving to Leer to look for food, some have relatives there, others are going to trade so they can buy food” (3 females, Koch, Dec 08). Others explain: “all that I can do is beg for food from my relatives, most times they agree to help” (1 female, Leer, Oct 23). This is especially highlighted by those who were unable to register for food aid, “we are not registered with WFP, we can only beg for something from a few people; they can give us something small” (3 females & 1 male Ganyiel, Nov 10).

Although this obligatory sharing is a critical auto-protection factor, it generates a further dimension to the food security dilemma for those individuals getting the resources directly from the international community. Some people said: “those who are receiving food aid do not have enough because they have to share with so many people” (1 male, Bentiu POC Nov 27). This highlights the complex demands on core capitals. Auto-protection mechanisms lead to people repeatedly drawing on others’ resources as a result of social obligations. However, reserves of core capitals are finite.

It is in this light that people return to the assertion that NGOs are protectors, with some arguing, “when NGOs bring food, this is another form of protection” (2 males & 2 females, Koch, Dec 08). As one group of men concluded, “we put peace as the priority, but even if this one is not there, at least NGOs must give some assistance so things are not the worst” (4 males, Koch, Dec 09).

The research was unable to capture the extent to which individuals, households and communities share food or are forced to allocate rations to armed groups as a protection payment or simply as an extension of protecting ones social capital, ensuring family and kin are supported. Food is an important commodity in the conflict, both for communities and armed groups that are linked to the people suffering from the conflict and may in part be responsible for manipulation of assistance.

6. Resolution to the Conflict

People facing such circumstances over a prolonged period express a distinct reluctance to project into the future, with some explaining that “we can only hope, we cannot determine the future at this time” (1 female, Ganyiel, Nov 08). Auto-protection efforts demand intensive focus in the moment.

People conclude that peace is really their only means of protection. Tying the notion of protection directly to peace some state that “protection cannot be there until we have peace” (1 male & 2 females, Ganyiel, Nov 12); “here, we are all civilians who call for peace, as a civilian we have rights to say this war is not good, it is not right for the two leaders to choose war again, we don’t want to go back to war. This war was not planned for the southerners it is just a political war” (1 male, Bentiu POC, Nov 22).

The emphasis on the macro political process and the larger framework of national conflict underlines that people are aware that any resolution of the violence is intimately tied to the resolution of the national crisis. Until a resolution to the armed conflict is reached, the people of southern Unity State will continue to look to each other and their depleted core capitals as they try to string an effort to absorb, avoid, adapt to and cope with the continual threats they face.

7. Conclusions

Despite enormous odds people in southern Unity State have demonstrated a significant capacity to preserve their lives, and provide for their family and kin. These strategies are borne out of necessity.

This paper highlights some of the harrowing experiences that people in southern Unity have had and continue to face in the current conflict and this lays a foundation for the experience and success of eventual recovery in many ways. It also demonstrates how threats to people’s livelihoods and protection are closely linked. The lived experience of violence in southern Unity State typically consists of people facing critical challenges, with nothing or no one buffering the impact. As people are exposed to shocks, they are forced to adapt. Some are more sensitive to these shocks; others have greater reserves to draw on. This is the essence of auto-protection.

However, this auto-protection process in itself has an erosive impact, both in terms of the cumulative impact of the direct harm of shocks (livestock can be killed or stolen; crops burned; money stolen; people killed), as well as the exhaustive impact of intensive draws on reserves as one tries repeatedly to adapt to what are typically massively overwhelming shocks. This perpetuates a continual erosion of core capitals, which in effect renders auto-protection progressively less feasible. Further, within the context of on-going armed conflict, there are few options for restoring and replenishing these core capitals. Thus, as the crisis prolongs, the potential for auto-protection efforts will dramatically decline, pushing people into ever more precarious circumstances. It is therefore important that the humanitarian community continues to engage with people at risk to allow them to act to mitigate the worst threats they face and make informed choices. These insights should directly inform operational interventions.

This dialogue should not take the form of tick box assessments but serious investment and sustained presence that allows trust to be built up and real understanding of how different contextual factors impinge or enable people's decision-making. In order to facilitate such efforts, needs analysis could be conducted through the frame of auto-protection.

The most direct manner of supporting auto-protection efforts is to facilitate improved access to the assets that people are drawing upon in order to operationalize their protection efforts. To some degree, this simply entails a shift in perspective, and accepting that people are going to continue to strategically relocate themselves in order to protect themselves and access essential services, whether that is food, health care, or employment options or UNMISS POC sites, whether in southern Unity State or beyond.

Serious consideration should be given to a large-scale effort to address the family separation issue, with restoration of communications between family members an important component.

The level of psychological impact as a result of the horrors that people have experienced and witnessed combined with prolonged exposure to extreme levels of stress has a cumulative impact. Psychosocial activities (in the broadest sense) are urgently required.

Finally, there is an urgent need to step up efforts to engage the decision-makers to end the conflict in order to allow people to move out of their auto-protection mode and begin to rebuild their lives and livelihoods and restore the core capital reserves that they require to navigate daily life.

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