Lessons Learned #1

Cultural engagement for change: a case study of the Otuho people

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Overview

This case study sets out learning from programmatic engagement from the UK's Peacebuilding Opportunities Fund (POF) among the Otuho people of Eastern Equatoria State. The programme promoted a cultural engagement process aimed to strengthen women's peace and security at a time when Otuho society undergoes a 22-year cycle of generational change when leadership structures are renewed.

This case study draws on POF experience from this engagement, sharing learning associated with influencing cultural processes through public discourse, and the development of bylaws adopted by the community. The learning paper outlines an approach to working with communities from within, while also reviewing social norms and practices which negatively impact women's participative and leadership roles within society. The programme, working with local advisers, negotiated the consent of community leadership and facilitated public discussion on changes that would positively impact the community, to be adopted as bylaws.

The case study shows the potential for change inherent in this community-led approach, outlining a change process that is internally driven, which builds on the positive dimensions of particular cultures, while affirming the need for change.

About the Peacebuilding Opportunities Fund (POF)

FCDO's South Sudan Peacebuilding Opportunities Fund (POF) is a scalable, adaptable, and contextually-driven mechanism to pursue peacebuilding objectives in South Sudan.

The POF seeks to deliver outcomes which ensure that targeted communities are more harmonious and resilient to conflict, and that political, socio-economic, and cultural institutions key for handling conflict and establishing the conditions for sustained peace are strengthened and more inclusive.

Introduction

This case study sets out learning from programmatic engagement among the Otuho people of Eastern Equatoria State with regard to generational change processes that occur every 22 years. These processes reflect a peaceful handing over of power from one generation to the next, within the cultural institution of the Monyomiji, the youth structure invested with responsibility for protecting the community. Each generation seeks to put down a marker of progress that differentiates it from the former, for which it will be remembered. These markers are agreed in a consultative manner within society, premised on public discourse which involves the leadership and community elders, and the Monyomiji youth structures (which includes women and men).

The focus of this case study is on learning associated with the possibility of influencing cultural processes, and on supporting public discourse that is central to the changes that are agreed - changes which govern the community for the next generation.[1] A belief in working within communities, in supporting communal public discourse as an instrument of change, and a commitment to working for incremental change, were central to the approach.

The public discourse agenda, or 'cultural conversation' focused on the impact of violence on women by the military and government militias (Mathiang Anyoor) during the civil war, and what the new Monyomiji generation can do to promote peace and security for women. The question was personalised by POF personnel engaging local communities to ask: '*What can we do to protect our wives, sisters, mothers, daughters from the violence that affects our communities?*'

Approach and Learning

The approach adopted was intentionally low-key, aimed at strengthening conversation and reflection with communities. The skill and ability of POF advisers were central to the process – including framing the purpose of a public meeting, securing authorisation environment from community leadership, supporting groups and individuals within the community to prepare for the discussion, and facilitating critical reflection in an inclusive manner.

By spending time in fifteen villages (in Hiyala, Bira and Mura), identified as progressive within the Otuho community, the POF advisers explored what was possible through public discourse involving those who had cultural governance roles within society, with authority to implement agreed changes to by-laws within the community.

Because of the facilitative nature of communal engagement, which prioritised discussion and reflection instead of delivery of thematic inputs, programme personnel do not claim direct attribution for the emerging results, seeing their role as contributing to key conversations that were taken forward by community leaders, who often had new awareness of the importance of what needed to be prioritised. The approach built on existing conversations, many in important private spaces within the community. The intervention was not about sharing information or delivering training, but of facilitating and empowering voices within a public space, frequently women's voices, to search for a better way to live as a community of women and men. In essence the approach aimed to move the agenda forward in

[1] The idea that values and norms can be agreed through public discourse is central to this approach. The seminal work of Jurgen Habermas on the public sphere analysis in western political life has been influential in shaping this approach, work the author adapted for the purpose of PhD research on the Angolan peace process (Comerford 2010).

terms of knowledge and understanding, and ideally to achieve legislative change through the introduction of bylaws at the community level.

At the time of writing, the generational change process is ongoing and due to conclude in late 2021, confirming the dynamic nature of cultural change. Emerging results are positive and encouraging, pointing to a significant cultural shift that is fragile and needs to be sustained. While the notion of bylaws may sound western, it holds important meaning within communities who see bylaws as part of their customary justice system, as reflecting decisions made within their community, to be drawn on for dispute resolution, arbitration, payment of compensation, pursuit of justice and reconciliation.

Learning from this approach has been acted on in a number of ways:

- The approach was replicated in Nimule, among the eleven Madi clans in the area. The POF team in Nimule report findings similar to the Otuho engagement, with an emphasis on new bylaws dealing with GBV (a legislative process which identified specific changes suggested by the community, that were then endorsed by the Nimule Town Clerk and approved in the state parliament), and recognition that educated women needed to be supported on leadership pathways within the community.
- Within POF, by advisers ensuring WPS issues are included within wider community dialogue processes. This reduces the risk of confrontation between men and women, and reframes gender discussions within ongoing conversations that redefine a community's relationships internally and externally with neighbouring communities. As a result WPS issues become part of the wider conversation, rather than a standalone intervention.
- From a sustainability perspective, advisers themselves report deeper understanding of the issues covered in this paper, particularly with regard to ways of engaging cultural institutions and leaders, whose role in being part of the solution is sometimes ignored in programming.

Literature – Academic approaches

The approach outlined in this case study draws from best practice approaches within the literature on social norms and Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG), but points to the need for public and communal engagement with the custodians of culture.

The VAWG Helpdesk[2] (2020:1) notes that:

> '…social norms underpin VAWG and are at the root of many of the barriers to progressing women's and girls' rights and achieving gender equality. Integrating efforts to tackle social norms around gender and VAWG can increase the effectiveness and sustainability of programme outcomes'. The document underlines that '…addressing social norms is therefore key to achieving social change. Integrating a component that addresses social norms on gender equality and the use of violence can be catalytic to the success of programmes on girls' education, social protection, economic development, public health, demography, climate change and conflict and stability' (2020:4).

POF programming situated engagement on social norms as a necessary and crucial entry point for meaningful and sustainable change. Not to do so would have constituted programming blind to socio-cultural realities, the promotion of a blueprint or template void of context, without social roots. Nor would it have been deemed conflict sensitive.

[2] Managed by Social Development Direct, see https://www.sddirect.org.uk/our-work/vawg-helpdesk/

Social norms are understood as:

> 'common standards within a social group regarding socially acceptable or appropriate behaviour in particular social situations, the breach of which has social consequences. The strength of these norms varies from loose expectations to unwritten rules' (Oxford Reference).[3]

They reflect collective social understandings of engendered roles, often at odds with individual attitudes or beliefs.

Many social development programmes focus on promoting knowledge and understanding at an individual level. This approach risks alienating the individual from their community in the absence of complementary approaches that address social norms and support the community move forward in light of new knowledge and understanding. By identifying entry points which support social norm conversation at the community level, POF believes that an enabling environment can progressively be nurtured and supported. POF supported these conversations by convening community meetings in the presence of chiefs, elders, women, men, and youth.

This methodology draws on the experience of SASA!, a 'community mobilisation intervention developed by Raising Voices in Uganda that aims to prevent VAWG by addressing gender inequality and social norms around the acceptability of violence' (Kerr-Wilson et al 2020:27). Led by trained community activists, SASA! is built around four phases of change: start, awareness, support and action (thus the acronym SASA!). While SASA! emphasises engagement with community stakeholders, its approach does not situate the 'custodians of culture', kings/queens, rainmakers, chiefs, elders, etc., the guardians of traditions and norms. For POF in Eastern Equatoria, programmatic engagement with these personalities is critical for achieving social change and creating a safe environment for public discourse on social and gender norms. In the case of the Monyomiji, it is central to securing agreement on changes to gender relations, to the issuance of bylaws that then govern the society going forward. Specific examples are provided below in Section 4.

Finally, a look at engaging men and boys, where interventions

> 'are based on the premise that [men and boys] are the ones who perpetrate violence and should thus be central to its prevention. … a recognition that constructions of masculinity – the social norms, roles, expectations and identities associated with manhood – play a crucial role in shaping men's use of violence against women' (Kerr-Wilson et al 2020:44).

Some approaches are exclusive to men and boys, others inclusive of women, recognising that 'women bear the brunt' of violence, a 'nothing about us without us' position problematises the notion of VAWG interventions that do not benefit women as victims or survivors.

POF promotes a shared space approach, where women and men discuss together, guided by a facilitator creating a safe environment for open discussion. The facilitation of this type of speaking is situated firmly within the culturally familiar truth-telling systems, such as traditional conflict management, which permit speaking without reprisal, truth-telling for the good of the community.

In summary, the adopted approach draws on documented best practice that aligns with cultural communicative processes which are practiced and familiar to local communities. It gives primacy to these processes, seeking to influence conversation content, building on conversations already taking place within community, invariably in private or semi-public spaces.

[3] https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100515327

A cultural note: Monyomiji

The Monyomiji refers to the youth and 'traditional youth governance or leadership system' of the Otuho people (Bedigen 2019:19). It is a political, social and economic management institution (Simonse and Kurimoto, 2011:9). It has a security function in that '*the role of Monyomiji first of all is to act like the army in the society. They are to manage the security of the people, the security of the village*' (Saferworld 2020:11).

This security function has been particularly important during the recent civil war, where the Monyomiji youth were tasked with protecting their community. Monyomiji are called on to settle conflicts, make decisions on land disputes and protect the interest of the community (Grawert, 2014:144). Following a cattle raid or theft of livestock, they are a form of first responder, deployed to seek the return of stolen assets.

The literature points to a patriarchal structure that discriminates

> 'against women and contributes to continued exclusion of women from most positions of power, decision-making and dispute resolution. … women can and do occasionally assume the customary role of landlord, and there are a small number of women involved in local courts, but they are completely excluded from the Monyomiji' (Saferworld (2020:1-2).

Key informants disagree with this view, stating that women become members of the Monyomiji through marriage, have their own female leader who represents their interests, and have their own spaces within the cultural shrine where the Monyomiji meet. How women are considered within society depends on the individual, and there is no single narrative that frames the place of women in society. Membership of the Monyomiji is conferred following male initiation rituals.

Saferworld provides a useful insight on issues of patriarchal norms, gender inequality, GBV and intimate partner violence, girl child compensation, bride-price and punishment – all of which reflect the type of issues approached in the public discourse model of community engagement.

> 'The lives of men and women are typically equally valued in terms of the amount of compensation required to be paid if they are killed, these systems too are characterised by gender inequality. Patriarchal norms contribute to sexual- and gender-based violence (SGBV), including rape. Intimate partner violence was widespread in the research areas, and was often regarded as normal or something minor to be handled within the family. Early and forced marriage are common. Girl child compensation, a practice where an underage girl is provided to the family of someone killed as a form of restitution (in place of cattle), is still in practice in the research areas despite government and civil society campaigns to stop it.
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> … if women do experience abuse, they are most likely to seek justice through family or customary community mechanisms, which tend to reinforce gender inequalities in how they deal with such cases and in the resulting outcomes. The practice of 'bride price', in which a man's family pays a woman's family to secure a wife, is associated with women's lack of decision-making and agency, and is thought to contribute to SGBV. It effectively turns women into property that men and their families have purchased, and it reinforces men's beliefs in their entitlement to discipline and punish their wives physically.'

Key informants, members of the Monyomiji, provided extensive feedback on the quotation above, which they felt misrepresented and misunderstood key aspects of their culture and of their society. Informants felt that much of the literature is overly negative about local culture, and fails to identify progress. Interviewees commented on three key issues.

Firstly, the Monyomiji literature generally places a strong emphasis on violence within the culture, particularly violence against women. This emphasis is frustrating because it fails to communicate any notion of healthy relationships of love within the society. Interviewees wondered why researchers were unable to see this within society. This is not to deny that the society has real issues to address, but to highlight an important reframing.

Secondly, bride price is more complicated that a man's family paying a 'woman's family to secure a wife'. Interviewees stated that the notion of a woman becoming the property of a man following payment of the bride-price is incorrect. Furthermore, the bride price exchange comes with obligations for the two families, who become the custodians of the couple, with a responsibility to offer guidance and advice.

Thirdly, while intimate partner violence is recognised as a serious issue within society, it is not accepted as 'normal', but is condemned by the society which has safeguards in place to protect a woman. For example, a woman experiencing intimate partner violence has grounds for divorce. She has the right to present her case to the local court, but generally would seek advice from her family in the first instance, which could lead to a meeting between the two families. A violent husband can expect a visit from the Monyomiji leaders within his community, asking that he explain his recourse to violence.

These comments are not intended to minimise the violence that women experience in South Sudan, but to suggest that greater nuance and perspective from within local societies is needed to understand better what is being done to address such an important issue. The '*Republic of South Sudan National Action Plan 2015-2020 for the Implementation of UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security and Related Resolutions*' makes for troubling reading on the issues faced generally by women in South Sudanese society:

> 'Because [women] do not have the same political rights, authority, resources or control over their environment and needs, all categories of women suffer an increase in domestic violence during and after conflict, which is often related to shifting gender roles'. (p.12).

> 'All across the country, SGBV remains at crisis levels and needs to be urgently addressed due to short-comings within the justice system, both in its formal and customary embodiments. … studies on South Sudan indicate that SGBV and sexual violence during armed conflict has not been broadly investigated, although women and girls continue to experience multiple forms of violence even after the conflict ceases. Cases of sexual and domestic violence reported to the police are often trivialized and very few are taken through the law courts. … SGBV manifests at the household level, within the family, community and between communities and is deeply anchored in cultural beliefs, where the majority of those affected are women and girls. Rape, for instance, is not treated as a serious crime in some communities and when an unmarried girl is raped she is expected to marry the perpetrator, even if it is against her will. Similarly, customary laws view wife beating as a normal and acceptable practice intended to discipline an errant woman' (p.23).

What appears to be unique, however, within Otuho society, is a structure that facilitates review, reflection, and renewal of norms which underpin the society. Emerging results from programmatic engagement with this process are outlined in the next section.

Emerging Results

From March to October 2020, members of the Monyomiji engaged fifteen communities to explore what could be achieved through public discourse engagement with leaders and community members.[4] This involved meeting community leaders to secure approval and a date for convening a meeting, subsequently facilitating the meeting followed by further conversation with local Monyomiji leaders on taking key ideas forward.

Emerging results from this community engagement suggest key incremental changes, including social norm change, and illustrate the inherent potential of the adopted approach, undertaken from within the society by members immersed in the culture and traditions of the Otuho people itself.

This section outlines and comments on key areas where change is being advanced internally by the Monyomiji. As will be seen below, public discourse within communities is influencing decision-making on a wide range of laws to govern the next generation, which include laws relating to GBV and gender relations.

Education: the importance of education, previously regarded as somehow foreign and not central to the ambition of the community, has been clarified and fully owned. With low investment in education, the community realised it needed to own the problem of decreasing investment to ensure the education of the next generation. As a result, the community has agreed:

- All children must attend school;
- Teachers (and doctors) are exempt from community security patrols;
- Parents who do not send children to school must provide a justification to the Monyomiji, and pay a fine if there is no valid reason;
- The Parent Teacher Association has increased responsibility to ensure the functioning of education and to report to the Monyomiji;
- Parents contribute SSP100 and one bowel of sorghum, and cultivate the school garden to pay teacher and other educational costs;
- School age girls who marry are to be supported by their husbands to complete their education.

The Monyomiji spoke of a growing realisation that the state was withdrawing from the provision of services such as education, that safeguarding their future, ensuring the education of their children required decisive action, which are the purpose of the bylaws above. The bylaws guarantee the education of girls, particularly if they are married young.

Protection of women: the impact of the civil war on women was especially acute, with high levels of sexual violence inflicted by the military and militias that operated in the Equatorias from 2016-2018. The failure to protect women from this violence was a failure of the community, and of the Monyomiji who were tasked with ensuring security. In charting a way forward, the Monyomiji looked to past practice, how women were treated prior to recent conflict, where they were viewed as non-combatants, as separate to the conflict. The by-laws state:

- Women are not to be targeted during intercommunal violence;
- Violence is to stop if women are present or intervene in a conflict.

Rape: interviewees agree that gender-based violence is a major issue, but that the prevalence of rape is low within the community and seen as a cultural taboo. They accept that rape was used by government

[4] The members involved were POF contracted personnel, who have founded the Monyomiji Union based in Torit.

forces and militias as a form of punishment during the conflict, the resolution of which was outside the community. The bylaws agreed in relation to rape reveal a harder line against rapists, with some recourse to the criminal justice system, where the punishment for rapists is increased to include prison and a fine. The bylaws state:

- Rapists are to be handed over to the police to be dealt with by the law;
- The fine imposed is greater than the payment of dowry;
- The girl/woman is not required to marry her rapist.

The bylaws recognise that rape survivors were often obliged to marry their rapists in the past, and that this is no longer acceptable. The imposition of a fine greater than the dowry price is intended as an economic deterrent.

Dowry: there is no reduction in dowry, but the focus is on associated costs that have driven the overall cost of marriage. Previous generations had reduced the dowry price from twenty-two to sixteen cattle, with other marriage associated costs driving up the price for a bride. Seeking to control these associated costs is seen as an important step in ensuring that marriage remains affordable.

Domestic Violence: A new bylaw forbids the use of sticks, knives, or such objects as part of disciplining a wife within the home. The WHO (2009) notes that in some societies a man has a right to physically discipline a woman for 'incorrect' behaviour. Within Otuho society, Members of the Monyomiji point out that husbands who beat their wives regularly find themselves having to account before the community for their behaviour, and that resorting to violence is seen as a weakness. After marriage, an Otuho woman no longer belongs to her family, but to her husband. In trying to address this cultural understanding of marriage, some parents no longer want dowry but are more concerned that their daughter is treated well. Some insist on a small dowry, with payment over a lengthy period of time, to avoid claims that the woman is fully paid for, which can confer some husbands with a license to act violently.

Girl Child Compensation: as referenced in the Saferworld report above, girl-child compensation was practiced within the community, an instrument of exchange between two families to settle blood compensation. The exchange of a girl-child has been abolished, with compensation paid in livestock or money. The compensation to be paid must be equivalent to dowry.

Stopping revenge killing: revenge killings are undertaken in response to a perceived lack of justice for the killing of a family member. Those who carry out revenge killings can be afforded hero status within the community, with songs composed in their honour. The new bylaws do not address the access to justice dimension of revenge killings, but rather target the culture of praise for those who conduct a revenge killing. The bylaws ban the composition of such songs of praise and discourage revenge killers being treated as heroes.

Cattle Raiding: this is a key cause of instability within the community. The incoming generation expressed a strong rejection of raiding by the present generation:

- A curse is placed on those who go raiding, wishing them ill fortune and death;
- Prohibition on composing songs of praise by women to honour the raiders returning with cattle to the community;
- Raiders are arrested upon their return:
- The raid will be announced on radio for the raided community to collect their stolen animals.

Condemnation of cultural practices that cause insecurity are strongly challenged by the new generation. They condemn the blessing provided by landlords and elders to raiders and their weapons before they go raiding. '*The landlord shaves your head, brings a goat, prepares you for four days in isolation, provides you with food, before you go raiding. They bless you when you return if you killed, return injured, receive part of the raid'*.

Support for Vulnerable Groups: widows, orphans, and the elderly have a special place in the community and need to be protected. The Monyomiji are expected to support by fetching water, firewood, assisting with the farming. Food is also provided. This is a reaffirmation to the new generation of how the culture expects the new generation to care for the vulnerable.

Farming: traditionally men and women have different roles in agriculture, but it is recognised that the division of labour needs to be reviewed to secure the production of food. It was agreed:

- That men would play a greater role in weeding, particularly cutting away tall grasses around crop areas;
- That alcohol consumption would be banned until the end of the day when work was complete. Those found drunk will be fined for drunkenness.

These bylaws recognise the increasing impact of changing weather patterns on food production, that the traditional division of labour – where women do most of the farming – needed to change. It also recognises the problem of alcohol consumption by men within the community and its affect on agricultural productivity. Key informants also noted the negative impact of alcohol on familial relations and violence within the home.

The generational change process is still ongoing within many Otuho communities. The implementation of these bylaws will be reviewed annually by the Monyomiji as part of continual dialogue with the cultural system.

Conclusion

This Learning Paper highlights the potential of an approach that emphasises women's peace and security by aligning with cultural opportunities for change and building on existing conversations within Otuho society. This is not an externally imposed agenda, but one that works incrementally and aligns with cycles of change already underway within society.

As has been demonstrated, the current Monyomiji generation has embraced a range of bylaws, embedded within cultural norms, that enhance women's peace and security, after a period of destructive violence.

The evidence points to a transformative potential within society that can progressively be worked with to support a locally-owned change agenda, where women and men engage in public discussion on the values and norms that govern their society. The strength of the approach is that it is locally-owned, aligns with a cultural change process, and engages the custodians and guardians of culture and tradition.

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