The Local Capacities for Peace Project: the Sudan experience[1]

Abikök Riak

'Do no harm': The Local Capacities for Peace Project

In the mid-1990s, the Local Capacities for Peace Project (LCPP) was launched to investigate the relationship between aid and conflict. The Project is a collaborative effort, involving international and local NGOs: the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRCS), Catholic Relief Services (CRS), World Vision (WV), UN agencies, and European and American donor agencies (USAID, CIDA, SIDA). Spearheaded by Mary B. Anderson of the Collaborative for Development Action (CDA), the LCPP set out to answer the following question: How can humanitarian or development assistance be given in conflict situations in ways that, rather than feeding into and exacerbating the conflict, help local people to disengage and establish alternative systems for dealing with the underlying problems? Lessons learned from the field experiences of aid providers working in conflict situations around the world were compiled into a booklet, and more recently into a book (Anderson 1999).

The LCPP is based on the premise that when international assistance is given in the context of conflict, even when it is effective in doing what it is intended to do, it not only becomes part of the conflict but it also has the potential to feed into and exacerbate it. In February 1998, WV Sudan joined the LCPP to investigate the effects of its aid programme on the conflicts in the south of the country, and to demonstrate how the field-based lessons learned through the Project could be used to improve the design and implementation of WV Sudan aid programmes.[2]

The LCP process is iterative. It begins with an analysis of the environment and looks at which groups are in conflict, both historically and potentially. Aid workers (assisted by external facilitators) identify the dividers, or capacities for war (for example, different values and interests, the apparatus of war propaganda, systems of discrimination) that separate groups in conflict, and the connectors, or capacities for peace (such as common history and language, shared infrastructure and markets) that bring them together. In this exercise, the dividers and connectors are prioritised according to those that are in WV's sphere of concern (like the north–south war in Sudan) and others in WV's sphere of influence (for example, inter-ethnic conflicts). Through this analysis, we can design programme alternatives that reduce negative impacts and strengthen connectors.

Our involvement with the LCPP has provided a solid foundation for the long-term process of addressing and monitoring the relationship between aid and conflict in Sudan. It challenged us to think about the obvious ways in which our aid can unintentionally contribute to the conflict, as well as the subtler impact of our attitudes and actions and how these can influence the perpetuation or negation of war. Most importantly, LCPP has provided us with the opportunity to improve the quality of our work in Sudan.

The operational environment in southern Sudan

The civil war in Sudan has the dubious distinction of being the world's longest-running civil war, having raged for most of the past four decades. The current fighting has lasted for the past 18 years. An estimated 1.9 million people have been killed since 1983.

WV operates in Yambio in Western Equatoria, and Tonj and Gogrial counties in Bahr el Ghazal (BeG), areas controlled by the Sudan People's Liberation Army/ Movement (SPLA/M). In these areas WV works with the Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Association (SRRA), the humanitarian wing of the SPLM. In 1994, a civil structure was set up, distinct from the SRRA. In mid-1999, tensions between the SRRA, civil authorities, and traditional leaders became more pronounced.

Tonj and Gogrial counties are close to the front line and are subject to fighting between the Government of Sudan (GoS), southern factions, and independent warlords; and to inter-ethnic struggles. The relationship between civil and military authorities, NGOs, and the local communities is a tense and potentially dangerous one, especially in Gogrial.

A thorough LCP analysis necessitates a keen understanding of the dynamic operational environment in which WV works. One of the key elements of the methodology is the constant reassessment of this environment and the links to WV's programmes. The focus of the LCP analysis in Tonj and Gogrial is on the targeting of food and non-food aid to genuine beneficiaries, and the potentially harmful impact that distributions of food and commodities can have in a conflict.

After the army, WV is the largest employer in the two regions. Therefore, the questions of whom we hire, whom we target as beneficiaries, and how these benefits feed into a war economy are vital. Who benefits from WV programmes and on what level can have tremendous impacts on the conflict and on the economy of the region. We purchase grain from farmers in Yambio for food distributions in BeG, we distribute seeds, tools, and survival kits, we provide drugs in clinics, and we drill boreholes. All of these and many other activities, if not managed appropriately, have the potential for misuse and re-direction to military endeavours. Every day we face armed soldiers requesting food, drugs, and seemingly innocuous rides in vehicles. How do we deal with these challenges without demonstrating either belligerence or powerlessness?

In the first assessment of Yambio, in 1998, a conflict was identified between the community and the local authorities that had developed out of a hiring procedure. The analysis showed that WV was inadvertently contributing to this conflict through a recruitment and hiring policy that depended almost entirely on the SRRA and was, therefore, subject to abuse. Ways to address this included recruitment through churches, open advertising, and committee interviews. These changes provided the community with the opportunity to participate in staff selection, to seek employment, and to represent to a greater extent the diversity of Yambio county. The committees are responsible for interviewing and hiring, and their role has developed to include supervision of employees.

Lessons learned

The LCP analysis was extended to Bahr el Ghazal in late 1998. Some lessons could be transferred from one region to the other. The issues of staff-hiring practices and of abuses associated with currency exchange were common in both regions. During this first phase, an emphasis was placed on training, and analytical discussions were refined.

The focus in the second phase was on incorporating the methodology in the design, implementation, and evaluation of WV Sudan

programmes. The dissemination of lessons learned through our involvement with LCP to the WV Partnership more broadly, and the aid community at large, is critical at this stage.

The lessons learned from the implementation of the LCPP are valuable, given the growing size of WV operations in southern Sudan, the increasing complexity of the conflict, and the challenges posed by the interaction between the two. We learned that the appreciative contribution and leadership of senior management are paramount importance to the success of any new paradigm. High staff turnover is common in emergency programmes, and this may jeopardise the capacity and consistency required for the LCP process to make an impact over the planned three-year implementation. Training is crucial, and staff in the field and in Nairobi were targeted for basic training and to act as 'champions'. Influential staff were given extended training.

Collaboration among those involved in the LCPP allows dialogue and exchange. Regular meetings give partner agencies the opportunity to discuss the lessons learned and their operational implications. The relationship between WV, CDA, and other partners has provided something rare in the relief community: a forum for critical discussion about the impact of humanitarian aid on conflict that has also emphasised learning and reflection.

Having analysed the impact of their programme on conflict, field staff were eager to make programmatic changes to correct negative impacts. The potential danger is that they may act too quickly, without adequate analysis of the alternatives that they identify. This tendency was checked with more active co-ordination between programme headquarters and field staff. Training was restructured to focus on the iterative process of developing programme options and analysing their potential before making operational changes.

We have become good at identifying ways in which our aid can feed into and exacerbate conflict, but it remains a challenge to develop viable programme options to address the more difficult issues raised. Some issues, such as recruitment and hiring practices for local staff, the setting up of feeding centres, and targeting of beneficiaries, were straightforward, and the programme options developed for them were equally direct.

The LCP framework has been used primarily as a tool to improve programme quality. Staff are now more aware of the impacts that aid can have on existing and potential conflicts. In relief and rehabilitation interventions, aid workers, struggling under the 'tyranny of the urgent', tend to focus more on the what (such as food and water) than on the how.

Through our work with the LCPP, WV has been given the opportunity to take a step back and focus on the neglected 'hows'. What we do is often less important than how we do it. Examining the conflict environment and how WV programmes feed into the connectors and dividers provides a unique tool for implementers to sit and discuss our interventions with stakeholders. This facilitates participation by local authorities and beneficiaries, with whom LCP has created increased understanding as well as communication between the community and WV. The inclusion of beneficiaries and Sudanese staff in the analysis has contributed to a better working environment in Yambio.

LCP as a peace-building tool

WV Sudan entered the LCPP collaboration with the knowledge that aid does not cause wars, nor can it end them; and that we as outsiders cannot create lasting peace in Sudan. At the same time, however, we acknowledged that the work we do, not only the services we provide but how we provide them, can have negative or positive effects on existing tensions and conflicts. After 18 months, we were able to see how interventions can support or undermine Sudanese efforts to build the conditions for their own peace.

The LCP framework is not a peace-building tool *per se*, but many aspects of the process have peace-building elements. The next step is to take our experiences with LCP one step further and explore their links to peace-building. Peace in southern Sudan must be created locally, but WV can facilitate the process. Given our large operational presence and our consequent impact on governance, WV is in a good position to support civil society and local peace initiatives. The key is that the processes are not WV's: in order to be lasting, they must come from the grassroots.

We now have a foundation from which we can begin critically and systematically to explore the potential of our aid programmes to encourage a peace-building environment. By building on this, we can fulfil our mandate to save lives and work with the poorest of the poor, while at the same time providing aid in a knowledgeable and thoughtful way, aware of the complex layers of our role in communities.

The way forward

As we move into the second phase and the third year of our involvement with the LCPP, we wish to pass on lessons learned and so to ensure that

the methodology is embedded in the design, implementation, and evaluation of WV Sudan projects. Our ultimate goal is better aid and more accountability. We want accountability at all levels. Our experience is that the LCP methodology is a tool that can help us achieve this.

LCP is only one of several tools that can be useful in programme management, and it of course has its limitations. Though it helps us to organise and process information, it does not answer the questions for us, nor does it make critical decisions. In the end, it comes down to our making better choices and better decisions in our programming. What LCP has done is to provide us with a systematic way of addressing the impact of our aid on conflict and the many programme-quality issues that surround the discussions. Clearly, the LCP framework has benefits, not only for the Sudan programme but also for other organisations working in conflict areas.

Notes

1 An earlier version of this paper was published in the October-December edition of *Together,* a journal of the World Vision Partnership.

2 The LCP initiative in Sudan was funded by World Vision Canada and CIDA.

Reference

Anderson, Mary B. (1999) *Do No Harm: How Aid Can Support Peace -—Or War*, Boulder CO: Lynne Rienner