

Working in Challenging Environments: Risk Management and Aid Culture in South Sudan

Field report South Sudan



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1. Introduction

The history of aid interventions in South Sudan dates back to the civil wars. The signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005 between the Government of Sudan and the Sudan People Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M) led to the arrival of great numbers of international aid agencies in South Sudan. The growth of organisations has been exponential – in 2005 there were approximately 47 INGOs working in Southern Sudan. By 2010 there were over 155 international NGOs registered and equally as many national NGOs.¹ Most recently, since the independence of South Sudan on 9 July 2011, the number of NGOs joining the Forum has been growing at a rate of three NGOs per month (Interview 26). However, despite this ‘peacetime’ era, there seems to be evidence that security restrictions were not as heavy as during the war and that aid workers were able to move around more freely. Rather, the trend toward aid bunkerisation is a ‘peacetime’ phenomena, underlining the extent to which ‘risk’ is a ‘social construct’.

In South Sudan, aid organisations are engaged in activities ranging from recovery and reconstruction, political stabilisation, peacebuilding, statebuilding, humanitarian relief and development, with donors encouraging the integration of aid and political activities to create ‘comprehensive’ or ‘integrated’ approaches. The variety of programmes affects how risk is individually and institutionally approached. Anecdotally, one NGO representative mentioned how ‘unthinkable for humanitarian NGOs’ that are used to Land Cruisers, radios and curfews, to work side by side with development-oriented organisations who, for example, send volunteers to remote areas to live with the population on teacher-training programmes. In such contexts, aid agencies run parallel humanitarian and development programmes, which also have different approaches to dealing with insecurity.

Although South Sudan falls under the ‘post-conflict’ banner, reality is much more fluid and boundaries between ‘peace’ and chronic insecurity are blurry, with aid agencies often working under situations of continued violence, despite political narratives of peace. For example, UN OCHA’s decision to leave South Sudan in 2007, transferring its coordination role to (the then) UNMIS’s Resident Coordinator Support Office, was a political decision that demonstrates just how chaotic these processes are. OCHA returned in 2009 reclaiming responsibility over coordination once again. Despite UN attempts to objectively define and structure levels of risk, the humanitarian arena and the interactions within are inherently ‘messy’, fragmented and continuously negotiated.

This field research report explores ‘aid culture’, some of its social norms and rules and its engagement with society, through the angles of risk and security management, in South Sudan. It is not to be read as an objective take on security but rather builds on the sociality of the aid industry from the perspective of its cultural and spatial dimensions. The report seeks to provide some evidence-based insights onto how risk and aid culture roll out in South Sudan, through grounded examples. The first section addresses the normalisation and institutionalisation of an increasingly restrictive security agenda, largely led by the United Nations Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) and the Department of Peacekeeping

¹ NGO Forum website: <http://southsudanngoforum.org/ngos-in-southern-sudan/> Accessed 6-11-2012.

Operations (DPKO) in setting the tone over (in)security thresholds. This is followed by a section on the idea of ‘how to stay’, including decision-making processes by organisations and individuals, and the tensions embedded in these, as well as counter-strategies by ‘enablers’/‘rogue’ officers on how to stay. The final section discusses the seemingly rising distance between aid agencies and society, in terms of a growing compound culture, sub-contracting and hierarchies within the aid sector.

This field report is a very small part of a two-year research project by the Global Insecurities Centre, University of Bristol and the Humanitarian Policy Group at the Overseas Development Institute.² The research project examines how risk management and enhanced threat awareness among United Nations agencies and international NGOs affects the nature of their operational presence and actions and how it challenges their ability to achieve key policy and programme goals in fragile states affected by conflict and violence. The report is exploratory and seeks to present preliminary findings and reflections on some features of the social dimensions of risk management. It is work in progress and refers specifically to a four-week field research period conducted in Juba and in Jonglei State, in the State capital Bor and in Boma sub-county in Pibor county addressing a number of agreed elements. Findings also draw from previous research done by the author in South Sudan in October-November 2011, under a Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI) project, looking at UN civilian peacekeepers operating at local level.³

Methodology

The research was ethnographically-driven and drew on a range of interview-based methodologies, including participant observation, informal discussions and qualitative interviews with international, national and local staff of UNMISS, UNDSS, UN agencies and INGOs. Targeted open-ended interviews were conducted with decision-makers such as project managers and security officers both in Juba and in Jonglei State. The author also attended aid coordination and security meetings in Jonglei. In addition to interviews, the research sites included aid community hangouts, such as compounds, restaurants and bars. In total, over 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted with some 16 organisations, in addition to a number of informal discussions and observations. Those interviewed spanned roughly 20 nationalities, including a number of South Sudanese.

Aidland in South Sudan

Expatriate aid workers are a community with shared values, norms and symbols. Raymond Apthorpe (2011) highlights how the emergence of the ethnography of aid, or what he refers to as “aidnography”, can greatly contribute to a better depiction and interpretation of the

² The research was conducted under the auspices of an ESRC-DFID research grant (RES-167-25-0439) entitled ‘Achieving Policy Coherence in Challenging Environments: Risk Management and Aid Culture in Sudan and Afghanistan’.

³ ‘Contextualizing peacebuilding activities to local circumstances’ was a Norwegian Institute of International Affairs research project funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Available at: <http://english.nupi.no/Activities/Departments/Department-of-Security-and-Conflict-Management/Projekter/Contextualizing-peacebuilding-activities-to-local-circumstances>

institutional culture of “Aidland” and the expert knowledges that inspire and sustain it. In this sense, Aidland can be thought of as macro construct with micro applications, that includes its own “mental typographies, languages of discourse, lore and custom, and approaches to organisational knowledge and learning” (Apthorpe, 2011:199). Similarly, Autesserre (2011) describes interveners deployed in conflict zones as a “community of practice” with three core characteristics: a domain of interest; a community; and practices, or a “shared repertoire of resources”, including “experiences, stories, tools, [and] ways of addressing recurring problems” (Autesserre: 2011:6). This includes formal cluster meetings, coordination and security briefings during the day and informal expat hang-outs such as restaurants and bars at night time. It also includes a shared way of engaging with local society, where one of the external signs of this is defensive living.

One early evening I met with an INGO expat at the nice tukul restaurant at a fortified UN Compound in Bor, Jonglei State. After roughly an hour, many of the INGO expats living in Bor had arrived for dinner and joined us at our table. Between beers, the conversation went from recent security incidents to newly caught diseases, and as my new friend told me amused, “when expats meet we talk about security and stomach problems”.

There is however a difference between those operating in Juba and to some extent in other state capitals living in similar circumstances, and those that are based in field offices, whose everyday practices involve negotiating with local level officials and the population at large. Dynamics on the ground are usually distinct from those at the level of the state, and instructions from capitals and headquarters do not automatically translate into action in the field. Since orders are interpreted, decentralised interveners have substantial leeway in conducting action on the ground. Jansen (forthcoming: 8) speaks of the sociality of aid in South Sudan:

In head offices, NGO policies may be presented that do not necessarily correspond to the reality on the ground, what Allen and Schomerus find as a ‘common disconnection between NGO policy and the realities of implementation’ (2010:94). This disconnection exemplifies the idea that humanitarian space is a social space, instead of a strictly legal or a bureaucratic one, in which ‘various actors, NGOs, UN, governments, private parties, individual aiders, and beneficiaries, negotiate the organisation of aid’ (Hilhorst and Jansen, 2010). The ways authorities and aid givers negotiate aid then is a social phenomenon that is an integral part of humanitarian practice.

Duffield (2010) suggests that current risk-management procedures have a homogenizing effect on aid workers. In this sense, it “normalise[s] the segregation and bunkering of the aid industry within fortified aid compounds”, while also highlighting the “exclusivity of the international space of flows and its unequal relationship with the surrounding environment” (Duffield, 2010:461). Similarly, Mosse (2011:14) refers to international experts as “occupy[ing] cultural enclaves of shared consumption, lifestyle and values”, “as restricted as any other strong ethnic identity” (Friedman in Mosse, 2011:14). Indeed, the internal culture of international aid institutions provides an interesting and often strange contrast with local society.

In fact, aid workers move between 'high-end' large INGOs such as Oxfam and Care International, UN agencies and UN peacekeeping, and private contractors such as AECOM. It is therefore increasingly hard to distinguish who is an aid worker, in the traditional sense of the term: 'Aid has become an industry and so much more bureaucratic. The more you grow, the more institutionalised you become. People move from Oxfam to the UN to AECOM...' (Interview 6). Boundaries between groups and who constitutes an aid worker are progressively blurrier. Aid culture is constructed not only by traditional humanitarian actors, but by all those who shape it, ranging from UN military and civilian peacekeepers, to NGO workers and UN agency staff, to private contractors, to research bodies, government officials, and of course, those on the 'receiving' end of aid, commonly known as 'beneficiaries'.

2. Normalisation of a restrictive security environment

Agencies are really trying to live in their own world, it's very different from the outside world.
UNICEF national staff, Jonglei

Institutionalisation of a restrictive security agenda

'The politicisation of aid has made helping others increasingly dangerous' (Duffield, 2010:453). For the sake of 'efficiency', 'cost-sharing' and 'best utilisation of resources', the architecture of aid has placed military, police and political peacekeeping under the same banner (and often roof) as UN agencies working on humanitarian and development issues, often referred to as 'the UN family', contributing to blurrier boundaries between different actors operating in the same arena. UN integrated missions such as the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) are now the norm. INGOs have had to, willingly or not, adapt and readjust to this trend.

The post-9/11 agenda has also affected the way aid actors are seen. One senior UN security officer in Jonglei argued that 'the perception of global politics and how the UN is perceived was different, now extremism rules (...) and the UN is now seen as the US, and as part of a certain western arm trying to promote a certain ideology, and it slowly grew to become vulnerable targets' (Interview 14). This became particularly evident after the bombing of the Canal Hotel in Bagdad in 2003 which served as the UN HQ in Iraq, killing at least 22 people, including the UN Special Representative of the Secretary General in Iraq, Sérgio Vieira de Mello, and wounding over 100. The attack also led the UN to create UNDSS. Other serious attacks against UN premises have also taken place in Afghanistan, Algeria and most recently in Nigeria contributing to the current risk averse environment.

UN security has thus become more restrictive, leading to a greater sense of insecurity (sometimes real or perceived), of distrust and of segregation from local society that becomes entrenched into the mindset of aid workers. This is also constructed through courses, workshops, curfews, off-limit areas, MOSS and MORSS regulations and daily security sitreps which are all part of the institutionalised culture of fear and disassociation from everyday South Sudanese life. A common identity is constructed through the informal and formal rules

of Aidland. Expat life is becoming more and more regulated and restrictive living within the 'aid bubble' institutionalised.

One UN expat told me: 'Because in Juba things that are normal become a big thing.' She described an incident when she got her bag snatched in front of a usual expat hangout, and how her colleagues urged her not to report it to UN security as it would likely make the place off-limits for UN staff. Yet as she reasoned, 'it's so arbitrary, decisions are based on one-off events, which could happen everywhere'. She also argued decisions would be taken by the country director alongside the security officer, both of which do not go to the place in question on Saturday nights. She continued: 'You adapt very quickly to the walls. In general I don't feel unsafe in Maban or in Juba. In Juba I just feel detached from everything, from normal Juba life. In other parts [of the country] we're so much more in the middle (...)' (Interview 4).

Unlike other conflict and post-conflict environments such as Somalia or Afghanistan where aid workers are often targeted, in South Sudan aid workers have largely remained ancillary to the conflicts. This is recognised by most aid workers who tend to say they feel safe and comfortable doing their work. There is however a hierarchy within safety of aid workers, with different perceptions and risks faced by *kawajas*, regional aid workers particularly those from neighbouring countries to South Sudan, national and local staff, as discussed later in section.

The problem with the increasingly restrictive security agenda in which aid agencies operate, is ultimately what it means for the relationship that *individuals* hold with the *society* they are operating in. The culture of fear that is promoted by this security agenda is disempowering and institutionalises an idea of 'the other' that cannot be trusted. These ideas are not only promoted by internationals, but by nationals alike who all delineate what spaces are appropriate and inappropriate for international aid workers to move in. For example, I was told by one UN international staff living in Bor 'not to trust anyone'. UN drivers had the same reaction. As I walked around in Bor in broad daylight and with many people around, I was stopped by UN South Sudanese drivers offering me a ride, saying it was not safe for me to walk around. When asked why, given the amount of people doing it, I was explained that it was not safe for a *kawaja* to walk, and there were now many foreigners from Uganda and Kenya around committing crimes (again demonising 'the other'). In similar lines, another UN staff observed 'compound life is so normalised, and the sense of security is pointed out by national and international staff. What they think internationals should do and what's acceptable for foreigners to do' (interview 4).

Rather than being mandate-driven, many organisations are becoming more insurance-driven and donor-driven. As argued by this INGO security manager 'bunkerisation is essentially led by donors'. Aid agencies are more and more a mirror image of their donors, whether their donors are UN agencies, the US government or ECHO. Donor-driven requirements are imposed on humanitarian actors and 'the knee-jerk reaction is "the donor needs it, let's do it"' (interview 9), rather than truly considering the implications of what is being requested.

One security manager to a large INGO, discussed an extreme yet burgeoning tactic undertaken by international donors, in particular US donor agencies, to overtly influence aid activities to better align with their geopolitical agenda and ideology of the day. This was explained to be particularly problematic in areas that maintained counter-insurgency operations such as Iraq and Afghanistan. Yet given the global interconnectedness of aid, events in Afghanistan, Chad and other insecure environments have implications for the wider aid community around the world.

The issue began to affect aid actors in Afghanistan around 2007-08, when congressional controversy surfaced regarding oversight and alleged misuse of funds by for-profit contractors working in development activities. This led the US to consider a broad database where all the personal details of all those working for them were stored in a Synchronised Pre-Deployment Operational Tracking System, known as S.P.O.T. This database of course became a huge problem for NGOs, as US funding decided to put a business model into what they did, also peppered with required justifications of how the recipient agency supported “counter-insurgency operations”. SPOT was also designed to ensure that all persons receiving US funding were not in any way “supporting terrorism”. However, what it effectively meant was that humanitarian access became highly tenuous for independent agencies as they had effectively signed up to being a supporter of a particular party to the conflict. Additionally, if an agency were to be seen negotiating access with the Taliban they would potentially lose all their US funding due to working with an entity on the terrorist watch list.

What this translates in reality for South Sudan is that any NGO partnering with a core funded US donor partner is required to provide the personal details of all their staff members to be “vetted” and cleared of potential “terrorist” affiliation.

UN DPKO/UNDSS setting the tone

The emphasis on a more restrictive security agenda is led by an increasingly risk averse ‘United Nations family’, and in particular UN peacekeeping operations. The institutional importance, role, influence and norm-making capacity of UN peacekeeping missions cannot be ignored. In South Sudan, the sheer size of UNMISS’ human and financial resources, added to its presence throughout the country make it *the* organisation/structure who often sets the tone and thresholds over what is constructed as secure and insecure for all aid actors, even for those who do not have to follow UN rules.

It is the UN Department of Safety and Security, which operates from UNMISS, that determines what is deemed safe, making recommendations to the Senior Management Team, which 90% of the time follows the advice given. While NGOs are not required to follow UNDSS security guidelines and recommendations, they are severely affected by UN thresholds. Since most NGOs depend on the UN for logistics, if the UN decides to pull out, this has implications for NGOs – even those that may be willing to stay.

South Sudan is an extremely challenging logistical environment to operate in. Most of the limited road infrastructure that does exist becomes impassable in the rainy season. In fact, during most of the rainy season much of the country becomes isolated and unreachable, even by airplane, with flooded airstrips only accessible by helicopters. Most INGOs rely on UNHAS/WFP flights to move around the country, or alternatively on UNMISS helicopters and fixed wings. Both UNHAS and UNMISS follow UNDSS guidelines, affecting the movement of most aid actors who do not have their own plane assets, which are most: 'No matter if they don't have to follow UN rules, but they're affected by us. To stay, to leave and to go back' (Interview 29).

'Before UNHAS flew everywhere, no matter what. Now there are two cows on the airstrip and they don't land!' one INGO international staff complained (interview 20).



'Please avoid the following', UNMISS HQ in Bor.

One OCHA official with experience in humanitarian contexts with no peacekeeping mission argued that the presence of a mission made UNDSS more risk averse, as the latter becomes entangled with the mission. Conversely, UNMISS substantive staff often complained that UNDSS was too restrictive and 'not very helpful': 'Support sections are meant to be enablers and facilitators to implement mission mandate' (interview 25). But in many cases, the opposite happens and 'UNDSS controls the mission [UNMISS]' (Interview 27). As articulated by one senior civilian UNMISS official with long-term experience in South Sudan:

UN Security also makes it very difficult to go out in the field. During the war I could do all kinds of things with UN Security approval that I can no longer do. I was dropped with a radio set and a tent and stayed for weeks in the bush. Today no one walks, no tents. This means that we have no access, nor the flexibility to go to the areas where there is the greatest need. And humanitarians, who are present in some locations, are reluctant to house UNMISS staff even if we are not accompanied by the military. (Interview 41).

The security regulations enforced by UN security bureaucracy and Minimum Operational Security Standards (MOSS) compliance make it increasingly difficult to operate. To be MOSS

compliant, UN staff must travel with two cars, always have a Thuraya Satellite phone on them if on patrol missions, among several other conditions. The trouble is that for example, an UNMISS civilian section of roughly 10 people in Jonglei will have only one Thuraya satellite phone to share amongst them. This means that if they were to respect all UN rules they would all be sitting in Bor while one person would be off on mission. It is encouraging that they still choose to go on missions, aware they are breaking UN bureaucracy rules, in order to get their jobs done. But it also means that if something were to happen to them, they would not be covered by UN insurance.

When new UN staff arrive in the country they are required to do a UN Safety Training prepared by UNDSS. While this is compulsory for UN staff, NGO staff are encouraged yet not obliged. Many of those interviewed thought the course lacked socio-political context. One UN official told me that ‘...UNDSS is personal security, not national security. They’re checking walls, fences, doors – they’re security officers, but they have no idea about the political context’ (Interview 27). Most UNDSS staff are international, while security staff from UN agencies tend to be national staff.

‘I don’t know to what extent INGOs have taken over the bad practices of the UN’, one UN staff member told me. She went on to give the example of one INGO head of mission who got shot in the head close to a restaurant where many expats hang out. According to this individual, it turned out to be a personal feud with a former South Sudanese employee, and not criminal activity as such. However, after this incident several NGOs changed the curfew for 10pm and made the whole area off-limits. She concluded with some disillusionment, ‘....they are following’ (Interview 4).

Anecdotally, one expat working for a Norwegian NGO with a long history in South Sudan, told me that when their security officer started attending UN security briefings, and subsequently implementing more restrictive regulations and procedures, he was jokingly forbidden from continuing to attend such UN security briefings. That was simply not how that organisation did things (Interview 43).

3. ‘How to Stay’ in an evolving security risk management agenda

The larger INGOs are increasingly concerned with mainstreaming security ideology and risk into their programming, although this is still considered to be done largely at an ad hoc basis. The larger the size of the organisation, the more prepared they are, which often means, the more risk averse they are seen to be, by most aid workers. Bigger organisations have strict security procedures, “sometimes even close to UN standards”, one NGO security focal point argued (interview 12).

According to one INGO security manager, although many humanitarian agencies are trying to mainstream security into their activities, only ICRC and to a lesser extent MSF have succeeded in doing so. Rather, security is still perceived as a barrier to programming, rather than a

support service. Integrating security is seen as something agencies need to tick a box, without truly reflecting over what it means, what it costs and how it affects programming and activities. Security is hardly ever integrated into programming or taken seriously: ‘Nine out of ten security departments [in NGOs] consist of one person. I have responsibility for training, strategic direction, programming, and list goes on. It’s a self-fulfilling prophecy to fail – I can’t do it all!’, one security manager argued (interview 9). It was also argued that one of the reasons this is unlikely to change in the near future is that there is still not a good pool of humanitarian security professionals. For example, UNDSS do not know how to deal with NGOs, while there is also a huge misunderstanding over what UNDSS do from the part of INGOs. Risk is still seen as a barrier and something to be transferred to either another individual, or another organisation altogether. In the same lines, donors are also imposing strict security procedures, but oftentimes without really providing the funding necessary to seriously consider security as part of programming.

A context presented as an emergency or as recovery

Politically, South Sudan is presented as a post-conflict country engaged in recovery and (re)construction. While this is partially true, many areas in the country remain in a chronic state of humanitarian emergency and insecurity, particularly along the border with Sudan receiving high numbers of refugees and in areas of rebel militia groups. One expat with many years in the country argued that the reason why many aid agencies operating currently in South Sudan were so risk averse was that many had come in after the CPA where the narrative was built around peace, increased stability and recovery, yet found themselves engaged in highly political and unstable environments, responding to humanitarian emergencies. The way the country is viewed – as a humanitarian emergency or as recovery – affects the way security is dealt with. Of course these phases are not linear, however this contributes greatly to the ‘messiness’ of the how risk management is conceptualised among aid actors.

The focus on ‘development’ is clear when scrolling through the humanitarian website Reliefweb jobs section for South Sudan. Many if not most of the jobs announced in the website fall under the ‘early recovery and development’ banner, ranging from community-driven development to justice support to food security.⁴ While boundaries between humanitarian and development can be very tenuous, it signals to those applying that the context is one of safety. Job descriptions do not appropriately reflect the reality of South Sudan, and this can be associated with the unpreparedness and ignorance of aid workers. In addition, recruitment processes are often done by HQ staff that often have a poor idea of the socio-political and security context of the countries they are recruiting for.

One expat told the story of how a certain Italian INGO hired one expat to go to Warrap State in 2011, in a time of heavy communal violence, and SPLA and rebel clashes. The engineer, who had done some development work some ten years earlier in Ethiopia and had since been living in Rome, arrived completely unaware of the political and security environment. While still in Juba and after being given some reports to read on the project and the specific context in

⁴ Reliefweb jobs. Accessed on 13 November 2012. Available at: http://reliefweb.int/jobs?sl=environment-job_listing%252Ctaxonomy_index_tid_country-8657

Warrap, he expressed with shock that he had no idea of what he had signed up for, and that he had a family back home. The NGO sent him to Warrap where he stayed for some three or four months, before returning to Italy (Interview 28).

Aid workers arriving in South Sudan for the first time may come with a flawed perception of security in the country. Yet this applies more broadly to a lack of basic understanding of the context they are coming to operate in. The ‘emergency mindset’ tends to suggest to aid workers that they do not need to be familiar with the history and political structure of the country they are operating in, since emergencies are seen as ‘ahistorical’, a state of exception, and not part of normality. The mentality is that they will soon be flying off into another ‘emergency’. Yet, South Sudan has been in a state of ‘chronic emergency’ for much of the last 60 years. And even in emergencies, context and political economy matter – a lot. One UN expat in South Sudan for three years, confessed his disbelief about how cluster meetings attended by INGO partners were full of people asking him basic context-related questions such as ‘what does SPLA mean’, ‘who is John Garang’, ‘when did South Sudan become independent’.

‘Stay and Deliver’?

Organisations set certain institutional and bureaucratic rules that hinder how far and how much their staff can decide in terms of security and access. Yet equally significant, the individual willingness and tolerance of aid workers to ‘stay and deliver’ and accept risk is also a major factor. The general perception is that this willingness/tolerance has decreased. One South Sudanese with previous UN experience that returned back in 2004, thought aid workers during Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) were of a higher calibre, and were willing to take more initiative. She also referred to stories where during her time at OCHA, her expat boss would “cover for her” in terms of security restrictions, allowing her to make her own judgements on what was considered safe to do. She left the UN when she started feeling she was not being able to “get out there and do the work” (interview 36). While working for OCHA in one emergency in Western Equatoria after an LRA attack, she wanted to visit the area as soon as possible, and UN security told her she needed 48 hours before being given travel clearance. Another expat with over 30 years of experience in the Sudans, suggested that aid workers were more committed and ideological before. There were none of the white cars and if you wanted to travel somewhere you would often have to wait for days until a lorry heading that way would take you in the back. ‘Could you imagine any aid worker doing that today?’ he asked (interview 37). He also argued that the aid industry was much smaller then and aid workers did not move from emergency to emergency as they currently do now, so displayed a different kind of commitment to the country and context.

Such views may be wrapped in the usual tendency to romanticise the past and it is easy to find extremely critical accounts of the aid encounter during OLS days (Harragin, 2001, Duffield et al. 2000). Yet these views do fit with how much less risk aid agencies institutionally, and aid workers individually, appear to be willing to take these days, particularly within the UN. There is a general feeling that aid workers are becoming more risk averse and unwilling to ‘get out

there'. Paradoxically, the trend toward bunkerisation is a 'peacetime' phenomena, underlining the 'social construct' nature of risk.

The context in South Sudan is generally safe and welcoming for foreign aid workers. Anecdotally, after being briefed by one UN security official in Bor over the different risks encountered in the State, ranging from mines and UXOs, communal clashes, crime and break-ins, mosquitoes, bad driving, among others, he concluded "bad roads and airstrip conditions are the greatest threat to UN staff and hindering humanitarian operations" (interview 10).

However, several of those interviewed were of the opinion that "we have all either been involved in an incident or know of colleagues who have" (interview 29), particularly those coming from highly insecure environments such as Somalia, Afghanistan or Iraq. This OCHA official went on: "White vehicles used to be respected, now they're a target. I've had colleagues killed or have worked in those places. But here's very different, we have access, we can get to people. I do think we are a bit risk averse here. I came from insecure places with real risks" (interview 29). She finalised: "NGOs' biggest problems [in South Sudan] are bureaucratic impediments", (interview 29) and not security. Naturally, the individual background, such as years of experience or whether they had previously worked in high-risk environments such as Iraq or Afghanistan, determined their understandings of what would be tolerated. Those with previous experience in those countries either thought that their less experienced colleagues either had no clue about security, or exaggerated. It is also the case that aid workers tend to rotate through 'similar countries' and 'do the rounds' – if someone comes from Darfur they will go to Somalia and then Afghanistan, while someone from Malawi will head to Mozambique and Botswana.

Most aid workers interviewed for this study in South Sudan were not familiar with the UN's 'Stay and Deliver' policy (Egeland et al., 2011). Opinions varied in how much risk aid workers should be willing to expose themselves to. As one senior UN security official stated:

Stay and Deliver is a noble idea with all fairness, we're trying to achieve that. But all comes down to individual leadership – their experience and exposure, willingness and commitment to the job. You'll find a lot of people less experienced, less committed, more thrill-seeking and less risk-seeking. (...) many aid workers are young and inexperienced, they just take pictures to put on Facebook. It's a fun paid holiday. (...) this compromises the entire humanitarian structure. (...) With all due respect, Egeland and Holmes work on policy but by the end of the day, you need committed people on the field. Individuals before choosing this kind of profession have to think more. If a manager is smart, he'll look for people willing to rough it out (interview 14).

One UN staff shared the story of one of her colleagues during last years' bombardment of Yida refugee camp on the border with Sudan. The media/public information officer refused to go to Yida on the basis of insecurity and "that it was too dangerous". This was seen by several colleagues as a joke, "what's the fuss, she works for [the UN] for years, she should go" (interview 4).

Still regarding the 'Stay and Deliver' OCHA policy, one UN official argued: "We can sit on every policy from New York, but we need someone like X [senior UN security officer], which is much more important than policy papers." (interview 29). In this sense, the importance of individual personalities mattered more than any top-down policy coming from HQ, as will be discussed further ahead. The sense was that 'Stay and Deliver' was "[it's] written in a vacuum, and offers no concrete suggestions" (interview 9). One UN expat argued that people want to act tough, "to get some street cred" (interview 4), not so much with security and taking risks, but more in terms of living conditions (interview 29).

If on the one hand, the individual tolerance of aid workers to be exposed to risk, and to 'stay and deliver', seems to have decreased, on the other hand, decisions are measured against the importance and effectiveness of programming: "we could have stayed, but at the time, the risk seemed higher than the benefit" (interview 1). One UN security official suggested: "Security is associated to effectiveness of the project, rather than operating in a conflict because they decide to operate in a conflict area" (interview 14). He continued: 'risks prevail that you cannot eliminate, especially in contexts of conflict or post-conflict, so you try to find a balance. I think of risks and programme criticality. Say there are 10,000 people in need of humanitarian assistance, so you look at risks and threats, then I make calculations...' (interview 14). Yet if aid agencies are engaged in recovery and development activities, as many do in South Sudan,⁵ then they will not feel their presence will be so critical and 'life-saving', affecting their willingness to stay, when faced with insecurity.

Decision-making: when to stay, when to leave

Insecurity levels are socially constructed by security bureaucracies. In the UN, decisions over security categories are taken by UNDSS officers who advise senior management, who are then responsible for taking the final decision. There are several categories within these thresholds. In the extreme end of the spectrum is 'Category four' considered 'insecure' and "a 'no go' area due to reason that bombing is an ongoing activity, land mines are in the area or there is an ongoing Armed Conflict, or crime in uncontrollable". This is followed by 'Category Three', or transitional, defined as 'The area is mined (UXO/Mine), Armed conflict is ongoing; Presence of RMG and crime is a concurrence', and so on (information from UNDSS document, Unpublished). In the context of South Sudan, extremely limited infrastructure and logistical challenges are also major considerations in the construction of security levels, and determining when to stay and when to leave.

UN and NGOs have different decision-making mechanisms and criteria. Yet large organisations have stricter procedures in place which determine when to stay and leave. Smaller NGOs are able to, as phrased by one such aid worker, take more 'context-driven decisions'. But it was also seen by another as 'when it comes to security, small-medium NGOs the common sense is just not there.' However, when the UN decides to leave – and they are usually the first ones to do so – this affects all of the NGOs, particularly smaller-medium sized ones who depend on the UN for evacuation purposes. There is the usual distrust between military and humanitarian

⁵ On December 2012, the South Sudan NGO Forum factsheet stated there were 70 NGOs working in what they termed 'development', followed by 49 in education, and 35 in livelihoods.

organisations. One OCHA official suggested UN missions rely on themselves, whereas ‘humanitarians need each other’. She went on: “Despite UNMISS mandate saying they must support NGOs, NGOs can’t rely on UNMISS, on their soldiers and helicopters. We’ve been shown that we can’t” (interview 29).

“UNDSS messes up evacuations all the time. Having that as a single option when we’re not on the same page (...) we were getting mixed messages...” (interview 1).

In Juba, security cell meetings take place every Tuesday and are attended by all UN security officers from UN agencies plus the security focal point from the NGO Forum. Here, all security incidents reported that week are combined and it is decided what information should be shared. Based on the discussions amongst UN security, recommendations are put forward to the security management team (SMT) where based on the security cell discussion, advice is given, including on reassessing – raising or lowering – levels and thresholds. According to one UN security official, their recommendations are taken 90% of the cases. At state level, the Area Security Management Team (ASMT) is comprised by all UN agency heads and team leaders in the location, plus the NGO focal point for security. This is also where friction often arises between programme staff – pushing for more access – and security staff pushing for more caution.

Friction/tensions over when to stay

Friction between central authority and action on the ground is an inevitable aspect of most bureaucracies, and also so for aid agencies (Felix da Costa & Karlsrud, 2012b). Decisions over security are not always easily accepted by programme staff, particularly when they are seen to be too strict, and infringing on their ‘personal life/space’ and ability to do their work. Tensions often arise between security decision-makers and programme/substantive staff unable to go out and do their jobs based on what is often felt by the latter to be inflated security restrictions that do not represent the actual situation. As argued by one national UN security officer, “sometimes UNDSS don’t want to be disturbed” (interview 3).

Risk management is largely seen as a constructed and arbitrary endeavour, which contributes to a questioning of security decision-making and leads to friction, even a sense of competition, between security staff and programming. Both in terms of how decisions are taken, how it is rethought and mitigation strategies developed.

“Sometimes it’s funny. My take on UN security is not so much that they’re too strict, but that their approach is too blanket. After the bombing [by Sudan in Yida refugee camp] UN staff were not allowed to stay overnight, which is understandable and rational. But having close-protection won’t mitigate the risk of bombing. The same goes for roads. If the risk is banditry then yes to close protection, bit if its mines, it won’t help. They’re not targeted measures” (interview 1).

UNDSS set the curfew in Bor town as 9pm for walking and 11pm to 6am for driving. All UN and INGO staff are strictly expected to comply with this curfew, which is generally taken very seriously. Interestingly, the curfew was changed to 1:30am for the farewell party of a senior UN security officer that took place on a Friday night at the UNMISS base in Bor. International staff were escorted home by UNDSS at this time (interview 19).

One UN security official explained he often took his programme staff to security meetings to support him in reasoning for greater access with other UN security. He gave the case of his country director's efforts to have staff in Yida refugee camp: "We have to make something flexible, balance the threat, there's always a risk. The idea is to manage and minimise these" (interview 3).

"[The UN agency] can contest the raising of [security] levels. Sometimes there's a rope, like pulling the rope between security and substantive sections. My concern is you, your concern is the beneficiaries, like delivering the food. Frankly speaking, it's all about approach. Ok, give me a solution. I discuss with the [substantive] officer and we try to find solutions, if they say they must really go" (interview 3).

Rogue officers or enablers? When aid workers find ways to stay

Within this restrictive environment, aid workers find strategies to operate and work in the current institutional framework. In the UN system, as in other bureaucracies, the rules and norms guiding peacekeeping are continuously developed through the influence of practices on the ground, and there is a premium on developing the ability to 'bend the rules' so that work can be implemented, using "common sense" (Felix da Costa & Karlsrud, 2012b). Strategies used usually include manoeuvring the system and attempting to prepare for situations. This is naturally easier for more experienced and confident staff, more able and willing to play and challenge the bureaucracy. It is mainly experienced aid workers that are able to do this – yet the system as a whole works against the development of experience through short term contracts and few incentives to remain in the same location.

For example, UNMISS civilian peacekeepers described several occasions where they had to take difficult decisions that on the one hand made them unpopular with support sections such as UN transport and with state coordinators who might feel they are being overruled, while on the other hand "bending the rules". For example, while mission policies coming from New York and Juba might not allow any official contact with rebel militia groups, in the field, UN civil affairs officers cannot ignore them:

Civil affairs have to coordinate between New York, national and local level. If X goes to the field and one of her key interlocutors is a rebel leader, what do you do – you call him a chief. I call it bending the rules. You can't ignore these key figures... so officially you may have to call him a different name, for the papers (interview in Felix da Costa & Karlsrud, 2012a).

One UN official described how the former head of OCHA in South Sudan, someone with decades of humanitarian experience in difficult contexts, had an enabling effect, not only in

OCHA but the rest of UN agencies and humanitarians (interview 29). For her, this was ‘a perfect example of how individuals can make a difference’. Terming his as an ‘enabler’, someone who ‘stretched the rules’, ‘got out of his way to get things done and gave that mindset to all of us’. ‘it’s contagious’; for her, tough decisions were about taking responsibility; by doing so, encouraging us to find solutions’. He was senior enough and well-respected, in that he could take tough decisions. Similarly, the current chief of UNDSS was also referred as an enabler: ‘My personal feeling is that UNDSS people in the field are very risk averse (...). But she’s [UNDSS chief] is a complete enabler; constantly telling her staff “go reassess it”’ (interview 29).

‘Enablers’, or ‘rogue officers’, also demonstrate that the impact and role of HQ institutional policy- and decision-making is more limited than is often understood. Rather, outcomes depend more on negotiations, bargains and compromises between different actors operating within the humanitarian arena. Aid workers *can* and *do* find strategies to counter the significant institutional obstacles and bureaucracy that they encounter. As argued by several interlocutors, ‘bending or stretching the rules’ not only matters, but is crucial if aid agencies are to remain ‘mandate-driven’, rather than ‘insurance-driven’. Aid agencies may have reasonable concerns for the security of their staff, however, greater autonomy and flexibility must be given if tangible results and outcomes are to be achieved.

Although the UN is increasingly taking a risk-averse approach which is limiting the space for action by its staff, research also demonstrates that humanitarian outcomes are in large part not only dependent on mandates and policy generated from HQs, but even more so, on the ability of individual actors to take responsibility. Over time, practices generate change, and the current security agenda is in large part reflective over recent events and peacekeeping practices. However, doctrine and policy should be continuously updated and adapted to the reality it is facing, and the particular context it is operating in. It is in this space between generic policies and local realities that aid workers are operating, and find new solutions to old problems on a daily basis (Felix da Costa & Karlsrud, 2012b). The need to “bend the rules” should not trigger punishing responses from decision-makers, but rather reflections on how to better adapt peacebuilding policy to the *realities* it is operating in.

A narrative of acceptance strategies

Recent research by Save the Children on acceptance as an approach to NGO security management in South Sudan found that although “many NGOs implicitly or explicitly use it as part of their overall security management approach, few have developed a comprehensive set of activities or indicators to implement or assess the approach and its effectiveness” (Fast et al, 2011:i). Rather, this is understood at an ad hoc basis where acceptance is seen as connected to meeting community needs through the delivery of services. However, as argued in the report,

“Approaching acceptance only from a programming viewpoint, [however], limits its efficacy by focusing on community members and local authorities as the main stakeholders while not engaging other actors with the power to harm NGOs, and by confining implementation primarily to programming and not other units within an organization” (Fast et al, 2011:i).

Attitudes to community acceptance in South Sudan reflect how risk management is approached, which continues to be largely arbitrary and improvised:

“The primary way that organizations in South Sudan work to build acceptance is through their programming, particularly through meeting the needs of the populations they serve. Thus, organizations see acceptance as intimately connected to how they operate, even though few organizations deliberately and consistently integrate activities designed to build acceptance into their programming strategies. Some organizations also pay attention to staffing and stakeholder and context analysis as part of an acceptance approach” (Fast et al, 2011:i).

One South Sudanese UN security official said: “I always believe in good relationships. Even if there’s a risk, someone from nowhere will come to alert you. That’s what I believe South Sudanese will do. So if staff are ready to build those relationships, they’ll be fine and can take more risk. If there is a threat, neighbours will tell you in advance’ (interview 10). The question is then, are aid workers ‘ready’ to invest in building those relationships? One NGO official argued that many expats felt South Sudanese culture was difficult to grasp and connect with, and this led to a low morale among aid workers who were generally unable to develop personal relations with the government and the community. Indeed, other keen expats told me they had arrived with expectations of greater contact with local society, but had found this quite difficult to achieve. It appears that despite NGO narratives around acceptance strategies, in practice the divide between aid workers and local society is quite large.

Perceptions and realities

During the time of this study, the Government of South Sudan passed two policy framework paper plans for greater regulation of NGO activities throughout the country, including improving “employment opportunities for the citizens of South Sudan, ensure quality service delivery to the vulnerable citizens and [will] guarantee that imported goods by humanitarian agencies are solely used for humanitarian purposes”.⁶ The framework for greater regulation comes after what the government described as several NGO malpractices throughout the country. The policy requires that all NGOs register with the Ministry of Interior, abide by the laws of the country particularly in terms of employment policy, including by providing jobs to South Sudanese, requires greater transparency in budgeting and activities, and commits them to operate uniformly throughout the country, particularly outside Central Equatoria and Juba.⁷ The law is of course rather problematic in that it treats NGOs primarily as job providers rather than as delivering services to those in need, as well as dictating where agencies should operate, rather than this being determined on needs. However, it also suggests how estranged relations between the GoSS and NGOs are perceived to be.

Coinciding with the discussion of these laws, the UN Deputy Special Representative and Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator in South Sudan Toby Lanzer, recently published a

⁶ Wudu, S.W. 2012. ‘Minister Tables Policy to Regulate NGOs’ Activities’ *Gurtong* 31 October 2012. Available at: <http://www.gurtong.net/ECM/Editorial/tabid/124/ctl/ArticleView/mid/519/articleId/8235/Minister-Tables-Policy-to-Regulate-NGOs-Activities.aspx>

⁷ Ibid.

letter for the occasion of UN day praising “our key partners, NGOs, without whom the UN’s agencies would be unable to carry out its development or humanitarian work”. The piece provided a flattering account of NGO work throughout South Sudan emphasising the involvement of national staff in INGO programming: “More than 16,000 South Sudanese were employed by NGOs in 2011. There are nine South Sudanese citizens for every international staff member working in the NGO sector. At the managerial level the ratio of nationals to internationals is nearly one to one.”⁸ One NGO official recognised that NGOs ‘[we] have an image problem’ and that the frameworks reflect the image the government have of NGOs in Juba and amongst dominant circles (interview 26). There is however a difference between the perception/relationship in Juba and in the rest of the country, where NGOs are better integrated in the communities where they work.

Local brokers

It is interesting to reflect upon how negotiations between different aid actors develop and who assumes the role of brokering, or act as intermediaries within these. Hillhorst and Jansen (2010) build from Norman Long’s (2001:1120) actor-oriented approach developed from the idea that ‘social actors reflect upon their experiences and what happens around them and use their knowledge and capabilities to interpret and respond to their environment’. They emphasise the usefulness of the notion of the “arena”. In this view, ‘aid is the outcome of the messy interaction of social actors struggling, negotiating and at times guessing to further their interests’ (Bakewell, 2001: 108–9 in Hillhorst and Jansen, 2010:1120). Long calls this coming together the ‘social interface’, (2011:243) defined as ‘a critical point of intersection between different lifeworlds, social fields or levels of social organisation, where social discontinuities based upon discrepancies in values, interests, knowledges and power, are most likely to be located.’

International aid workers can possess a wide network of local relations and have a good, if necessarily partial grasp of local socio-political dynamics of the region they are operating in. However, barriers related to trust and cultural misunderstandings remain significant, and are often filled by national staff. Institutional frameworks and bureaucratic dimensions of international organisations including aid bunkering and other risk-management constraints, significantly contribute to segregate expats from local communities. In such cases, the heavy dependence on local and national is huge, as recognised by expats interviewed for this study. National staff often take on the role of brokers between their international colleagues and the local community and environment, in terms of understanding the community, information-gathering, social dynamics, navigating local government and interactions with local leaders.

One UN expat referred to how in Juba all her life was centred around office work. In that context, the role of national colleagues in helping her navigate local rules was not significant. This was entirely different when working in Maban Refugee Camp. There, national staff were critical in relating to local authorities and in ensuring that, for example, courtesy visits to SPLA barracks, which are not formally required, yet key for good relations were done: “They know

⁸ Lanzer, T. 2012. ‘NGOs: our partners for helping South Sudan and its people move forward’, *Sudan Tribune*, 31 October 2012. Available at: <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article44383>

the unwritten rules” (interview 4).

Yet local/national aid workers are themselves embedded in a circle of personal interests and biased and subjective views. What can at first sight be seen as a powerful position of controlling knowledge and influencing the positioning of huge amounts of resources being channelled into a community by a local aid worker, can also place the individual in a fine balancing act of what is expected from him by the community. Jok (forthcoming) discusses the somewhat awkward positioning and challenges faced as a South Sudanese humanitarian aid worker and researcher working in his own country. On the one hand, he is an insider “subject and researcher at once” (Jok, forthcoming). He “may be too involved with the community’s intricate relations to be objective, and yet too familiar with the nuances of the local culture to pass up the opportunity to make concrete contribution to my discipline and to the myriad aid programs that attempt to assist war-afflicted populations” (Jok, forthcoming).

4. Greater social distance and weakened control of aid delivery chains

A compound culture or the fortified aid compound: ‘what other way is there?’⁹

The architecture of aid is characterised by high compound walls with barbed wire at the top. Yet gated communities are on the increase not only in post-conflict/conflict settings, but throughout most if not all African urban areas. There is a correlation between wealth and the height of the compound walls. Rather than being a measure put in place in response to post-conflict environments, criminality and banditry in places like Juba and other urban areas such as Bor and Wau mean that aid agencies arrive with a bunkerised mentality. Similarly, homes, hotels, restaurants, and government buildings, are surrounded by high walls complete with barbed wire. However, the compound mentality and culture is not only part of the aid culture and high-end government buildings, but is also a feature amongst South Sudanese homes around the country. In many South Sudanese rural areas the average homestead is constructed around a fence made of local materials.



⁹ Comment by one UN expat, when I first introduced the research project. Informal discussion, Juba October 2012.



Government, UN and NGO fortified compounds in Juba

Defensive living is increasingly seen as the *only* way to live in places such as South Sudan. It is justified by the rising levels of criminality experienced in Juba and other peri-urban areas. There is a sense that it is needed: “There’s a normalisation [of a restrictive security environment] in areas where it is required” (interview 25). Yet there is also a sense that ‘bunkerising is becoming institutionalised: “We get into that mentality, people that have been in these places. But how do we break the cycle? When do we turn? When do we start to rely more on community security and acceptance instead of physical security? Where does it start?”, one OCHA official asked (interview 29).

“Look at UNMISS. You can live all your life in Juba without leaving the compound... Go to work, exercise, shopping, partying... UNMISS 2, the new HQ further away from the city will even have a swimming pool. It is also built out of town, making it harder for people to actually go into the city”, said one UN expat. She added “you can choose to live outside the compound, but you’re not encouraged” (interview 4).

“(…) It’s also related to the culture of the organisation. Accommodation is given according to your level and seniority. It’s very hierarchical. Here you really feel it. For example, if you’re seconded, you get a completely different treatment. You’re not allowed to take boda-bodas or public taxis, so if they put you into a hotel, you’re locked there” (interview 4).

The resemblance between fortified aid compounds and prisons is remarkable. Interestingly, it was UN security officers who raised the comparison. One national security officer justified: “People only go on leave every 4 or 6 weeks, otherwise they stay in, and you can’t stay in the compound all the time. You’re like a prisoner. You need to go out” (interview 10). Discussions included many allusions to being captive, being a prisoner.



One of the UN compounds in Bor, Jonglei State. Or is it a prison?

It is not only formal and institutional restrictions that apply. Individuals “impose security restrictions on each other”. One UN staff gave the example of the Emmanuel Jal concert on International Peace Day where one colleague insisted it would be dangerous to attend: “That’s how it works, one person starts and then people follow (...) And it’s totally different with driving, most people drink and drive. Most people in our community, the expat community, there’s a lot of drinking and driving” (interview 4).

There is however a distinct difference between the ‘fortified aid compounds’ that can be found everywhere in Juba and in most state capitals, and the smaller offices in more remote areas. There are also major differences between the UN and NGOs. For example, in Bor town most of the INGO offices are located on the way out of town on the road connecting the town to the airport, because this is the land allocated to the organisations by the government. There is one exception where one NGO compound is situated in the centre of town by the main market. With a bleak chain-link fence which can be seen from both sides, it is understandable why staff may feel very exposed. One of its international staff shared that he felt safe, even though the night before there had been an attempted robbery in the NGO compound with someone jumping over the fence late at night.



Containers with A/C and hot water, UN accommodation, Bor.



'Tukul' INGO accommodation, Bor.



Gates and fencing at an NGO compound, Boma Jonglei State



Open gates at an NGO compound in Boma, Jonglei State

I joined UNMISS police and civilians on what is called a one week long-distance patrol from Bor to Boma sub-county, tasked with police training. We took a UN helicopter to Boma village, in Pibor County, considered isolated and largely inaccessible by car for most of the year but also rather safe. The team, composed of five UN Police and one SSPS, and two UNMISS civilians, arrived in Boma and pitched their tents by the local administration, which also hosted two water boreholes used at all times by the community. Although Boma is in Pibor county where much of the insecurity in Jonglei has taken place, Boma is regarded as a safe area. UNDSS has no restrictions over Boma, and UN personnel, both police and civilians, walked around freely. This was an unusually long visit (usually UNMISS patrols do not last more than two or three days). Yet it served to demonstrate that there is not a security blanket approach imposed everywhere throughout Jonglei, and that in areas where this is permitted, decisions to move around have a lot to do with the individual willingness of UN staff to step out of their comfort zone.



UNMISS long-patrol mission to Boma sub-county. UNMISS camping site seen in the background, next to the community borehole.

UNMISS County Support Bases: a 'paradox of presence'?

In addition to being present in all 10 state capitals, UNMISS plans to have a presence at county level through what it calls 'county support bases' (CSBs), in locations selected according to the level of insecurity and isolation. The CSBs are UNMISS's attempt to decentralise, support the expansion of state authorities and build national capacities to enable service delivery to serve rural populations. The CSBs will host military, UN police and civilian sections such as civil affairs, human rights and RCSO/RRP staff and are also planned as a hub to encourage UN agencies and NGOs to operate in remote areas, providing regular transport and physical infrastructure. UNMISS is busy constructing the first 13 out of the total 35 planned CSBs, thus planning to cover about 40% of the 86 counties in South Sudan. UNMISS envisages that the CSBs will support the peacebuilding and statebuilding agenda by being a 'portal' not only for the sections of UNMISS, but also to facilitate the presence of other aid agencies. Locations hosting CSBs will also automatically have UNMISS flights twice a week, facilitating the presence of government and of other aid actors.

At present, CSBs are still not fully operational, but it will be interesting to follow their development, including their social and physical architecture, and to track how UNMISS staff in CSBs establish relationships and interact with local society and local authorities. The CSBs constitute an attempt by the UN mission to be more decentralised and closer to local populations. In principle this is a move towards the right direction, yet it will be important to UNMISS will have to avoid creating a culture of fortified compounds and a paradoxical presence where UN staff is hostage to its own security trappings and extremely limited in their movement.

Sub-contracting: "When it's too dangerous, ask NGOs to do it"

'NGOs do the dirty job in the field, UN agencies are behind as donors in the office, following politics (...) coordinating them' (Interview 20).

With UNDSS rules setting the tone of where UN agencies are allowed and not allowed to go, and becoming more and more risk averse, INGOs are being sub-contracted by UN agencies to

implement their projects. Remote management as what is experienced in Somalia or Afghanistan is not yet a feature of the aid encounter in South Sudan, but these layers of sub-contracting have an impact on relationships and mutual understanding between the UN as donors and NGOs as implementers, as well increasing the distance with those commonly known as 'beneficiaries'.

One South Sudanese UN security official shared how when he first joined the UN in 2004 the security protocol for the UN and INGOs was similar, but this had changed to a point where "in risk areas they send NGOs". He added that in UN trainings he attended he was told that "if things get worse, give the project to an NGO" (interview 10).

One expat offered an elucidative account of the dangers of increasing separation between donors and implementing agencies. One international NGO was implementing a UNDP-funded DDR project largely perceived as a success. The project involved training and providing ex-combatants with a trade/skill, followed by a small amount of cash to which they could then start a small enterprise with. It was managed on-spot by an European project manager and South Sudanese vocational trainers who all kept good relations with the trainees. When the time came for the money to be distributed among the trainees, on the agreed date for distribution of cash, the NGO had not yet received the funds from UNDP. The group of men were extremely displeased and returned the next day, when there was still no money. After a few days, the men arrived to the project site, and took the project manager and trainers hostage to pressure the organisation to give them the promised money. UNDP still did not disburse the cash, though at this point the NGO office in Juba advanced the cash from their own funds to solve the situation. As this expat said, "if it had been UNDP staff on the line, they would have realised how urgent matters were" (interview 30).

On the one hand, there are the dynamics between UN as donors and NGOs as implementers. On the other hand, and most importantly, there is the corresponding dimension of what this means for the relationship between those designing and managing programmes, and societies in which they work in.

Poor context knowledge and analysis

Sub-contracting seriously hampers effective information-gathering and understanding over the situation, both in terms of monitoring and evaluation. It is challenging enough to understand the socio-political context if in the country and interacting on a daily basis with society, let alone if remote managing. One UN official described how she received weekly or monthly reports from sub-contracted NGOs, but that her agency simply "did not have the capacity to follow-up on monitoring". In this environment, monitoring is just not possible and "NGOs can write whatever they want" (interview 4).

On the one hand, the turnover of international staff in South Sudan is extremely high. On the other hand, due to short-term funding and donor conditions, contracts given are also extremely short: "There's a general feeling we need more staff, but staff come in on three

month contracts, which reflects the quality of our work". This also has significant repercussions for establishing community and government relations, and affects context knowledge and analysis. In the view of one NGO expat, the turnover of aid workers is so high "not so much due with [living] conditions, but with the working environment" (interview 26).

"I've never been in a mission that is so insular and ill-informed. (...) I feel it's a huge problem how people live in camp and are never forced to leave, they operate in an UNMISS world, which is dangerous because they can be very busy the entire day, but the only people they talked with are your own UNMISS colleagues, and none of us know anything about the country" (interview 7).

Hierarchies and risk transfer within the aid sector

There are hierarchies amongst aid workers, including what is considered acceptable risk-taking, between internationals, nationals and locals. Yet within the 'international' category, there are also layers according to region, with east Africans being somewhere between 'local/national' and 'international': 'As a *kawaja* you're seen as coming to help. As an east African you're seen as competition' (interview 30), influencing the risks one is exposed to. Indeed, this was reaffirmed not only by *kawaja* aid workers, but also by national staff who suggested that "internationals from Kenya and Uganda get more or less the same treatment as South Sudanese" (interview 10). One national UN security officer classified international staff into different types, grouping *kawaja* aid workers into one group, Arab and Asian into another and African staff as another. Referring to African staff, he argued "some are good in seeing they're not from here and behaving well. Other times they think they're more local than locals" (interview 10).

Indeed, the expectations brought by the sheer presence of a *kawaja* aid worker remain huge and inflated. Referring to her role assisting her international colleagues, one UN national staff revealed 'you act like a translator, for people of concern, once they see the expat they know they've come to assist' (interview 8).

One UN aid worker expressed what she described as a very awkward sense of hierarchy, both in terms of UN and NGO, and in terms of international and national staff. She compared her time in Maban and Pibor. In the former 'we [UN] were the same as NGOs, we felt the same, had the same standards, and seemed more equal. The living conditions you have, for you to be able to work well together, it's good to have the same conditions. I don't feel afraid at all in Maban.'

The geographical/architectural organisation of compounds is also worth noting in delineating the division between international and national staff. At the compound of one UN agency in the border areas, international and national staff were accommodated on separate sides of the compound, stressing the unwritten hierarchy among aid workers, where the former is privileged in salary, accommodation, perks and benefits.

International staff always get the best accommodation. One side is for internationals, and the

other side is for nationals. When I was there, there were a couple of tukuls [no A/C nor electricity], a couple of containers with A/C and lots of tents where national staff stayed. Shower arrangements and latrines were the same for all. But for example, they finished new latrines and showers in the international side. It's like everything else, salaries and all.

These hierarchies are permeated with racist undertones. As this aid worker suggested: "Then it becomes racist, and very uncomfortable. For example, someone from an NGO came, she was from Uganda, and stayed with our national colleague. They realised later that she was international and should've stayed in the international side, and started apologising to her" (interview 4).

Similarly, this also applies to perceptions of risks, acceptable behaviour and thresholds of acceptable risk-taking by each group. One national UN security officer thought the case of South Sudan was not comparable to other challenging environments: "War here is within. If you're a *kawaja*, you are more respected than me. For example, in Jonglei State, we can't send a Nuer to a Nuer area, but any international staff can go. I'm from Nimule so I can go to Pibor but not to Magwi, because of the problems with the Acholi. But this is not like Somalia or Afghanistan, international staff are not targeted" (interview 3). Another NGO national staff confirmed: 'The risk as national staff, when it's a kind of tribal conflict, even if you're part of the problem or not, you'll be affected. Those who are innocent will also be affected, those are the fears we feel. I'm working here, but if my tribe gets into conflict, I will suffer' (interview 17).

Rising criminality in urban areas however affects all. Some risks are mitigated by defensive living and expats navigate between havens of '*kawaja*-ness', driven between compounds, supermarkets and restaurants. National colleagues are exposed to a number of risks. One UN staff suggested: 'National colleagues feel so afraid here in Juba. I feel really safe. They say it was more safe during the war' (interview 4). This was supported by one national UN staff: 'Expats feel safe, but for us, we face any risk any national person is facing. Robberies, we are exposed to that. The house has a fence, but every night we have shootings' (interview 8).

[On using local staff and organisations](#)

The unwritten social and professional hierarchy of aid workers often places international staff responsible for their national colleagues, even when/if in reality the latter may have much more experience and much more understanding of the context. National staff are seen as critical in information-gathering and in feeling the pulse of a place, brokering between expat colleagues and the community. Conversely, they are also seen as lacking capacity or as being biased. One NGO official suggested that remote management had not been used much, or at all, in South Sudan because on the one hand the security environment was not that critical; yet on the other hand, "the capacity of national staff is very low".

In this sense, is remote management only about risk transfer or are there positive dimensions of remote management to local staff and indigenous NGOs, such 'empower[ing] the local community, and make[ing] them part of the solution', as suggested by one UN national staff in

Jonglei? (interview 11). Or is it rather simply another way of reproducing and institutionalising unequal social relations?

Referring to the humanitarian emergency in the border areas, one expat argued that “indigenous organisations on the ground have much more experience than we do, except in more technical skills like demining.” She argued that “international staff are believed to be more accountable but this is a neo-colonial western idea. I could be corrupt too” (interview 6). This expat argued for greater involvement of local staff: “I don’t know what’s the impact of sending an international whose not prepared and not professional (...) personally I believe in local staff more than in internationals.”

There is also the issue of commitment: “Local NGOs don’t see insecurity as a problem. If you’re a humanitarian actor working in a very political conflict you accept to work for a small salary because you do it for the people. Administration costs are reduced to a minimum, so there’s a huge drive which can’t be substituted by any international staff. In situations of war you need to work with people who are committed” (interview 6). One national aid worker with over 15 years with the UN argued that too much money was spent in security and in international positions, which could be used for programming managed by national staff, who would do it for less (interview 8).

The neutrality of national staff is sometimes tarnished by a sense that they have a role in the conflict and will be biased, whereas internationals are seen as being less involved and more likely to be ‘neutral’. Yet this involvement with the conflict, described as being partisan/‘taking sides’, can also mean that security thresholds will be lower, since the commitment to delivering aid will be greater. One expat involved in South Sudan for long argued that a “risk is associated to a threat. There are risks worth taking, the conflict generates the risk and they [indigenous NGOs] want to alleviate the suffering, local NGOs are composed by local people, so the threshold is minimal because of their role and involvement in the conflict.” She compared this involvement of indigenous NGOs often seen as partisan to NPA during the civil war: “For an INGO like NPA, they took aside their understanding of the risk to being closer to the local population” (interview 6).

While it is true that there is a huge need for education in South Sudan after decades of war, a large number of South Sudanese aid workers have a lot of experience in humanitarian work. In this sense, the danger is that remote management becomes discursively constructed as a ‘development opportunity’ and ‘capacity building exercise’ for local staff and organisations. This conflicts with the fact that many national staff now have over twenty years or more experience of working for aid agencies. In some cases, this involves acquiring considerable expertise in the management and technology of aid programming, often gained from working for a number of agencies. Seeing remote management as yet another opportunity for ‘capacity building’ may well unintentionally belittle the local expertise that does exist, thus reproducing the unequal relationship between national and international aid workers. The unwritten rules and hierarchy of the aid sector is based on the assumption that international aid workers are more neutral and better equipped than national staff.

One expat working in the Sudans for considerable time argued that the reluctance of aid agencies in sending their own staff, whether international or national, to highly insecure environments is connected to the fact that if they lose any of their staff, they will be forced to pull out, hence making sub-contracting of indigenous organisations a good alternative. She argued this approach had benefits not only “from a security perspective, but also in terms of making people participate, and not being only the recipients of aid” (interview 6). However, as shown by the death of a local aid worker in Gumuruk, Pibor County in Jonglei, this is not necessarily the case. During the time of the research, a local aid worker from Plan International was kidnapped from his home in Gumuruk and killed allegedly by the David Yau Yau militia.¹⁰ Updates were shared in the Daily UN security situation reports, until the sad news came that the Murle man was killed. It remained unclear if the kidnapping and killing were inspired by ‘tribal’ motivations, forceful recruitment into the militia, or an extortion attempt. Most significantly, this event did not spark any major reactions from the NGO community in South Sudan, although one can only wonder the repercussions had it been the kidnapping and death of an international aid worker. As one UN official protested: ‘They’re [national staff] expendable! The first thing asked when aid workers are attacked is if there were any internationals? Who cares [if there were internationals]?! (interview 29).

5. Final reflections

Given the short time frame, the findings and reflections in this field report remain tentative and exploratory and will benefit from further analysis. Yet, they describe a humanitarian arena that operates within socially constructed security levels. It is ‘messy’ and arbitrary, shaped by continuous negotiations between the various actors that operate within it, hierarchically organised and increasingly risk averse. Despite UNDSS attempts, it is impossible to objectively define levels of risk, particularly in volatile environments such as South Sudan where humanitarian and development actors work side by side. This leads to both strong tendencies to defensive bunkerisation at one end, together with the bending or the rules at the other. Between these is a hierarchy of risk transfer and subcontracting relations.

These trends are part of what makes up ‘Aidland’ in South Sudan, or the sociology of the aid industry, as a community of practice with shared approaches to risk which also shape they means and attitudes in engaging with local society. The UN has a key role in trend setting and in defining, by default also to others, risk thresholds. Given the UN’s position as a policy regulator, as a donor to many NGOs, as well as the organisations’ control of logistics, when the UN decides to pull-out this has implications for NGOs – even those that may be willing to stay. The normalisation of an institutionalised ‘culture of fear’, of limited engagement with local society seen through defensive living are the external signs of the aid industry’s move from ‘mandate-driven’ to ‘insurance- and donor-driven’ agendas. This also demonstrates the extent to which donors contribute to the trend towards bunkerisation.

Despite risk aversion among organisations and individuals, often aid workers find strategies to operate and work in this restrictive security environment. In the aid system, as in other

¹⁰ Sudan Tribune, 2012. ‘Aid worker kidnapped and killed in Jonglei’, *Sudan Tribune*, 11 November 2012. Available at: <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article44490>

bureaucracies, rules and norms are continuously developed through the influence of practices on the ground, and there is a premium on developing the ability to ‘bend the rules’ so that work can be implemented, using “common sense”, rather than necessarily following strict regulations. This is naturally easier for more experienced and confident staff, more able and willing to play and challenge the bureaucracy. It is mainly experienced aid workers that are able to do this – yet the system as a whole works against the development of experience through short term contracts and few incentives to remain in the same location. Often, job descriptions do not reflect the reality of South Sudan, and this can be associated with the unpreparedness and ignorance of aid workers.

Despite NGO narratives around acceptance strategies to risk management, these are still approached at an ad hoc basis where acceptance is seen as connected to meeting community needs through the delivery of services. In addition, many aid workers reported they had difficulties in engaging with local society, had little contact with South Sudanese beyond their immediate colleagues, and felt frustrated about their inability to develop relationships. In part, it is not necessarily that foreign aid workers are uninterested in learning and understanding the society in which they are operating in. On the contrary, many aid workers, particularly those around for longer, demonstrated a good contextual understanding and desire to learn more. Yet to a large degree, the system in which they operate in is not conducive to building meaningful relationships and encouraging greater involvement with local society. This is perhaps one of the most meaningful parts of the study, which could do with further reflection. Importantly, it asks about the direction that the aid industry is taking. Ironically, as was often highlighted by older aid workers, there appears to be evidence that security restrictions were not as heavy as during the war and that people were able to move around more freely. This is an important point – the trend toward bunkerisation is ‘peacetime’ phenomena, underlining the ‘social construct’ nature of risk.

Another important element worth reflecting further is the resourcefulness and creative capacity of individual aid workers set against the institutional limitations and restrictions of organisations. Despite the UN’s increasingly risk-averse approach limiting the space for action, findings demonstrated that outcomes are not only dependent on mandates and policy generated from HQ offices. Even more so, they depend on the ability of aid workers operating in the field to “bend the rules”. Over time, practices generate change, and current risk management doctrines are built on recent attacks events. However, doctrine and policy should be continuously updated and adapted to the reality it is facing, and the particular context it is operating in. It is in this space between generic policies and local realities that the humanitarian arena operates, with various actors negotiating new solutions to old problems on a daily basis. The need to “bend the rules” should not trigger punishing responses from decision-makers, but rather reflections on how to better adapt policy to the *realities* it is operating in.

In this light, the aid world – all of the many actors, organisations and individuals that shape it – should reflect on the impact of an institutionalised culture of fortified compounds in the daily interactions between aid workers and local society, where aid workers risk becoming hostage to their own security trappings.

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