

FAO International Workshop on
“Food Security in Complex Emergencies: building policy frameworks to address
longer-term programming challenges”
Tivoli, 23-25 September 2003

**Harnessing the Potential of Aid to Protect Livelihoods and Promote
Peace – the Experience of the Nuba Mountains Programme
Advancing Conflict Transformation (NMPACT)**

Sara Pantuliano¹

Abstract

The paper examines the experience of the NMPACT programme in the Nuba Mountains of Sudan. The programme provides an example of an operational response which has innovatively addressed an incipient food security crisis through an approach which requires adherence to principles of engagement that emphasize strengthening livelihoods and peace building. NMPACT is notable for its having brought together a multiplicity of UN and NGO actors around a common principled agenda and, most significantly, for being the only operational programme in Sudan subscribed to by both warring parties. The document analyses how NMPACT was developed out of learning from the Operation Lifeline Sudan experience, how it broke from traditional externally driven responses to food insecurity and adopted an approach which focuses on capacity building, promotion of sustainable agriculture and market revitalization alongside conflict transformation and peace building. The consequent adoption of the ‘Do No Harm’ approach resulted in joint advocacy to end the humanitarian blockade and press for a ceasefire. Latterly much attention has been paid to avoiding potentially destabilizing aspects of aid provision and to land tenure issues. The response has been characterized by exhaustive engagement with the Government of Sudan, the SPLM, the key diplomatic players and the ceasefire monitoring operation. The significant results achieved by NMPACT in a relatively short space of time indicate that much can be learned from a response that is informed by a political analysis of food insecurity, which departs from the more conventional technical and community-centred responses of aid agencies to such crises.

Context

The Nuba Mountains cover an area of roughly 80 000 square kilometres located at the centre of Sudan in the State of South Kordofan and part of the State of West Kordofan (Lagawa Province). The population is estimated at 1.2 million. The people now known as the Nuba represent a group of originally disparate, black African ethnic groups who started to settle in the mountains of South Kordofan over 500 years ago, primarily in an effort to avoid the incursions of slave traders. The area has always been recognized as one of the richest and most fertile of Sudan. In the past, a food production surplus was registered on a fairly regular basis, and the area was one of the few in the country not to be affected by the 1984 drought. Unfortunately, the onset of conflict has led to a total breakdown of the local production system which has increased vulnerability of the local population. In Government of Sudan-(GoS) controlled areas, which cover most of the farmland on the plains as well as the urban

¹ Dr Sara Pantuliano was until November 2003 Advisor to the Nuba Mountains Programme Advancing Conflict Transformation (NMPACT), Office of the UN Resident and Humanitarian Co-ordinator for Sudan, Khartoum

centres, people had access to external assistance including food relief until 1999/2000, when a number of humanitarian agencies withdrew from the area for political and security reasons. Conversely in Sudan People Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) areas, which cover the crowded hilltops and mountainous terrain, external assistance as provided by Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) in other conflict affected areas in Southern Sudan was never allowed by the GoS since the outbreak of conflict in 1987. A very limited amount of aid did come through agencies prepared to risk working contrary to the wishes of the Government, which actively targeted such 'illegal' forms of assistance. This situation pertained until the brokering of a ceasefire in January 2002, when international aid agencies were granted access to all areas of the Nuba Mountains. This in turn spawned the joint United Nations/Non Governmental Organization (UN/NGO) initiative known as the Nuba Mountains Programme Advancing Conflict Transformation (NMPACT).

The evolution of NMPACT

The genesis of NMPACT dates back to the first UN/NGO Nuba Mountains Inter-Agency Assessment Mission to the SPLM areas of the Nuba Mountains, which took place in September 1999 after several years of high-level negotiations between the UN and the GoS. The main overall recommendation of the mission, which visited both SPLM- and GoS-controlled areas, was that assistance to the Nuba Mountains population be provided through a comprehensive, multi-sectoral, multi-agency rehabilitation programme, implemented outside the Operation Lifeline Sudan structure, addressing both SPLM- and GoS-controlled areas. Subsequently, at the end of January 2000, a consultative process with a wide range of international NGOs and UN agencies with interest in the Nuba Mountains was started under the leadership of the Office of the UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator, to design the Nuba Mountains Programme (NMP) Umbrella Document.

The process was highly inclusive and several meetings were held with all partners involved in the Nuba Mountains, Khartoum and Nairobi. After a year-long consultation process with programme partners, a joint programme document was prepared, where emphasis was placed on the development of a set of principles of engagement to be adhered to by all agencies. The document was endorsed by 12 partners in May 2001. The implementation of the NMP, however, was hindered by the stalemate over the issue of access to SPLM-controlled areas. The NMP agencies then focused their efforts on advocacy directed at western diplomats to facilitate unblocking the humanitarian impasse in the Nuba Mountains, particularly in light of the fact that a food security crisis was maturing in SPLM-controlled areas.

The advocacy action was a major factor in catalysing senior diplomatic interest that in January 2002 resulted in the brokering of a Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) between the GoS and the SPLM. With the new opportunities and challenges presented by the ceasefire, the organizations which had endorsed the NMP extended the consultation process to all the agencies operating in the Nuba Mountains region. The outcome was the development of NMPACT as a new framework underpinned by a set of principles of engagement, closely linked to the implementation of the CFA and stipulating a close cooperation with the Joint Military Commission/Joint Monitoring Mission (JMC/JMM) which had been set up to monitor the ceasefire.

NMPACT was designed as a phased, multi-agency, cross-conflict programme aimed at supporting all stakeholders to contribute to a Nuba-led response to the short and long term needs of the people of the Nuba Mountains. Its overall strategic goal is: *'To enhance the Nuba people's capacity for self reliance within a sustained process of conflict transformation guided by the aspirations, priorities and analyses of the Nuba people themselves'*. The NMPACT Framework was at the end of 2003 being subscribed to by nine UN agencies and 16 INGOs and had been endorsed by the GoS Humanitarian Aid Commission (HAC) and the SPLM Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Association (SRRA), later renamed the Sudan Relief

and Rehabilitation Commission (SRRC). This is the only joint programme to which the two warring parties have subscribed at the time of writing.

Developing an innovative model for aid delivery

The design of NMPACT benefited from the lessons learned from the Operation Lifeline Sudan experience and the criticism that had been advanced against it from various quarters (Karim, Duffield *et al.*, 1996; African Rights, 1997). The changes enabled the programme to attract a large number of NGOs, many of which had refused to join the OLS and which were not part of the OLS Consortium. At the end of 2003 only two NGOs operating in the Nuba Mountains had not subscribed to the programme.

The main lesson learned from the OLS was the need to move beyond the North/South divide and to establish one single, coordinated cross-line initiative. While the OLS has two separate operations for GoS- and SPLM-controlled areas, NMPACT unified the operations and was placed under the leadership of an overall programme coordinator with responsibility for the entire region. NMPACT constituted a departure from the mode of coordination offered by the OLS in that it was the first attempt to bridge the long-established division between agencies based in Khartoum and in Nairobi.

A distinctive element offered by NMPACT vis-à-vis OLS is that coordination is centred around a set of principles of engagement which have been developed together by the NMPACT partners and Nuba representatives and which constitute the foundation of the programme. There is no doubt, as demonstrated by feedback from an internal review in 2003 (Office of the UN RC/HC, 2003), that most partners feel that an original aspect of NMPACT derives from these principles against which the performance of their interventions is measured. The principles focus on sustainability of programmes, national ownership, equitability of interventions across the political divide, transforming conflict and minimizing harm. The principles of engagement represent an innovative instrument of aid coordination in the context of assistance to Sudan, especially in areas affected by conflict.

Through the principles, NMPACT has been effective in giving a strong sustainability focus which cuts across the work of the partners and which has resulted in the implementation of programmes which are directed more towards training and capacity building than to the delivery of external inputs. This trait is particularly significant given the fact that agencies have been operating in an environment where the ceasefire has not yet matured into a peace agreement. The emphasis on capacity building from the outset in such context represents an important departure from the model of assistance used in other areas of conflict in Sudan.

The principle of equitability has allowed NMPACT to make headway in promoting cross-line initiatives and in building a rapport between HAC and SRRC around the coordination of the programme. Moreover NMPACT has been unique in involving government and SPLM counterparts in the coordination of the programme, thereby conferring ownership of the process to the national authorities, though it needs to be recognized that more work needs to be done to extend this ownership to the Nuba NGOs and the community on the ground. Local ownership was reinforced through the organization of Partners' Fora attended by international and national agencies and counterparts, where key programming decisions were discussed and agreed upon. The Fora, as well as other cross-line meetings, were held in a neutral location in the Nuba Mountains established with the consensus of both warring parties. The fact that NMPACT has brought the GoS and the SPLM together on Sudanese soil several times in a neutral environment has been seen by many programme stakeholders as a substantial contribution to the conflict transformation process in the region, which remains the ultimate goal of NMPACT.

The food security crisis in the Nuba Mountains and the NMPACT food security approach

The vigorous advocacy action that had been promoted as a result of the collective adherence of NMP partners to the principle of 'do no harm' (Anderson, 1999) to obtain a ceasefire agreement in the region had largely been prompted by the need to avert a severe food security crisis looming over the SPLM-controlled areas of the Nuba Mountains. Staving off the famine was the objective that drove the ceasefire negotiations and became the primary aim of the ceasefire agreement.

While the ceasefire was being negotiated and prior to the arrival of the international monitors, the agencies which later became partners of NMPACT worked together with Nuba agencies and representatives to learn how best to address the crisis without undermining the Nuba food economy. The SPLM areas of the Nuba Mountains had not received international assistance since 1988 and there was therefore a danger of destabilizing the local economy and creating a dependency syndrome through the provision of food aid, as had happened in many parts of Southern Sudan. A new approach was designed within NMPACT where food delivery was coupled with programme interventions strongly focused on supporting local capacity and enhancing sustainability through strengthening the local food economy.

The NMPACT food security approach prioritized capacity building over the delivery of external inputs (food aid and infrastructure) from the onset of the intervention, thus reversing the approach used in Southern Sudan within the OLS umbrella where the focus on capacity building had come much later.

The NMPACT partners invested significant collective resources into understanding the local economy better and identifying points of entry to support and strengthen the local food economy. This continuous joint learning took place through joint assessments and reviews. Region-wide surveys looking at production, productivity, market access and marketing issues were undertaken and the findings jointly analysed at the Partners' Fora, where food security strategies were revised together with local authorities and donors.

A special focus was placed by the partners on land tenure. Several studies were carried out, including a three-month survey which covered all parts of the Nuba Mountains region. The survey analysed and recorded traditional land ownership, existing land titles and illegal land alienation to non-Nuba owners. This work was undertaken in order to underpin advocacy action to ensure that internally displaced persons (IDPs) could reclaim land grabbed in the past and return to their farms in contested areas of the Nuba Mountains.

Advocacy action has also been promoted by the NMPACT partners to ensure that local purchase of food from within the Nuba Mountains is maximized and food aid limited to areas of extreme need where cultivation has not been possible. Much peer pressure was applied on to the World Food Programme (WFP) and other large agencies and donors by other NMPACT partners during the Partners Fora to ensure that local purchase was prioritized over the injection of food originating from external sources. The advocacy action brought limited results during the first year of operation of NMPACT but was successful in ensuring an adequate targeting of communities and more strategic use of food aid. Part of the assistance was in fact devoted to supporting the demining operation which other NMPACT partners have been carrying out in the Nuba Mountains.

Promoting sustained political engagement

An important constant of the NMPACT approach has been its vigorous interaction with key political and military actors involved in the Nuba Mountains question. From its very inception NMPACT has been actively engaged with the Joint Military Commission/Joint Monitoring Mission (JMC/JMM), which is the international force mandated to monitor the ceasefire and the military and policing roles of the parties in the region. Secondly, there has been regular and structured interaction between NMPACT and the Friends of Nuba Mountains, a group

made up of senior diplomats working in Sudan, which provides political leadership for the JMC/JMM. The actors concerned, particularly the JMC/JMM, were not always entirely amenable to the concerns raised by NMPACT. However, a deliberate commitment to active, constructive engagement has cemented relations and over time has proven crucial in ensuring that a number of important issues, which are beyond the remit of humanitarian organizations but which impacted on the response, were addressed in a timely and adequate manner. These included land tenure issues, conflict between nomadic and farming groups and the harassment by the authorities of people returning to farms.

The multiple forms of advocacy and engagement with a range of national and international political bodies, under the aegis both of NMPACT and of its predecessor the NMP which lobbied the authorities for access to the whole Nuba Mountains region and for a humanitarian ceasefire, have in the view of some partners and observers (Office of the UN RC/HC, 2003) added an important new element in the context of Sudan's humanitarian scenario. The joint advocacy promoted by the UN agencies and the partner NGOs since 1999 has allowed NMPACT, as a humanitarian operation, to forge unprecedented links to the political sphere. The fact that the NMP was transformed into a response which was explicitly related to the CFA has given it a political dimension which has been a significant contributory factor to political processes. Some of the partners have argued in a review of the programme (*ibid.*, 2003) that particularly in the early period of the CFA, NMPACT was a factor underpinning the first extension of the ceasefire since it was seen as an important element of the peace dividend. Thereafter, NMPACT has facilitated greater interaction between the parties and cemented relations in such a way that it has translated the main aim of the CFA, which was to avert a food security crisis in the Nuba Mountains, into reality.

Conclusion

Experience to date provides some evidence that NMPACT has made a difference in the ways it has sought to engage with stakeholders at all levels. Strong initial coordination from the NMPACT structure ensured adherence to key principles in the first year of operation (Office of the UN RC/HC, 2003). However, the weakening of the structure as a result of staff turnover and delays in recruitment in its second year resulted in a less rigorous adherence to the NMPACT principles and to a weakening of the food security approach. Reduced capacity appears to have resulted in a proportion of food aid being mistargeted, negatively impacting on local production in some parts of the region. It appears then that without a strong structure to provide leadership and coordination, adherence to the NMPACT principles is much weaker.

NMPACT can be seen to have built on lessons learnt from the past and particularly the shortcomings of OLS in bringing about changes that have often proven elusive in the history of humanitarian engagement in Sudan. Its emphasis on strong inter-agency coordination around a set of principles has proven to be effective in enhancing the potential for recovery and building the resilience of local communities in the Nuba Mountains. The framework has also been successful in using aid to foster dialogue between the warring parties. The 'political humanitarianism' of NMPACT can be looked at as a model for addressing food security issues in a complex emergency by focusing on responses based on political analysis, advocacy, fostering links with key actors in the political and peace-keeping spheres of operation and strong local ownership of the recovery process.

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