

CSRF Briefing: Field-based Reflections and Conflict Sensitivity Lessons of the PfPRR in Rubkona, Leer & Mayendit, South Sudan

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The Partnership for Peace, Recovery and Resilience (PfPRR), one of the platforms for a Humanitarian, Development and Peace (HDP) nexus in South Sudan, has made progress in rallying field-based operations to integrate a HDP nexus approach. In Rubkona/Bentiu, there is now a coordination mechanism as well as space in which different HDP actors work. There is also increased awareness around the importance of collective strategies and outcomes, as well as appreciation of the need for complementarity across the intervention areas. Over several months of concept generation, a clearer 'way of working' has been developed. This has been widely embraced by the field teams of the various agencies that participated in the PfPRR activities, including UN agencies, international and national NGOs (I/NGOs). The Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility (CSRF) has served as a critical friend and provided accompaniment to the Bentiu pilot process, through a consultant located in Bentiu for six months. Lessons have been drawn from CSRF's experience of accompanying the PfPRR stakeholders in Rubkona/Bentiu.

The PfPRR Steering Committee – under instruction of the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General (DSRSG) and comprising UN agency leads and interested donors from the HDP Community – selected Rubkona, Leer and Mayendit Counties in Unity State as one of the three pilot areas to explore the concept and implementation of the HDP nexus in South Sudan. Commonly referred to as the 'Bentiu Pilot', these three counties were chosen based on a wide range of factors, primarily because of the high humanitarian needs and food insecurity, which have been further exacerbated by perennial flooding and the most recent influx of people fleeing the Sudan crisis. As a result, there are many opportunities for nexus thinking through the PfPRR framework, and for strengthening linkages across the peace, humanitarian and development interventions in the area. Between November 2022 and June 2023, the first phase of the Bentiu Pilot included deeper engagements by the field-based Task Team (TT), leading up to the development of a concept note.

CSRF worked closely with the Bentiu TT through a consultant between January and June 2023. CSRF played a role of a 'critical friend' to the PfPRR process, while also providing accompaniment and mentoring to the TT collectively or as individual agencies. This analysis paper is a result of CSRF's involvement in the PfPRR Bentiu Pilot. It attempts to draw attention to critical issues associated with the HDP nexus more broadly, using the specific practical experience of the PfPRR process in Rubkona/Bentiu. Specifically, it explores the evolution of the concept of the HDP field; it discusses the opportunities and challenges resulting from the roll out of the PfPRR in this context; and it provides conflict sensitivity considerations.

Uphold the PfPRR as a platform for better collaboration

Following the November/December 2022 meetings in the field, agencies in Bentiu increasingly engaged in the PfPRR process by assigning staff to participate in different activities. In Bentiu, the widely circulated mailing list reached more than 50 participants. Participants were arranged according to the three pillars or task teams established by the DSRSG – climate change adaptation, food security and livelihoods, and displacement solutions. What was the motivation of stakeholders to participate in the PfPRR process? Although intended as a mechanism to facilitate a more effective collective aid response,

it appears from the beginning that field staff across the board were largely motivated to participate by the possibility that PfPRR would be a basis for lobbying funding for agencies involved in the respective pillars and addressing funding gaps that had already been identified. However, it became increasingly clearer to field-based staff that a lot more could be achieved with the PfPRR collaboration than the dollar figures.¹ Particularly, during workshops and meetings when the idea of collective strategies and outcomes were discussed, agencies increasingly started to see where effective linkages and complementarity points would benefit the greater good. One example of this was witnessed during an inter-agency humanitarian mission to Panakuach, which was intended to assess the entry of returnees from Sudan. Increased communication and sharing and distribution of roles across the agencies was observed. De-briefing sessions were held, where common challenges and areas of collective decision² identified and pursued. Going forward, whether PfPRR turns out to be or not, and HDP nexus applies in a specific context, has been underscored by the creation of spaces for field-based staff to regularly meet, work together and undertake joint decisions was seen taking root in Bentiu/Rubkona.

Ensure effective leadership at all levels

Different agencies are at various levels of integrating their understanding of the HDP nexus. The factor that has been most crucial in deepening the understanding of the HDP nexus, and PfPRR in particular, has been leadership. Field-based staff required clear guidance from Juba-based leadership on the vision for and added-value of PfPRR, and from field-based leadership for granular work planning and practical convening. Although clarity from leadership grew from February 2023 to the latter stages of the concept note process (June 2023), a section of agency staff based in Bentiu felt that there were gaps in leadership, while others wished that there could have been improved communication of the roles and responsibilities between Bentiu and Juba.

There were gaps also at intra-agency level, where the assigned staff did not feel empowered enough to be more decisive at the meetings in Bentiu. To highlight a specific gap in communication, there were instances when leadership in Juba understood the Bentiu team to be behind other PfPRR areas, as regards the expected outputs and milestones that field-based staff were expected to produce when in fact the said outputs had been shared by the Bentiu team, thus, demonstrating lapses in information-sharing across the stakeholders. In Bentiu, strong leadership by the field office heads ensured that mobilisation, participation and problem-solving were adequate for effective inter-agency working, such as the PfPRR.

Pursue greater ownership

During a recent nexus café convened by the Embassy of the Netherlands in Juba, an embassy staff member who had been involved in a previous cross-sectoral collaboration in South Sudan cautioned on having a heavy management structure for PfPRR: “I am hoping that we keep the structure of the PfPRR light enough to enable participation.” He went on to state that: “the previous partnership was so heavy that we had to hire a consultant to participate in the PfPRR³ meetings on behalf of the Embassy.” This raises the critical question of how agencies can gain greater ownership and institutionalisation of

¹ The clarity of the PfPRR serving as a way to improve aid effectiveness more than merely a funding platform grew among field-based staff as a result of increased communication of the HDP vision, and working together on collective outcomes.

² Notes from the inter-agency humanitarian mission to Panakuach, 1 May 2023.

³ The Partnership for Recovery and Resilience (PfRR) was a predecessor to PfPRR that sought to bring together primarily humanitarian and development perspectives around joint programming in South Sudan from 2018-2022.

platforms and processes, such as the PfPRR. In Bentiu, CSRF played a key role in deepening PfPRR understanding and strengthened working relationships among stakeholders in Bentiu. Later in the process, IOM also hired a consultant for two months to help move the PfPRR concept note into proposal stage. Both consultants spent time in Bentiu and engaged with different PfPRR stakeholders. The use of consultants will be needed from time to time by different agencies. However, there must be commitment to institutionalising the work done by the consultants.

Since June 2023, the UN Resident Coordinator has moved to institutionalise the coordination of HDP nexus work by appointing Area-Based Leaders (ABLs) from different UN agencies in four pilot states – Western Bahr-el Ghazal (UNDP), Unity (IOM) and Upper Nile (UNHCR).⁴ This could ensure sustained coordination on the PfPRR and HDP nexus, and perhaps greater ownership. The ToR for the ABLs recognises that the challenges of South Sudan cannot be addressed by one set of actors alone, but require a joint approach by humanitarian, development and peace actors with local communities at the centre.⁵ This leadership and coordination structure could go a long way in fostering collective HDP nexus thinking and institutionalise champions for collective approaches going forward. Effective ABLs could also be a good structure in strengthening sub-national leadership, which will be better able to drive the process from the field level while coordinating with Juba. This can mean, for example, the field-based team being more involved in setting the objectives and timelines and being part of the design of templates and frameworks, together with Juba teams.

Harvest the low-hanging fruits first

The PfPRR is the latest nexus platform but it is not the only one. HDP opportunities beyond PfPRR are not new in South Sudan. In fact, at the time of writing, there are ongoing HDP-centred initiatives that have funding and projects and are carried out by different actors. Key examples include: the Complementary Action for Resilience Building in South Sudan (CARB), funded by USAID; Enhancing Community Resilience and Local Governance Project (ECRP), funded by the World Bank; and South Sudan Reconciliation, Stabilisation and Resilience Trust Fund (RSRTF), multi-donor funded. The three programmes are present in different parts of Unity State and have interacted with some of the initiatives of the PfPRR, or have been brought up during PfPRR discussions.

What these existing efforts add to the nexus thinking is the understanding of the possible funding modalities. However, what could be leveraged more is the inter-connectedness of the collective outcomes being pursued by each of the programmes. For example, the former PfRR and current USAID programmes use the idea of layering, sequencing and clustering to define integration of activities within a complex landscape for its Implementing Partners and contractors.⁶ This could be a catalyst for stronger partnership across these programmes. There is benefit in having same donors and implementing partners for ECRP, CARB, RSRTF also interested in the PfPRR, as it could facilitate more engagement between the programmes. Key donors of these programmes recently participated in the nexus café organised by the Embassy of the Netherlands in mid-June 2023, which could be made a regular space for the donors to exchange their various HDP nexus ideas, whether it is the PfPRR or otherwise. At the

⁴ Terms of Reference for ABLs, OCHA on behalf of the Humanitarian Coordinator, June 2023.

⁵ Ibid. Key among the roles of the ABLs listed in the ToR include leading joint analyses, promoting joint development of collective priorities and inclusive approaches, and leading on integrated area-based operational and thematic planning.

⁶ USAID's Principles of Layering, Sequencing and Integrating, <https://www.fsnnetwork.org>.

field level, the PfPRR leads in Bentiu could have done more to involve the other nexus programmes (CARB, ECRP and RSRTF) for greater partnership across the collective outcomes.

Strengthen collaborative ‘ways of working’ over project activities

Over the six months, practical discussions at field level in Bentiu helped to shape the angle that the PfPRR should take. In the beginning, the field teams, comprising more than 50 individuals from several UN agencies, as well as INGOs and NNGOs, met to generate project activities for each of the three pillar areas. It did not take long before it was clear to everyone that this approach would create silos along lines of expertise and mandates. Going by this approach, a PfPRR room would unavoidably have its typical corners, such as a corner for humanitarians, a corner for development experts, and a corner for peacebuilders. This would leave little space to build relationships across these silos or to restructure joint activities where there is value added through collaboration.

In a PfPRR meeting in mid-February 2023, the idea to focus on ‘ways of working’ or meaningful linkages started to take shape. Stakeholders began to appreciate the fact that they could focus on collective, strategic thinking and create stronger partnerships, which would allow more space for a flexible approach where activities can be co-created and adapted together with communities. This would reduce competition and advocate for equitable resource allocation across the pillars. Considering this, the question remains: would the PfPRR be more effective by investing in strengthening collaborative ways of working and the identified points of nexus. Some of the collective ways of working that the team in Bentiu discussed and found relevant for their context include: coordinated collective analysis and learning, joint community engagement strategies, joint risk identification, communication, and management, collective policy decision-making, and joint conflict sensitivity assessments.⁷

Over the last six months of working together on the PfPRR concept, it can be noted that the stakeholders have strengthened the way they work together. The way the agencies in Bentiu have approached the Sudan Response Plan is one such example to highlight. There was increased collaboration by different emergency aid providers in conducting collective inter-agency assessment and analysis, and in discussing and taking a decision on specific challenging issues, in accordance with the South Sudan Response to the Crisis in Sudan.⁸ Agencies made one inter-agency mission Panakuach entry point, and conducted one joint assessment of Rotriak, which is a transition site for returnees. They regularly met to debrief on different emerging issues, jointly held meetings with the state government, and took a collective decision to be communicated to the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT). The specific decision that arose from a PfPRR process and discussion was when the inter-cluster coordination group (ICCG) agreed to request HCT to allow for a light response in Rotriak to cater for the overwhelming needs of returnees.⁹

⁷ UN SDG, Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) Collaboration, Cooperation Framework Companion Piece, May 2020.

⁸ South Sudan Response to the Crisis in Sudan: Emergency Response Plan (Multi-agency), May 2023, pages 6-7.

⁹ From the minutes of the Inter-Cluster Coordination Group (ICCG) Meeting, held in Bentiu on 8 May 2023. This meeting resolved to request the HCT in Juba to grant permission to provide a light response at the Rotriak transit centre for returnees. This was inspired by the inter-agency mission to Rotriak and Panakuach on 1 May 2023, to jointly assess the situation of returns and response.

Encourage greater inclusiveness: there is no ~~nig~~big or small fish in the PfPRR pond

PfPRR is in many ways unique in its conceptualisation. National NGOs (NNGOs), international NGOs (INGOs), civil society organisations (CSOs), UN agencies and other entities shared a platform. In Bentiu, the bigger meeting attracted up to 50 individuals, while the pillar lead meetings included a cross-section of representatives from the above entities. However, it was noticeable that UN agencies and United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) commanded the leadership space, followed by the INGOs, then NNGOs – in that order.

NNGOs specifically felt that they were at the periphery of the table, or in instances where they ever came close to the centre of the table, their voice was not adequately listened to, and many do not have vehicles or boats to move around. One example will illustrate this grievance. In preparation for a high-level delegation visit to Bentiu by the donors in February 2023, the PfPRR task team in Bentiu organised a meeting to agree on the programme and meeting schedule. One NNGO representative put up a sustained advocacy for more NNGOs to be involved in the visit, including joining site visits. He was clearly reminded that he or anyone was free to join the trip, if they find themselves a vehicle and do their own security clearance. Most NNGOs do not have their own vehicles or boats to move around in and UN vehicle policies do not allow non-staff to ride in UN vehicles. That was a strong enough practical impediment for NNGOs – only a few NNGOs participated in the site visit, compared to dozens of representatives from all UN agencies and several INGOs.

Donors could use PfPRR / HDP nexus in their business cases or strategies

The interest of the (UN Country Team) UNCT and donors in the PfPRR and HDP nexus is unquestionable. The first half of 2023 was spent developing the concept notes across the three locations. The concept notes paint a clear understanding of coherent strategies and collective outcomes. During the presentation of the concept notes to the taskforce and donors in Juba on 25 May 2023, there was general appreciation of the clarity of the identified intervention areas. One of the ways to move this process forward could be for donors to ensure their strategies and business cases build on the momentum and relationships created through the PfPRR process in pilot areas so far. This would ensure practical commitment, which would be followed by actual programming process and resourcing modalities. The Bentiu PfPRR experience has shown that although the process might have had some flaws or gaps, good HDP-centred work can still be done.

Some key questions to consider:

1. How is it possible to achieve equitable partnership with participating HDP actors having different levels of resources and power – UN agencies, INGOs, NNGOs and CSOs – especially giving more voice to NNGOs and CSOs?
2. How can the HDP nexus leaders deliberately identify and address barriers to full participation by all stakeholders?
3. How can all stakeholders (donors and partners) more intentionally include HDP nexus into their strategies and programmes?
4. How can the CSRF continue to provide conflict sensitivity support to the PfPRR and other HDP nexus platforms and processes?

Annex 1:

Summary of PfPRR Activities in Bentiu between January and June 2023

19 & 20 January:	Task Team Meeting in Bentiu
23 January:	IOM Emergency Coordinator/Triple nexus focal point
24 January:	UNHCR Head of Field Office/Triple nexus focal point
26 January:	Participation in Protection Cluster bi-monthly meeting
27 January:	Meeting with State Government officials, to provide briefing
30 January:	Meeting with 14 NNGOs operating in Rubkona/Bentiu
1 February:	Meeting with community members in the IDP Camp, Rubkona and Bentiu towns.
14 & 15 February:	PfPRR team meeting, to prepare for the high-level delegation visit
16 – 20 February:	High-level delegation visit to Bentiu <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Visit and briefing with State Government, meeting with youth association and a community group ▪ Visit to community Tong, a high ground, where flood victims are displaced to ▪ Visit to Rotriak Community, IDP camp, and dykes ▪ PfPRR meeting with the delegation
March & April:	Concept note writing process
May & June:	Collective work on the South Sudan response to the Sudan crisis, reflecting PfPRR principles <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 May: Inter-agency mission to Panakuach and Rotriak to assess return situation • 8 May: ICCG meeting to advocate for limited intervention in Rotriak • Regular joint missions to different sites of entry of returnees
May & June:	Continued collaboration and meetings on concept note development process
15 June:	Conflict Sensitivity training for NNGOs operating in Bentiu