

**EDITORIAL:**

**“Sesame Street” and  
the logic of humanitarian  
cooperation**

**T**here was a time – some years ago – when cooperation was a very important word in my vocabulary. As an avid watcher of the children’s show, “Sesame Street”, I learnt that it was good to work with your neighbours, that it is important to see what you have in common with people and that things work better if you help others and let them help you.

It wasn’t until much later in life that I discovered my puppet friends on Sesame Street had a lot in common with theorists on humanitarian action. They point out that humanitarian problems are collective and it is less wasteful, if not cheaper, to solve collective problem collectively. So, they say, we would be much more effective if we pooled our skills and, avoiding the dreaded duplication, pulled towards our common goals.

Advocates on the issue of sexual abuse and exploitation by aid workers, have also adopted the language and the logic of cooperation (and its neighbour, coordination). It is argued that cooperation on prevention and response to sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) is probably the best way to ensure beneficiaries can make effective complaints regarding SEA. Alleged instances of abuse may involve subjects of complaint from a number of agencies, and moreover, beneficiaries may not know which agency/ies the subject/s are from. In addition, it is often cheaper for organisations to contribute to (or pig-

gy-back on) a collective prevention and response system rather than to develop a system for themselves. This is especially true of smaller agencies or agencies that work regularly with particular partners.

To this end, BSO has begun working with NGOs in the Middle East and Asia to set up “Regional Networks” on SEA prevention and response (it also works with existing networks in the United States and Kenya to support their SEA prevention and response work plans). Both the Middle East and Asia networks are in the planning and needs-assessment phase. Once established, BSO hopes they will allow NGOs to better coordinate their responses and share their resources on SEA.

However, the realities of cooperation are often more complicated than we think. To begin with, there are questions of how to cooperate, with whom and to what extent. Then, cooperation costs. It requires time and money and (as we at have found) it is not easy persuading people to devote more time and energy to yet another forum, even if they see its value. Further, the emphasis on cooperation may discourage organisations from trying single-agency strategies that could prove quicker and more flexible. Finally, cooperation can provide a way for organisations to set a lowest common denominator, “hiding” or deflecting their individual responsibility to a group which agrees – tacitly or explicitly – not to press for improvements.

That’s the argument “against” cooperation. Unfortunately, in practice, it can be even more difficult to

disentangle the advantages and disadvantages of collective action. As our two competition winners, **Jean-Christophe Gerard** and **Moses Singei** discuss, working with other NGOs to improve SEA prevention and response can present considerable challenges, and be nonetheless worthwhile. This leads us to conclude that – in the relation to SEA in humanitarian NGOs, at least – there is no easy answer to the question “cooperation – good or bad?” Rather, the issue is **whether there will be fewer cases of SEA, or better responses to individual SEA cases, if organisations work together.** If we answer “yes” to either or both of these questions, we then need to ask **how we should cooperate to produce these positive effects.**

**FEATURE ARTICLE**

**A Long March?  
Working with partners  
to improve the protective  
environment for children  
in Egyptian NGOs**

Jean-Christophe Gerard\*

**C**ommunity advocacy on the protection of children is often a matter of two steps forward and one step back. Certainly protection is not as controversial as it once was, media reports, criminal cases and awareness campaigns having persuaded many people that children are

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vulnerable to abuse and that organisations have a duty to prevent and respond to complaints.

Even so, preconceptions of women and children, families and communities, can colour the way messages about protection are perceived. This, in turn, can present a considerable challenge to promoting protection issues, as we in Terre des hommes discovered during a recent pilot in Egypt.

## Two steps forward

**F**unded by the Participative Development Programme (PDP) at CIDA, the pilot was conducted during 2006 by Terre des hommes (Egypt) with five local partner NGOs that work with children. The project aimed to increase awareness of children's rights amongst these agencies and their beneficiaries and to encourage the agencies to integrate "Protection Policies" into their human resource systems.

Starting with a rapid assessment, our team met separately with the directors, staff, parents and child beneficiaries of the NGOs to gauge the potential for abuse in the organisations and the adequacy of the organisations' current protection systems. Over three days we then worked with staff and board members in workshops to discuss the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC or **Convention**), and to explain how they could integrate a rights-based approach into their programming through codes of conduct and other protection policies. We followed with technical support.

The overall goal of the project was to send a strong message to all stakeholders (not least employees and volunteers) that child protection is paramount in the organisation and that concerns would be dealt with fairly and effectively.

## One step back

**T**he results of the assessment and the workshops were, however, disappointing. Although some of the participants knew about protection standards, no organisation surveyed with the questionnaire had a code of

conduct, a complaint mechanism or effective internal awareness-raising on the risk of abuse. So, though staff had concerns about abuse, they did not know how to complain in their organisations nor to whom. Instead, they dealt with their concerns by asking Tdh staff for advice and support during the research interviews.

Moreover, most participating staff and board members misunderstood the full scope of their international obligations. In general, they only recalled the duties on the government in the CRC (e.g. to provide health care, education, citizenship) and generally they could not recall the duties attaching to individuals and non-government organisations (e.g. to listen to children, to allow children to participate in decision-making, and to protect them from harm). As participants did not accept the standard definition of protection in the CRC, they were not comfortable with codes of conduct that reflected that standard.

## Why the slow shuffle?

**T**he next question for us was why agencies were so far behind in adopting international standards on child protection. My conclusions, from working in Egypt and participating in the pilot as a trainer, are twofold.

First, the international standards for child protection conflict with some interpretations of Islamic law and Egyptian tradition. Both value systems seek to regulate social relationships by assigning roles to men, women and children, and characterising some relationships as acceptable and some as taboo. The characterisations of these roles and relationships can be difficult in the protection context, as they commonly give women and girls responsibility for sexuality and deem both people in a same-gender sexual interaction as "at fault" – even if there is no consent or one of those people is a child.

Second, power structures in Egyptian society conflict with the standard-model prevention and response mechanism. In my experience, the former is highly autocratic, with per-

sonal appointments and other forms of corruption allowing a minority to control important decisions and avoid criticism from outside. This operates at each increment of the social hierarchy, with those at the top of the pyramid, using public institutions (such as courts and police) to control society at large, and those lower down, using personal finances, physical power and social pressure to control those below. It is therefore not surprising that the board members we worked with did not immediately perceive the need to establish systems to check misuses of power as they were also socialised within this system.

## The next steps...

**G**iven these challenges, you may be wondering whether our pilot did actually take us those two steps forward. Certainly working with local partners to implement a protection policy is a task paved with obstacles. There is at present little capacity for receiving and responding to complaints within organisations as local partners had difficulty understanding the concept of protection and the need for protective systems. That said, there is anecdotal evidence that the pilot succeeded in publicising protection concerns and changing attitudes to child protection in agencies.

This being the case, what are the next steps from here? Donors need to exert concerted pressure on recipient agencies to develop and implement protection policies. There are some models for this (witness BPRM in the United States and the UN which can cancel cooperative agreements if a partner agency fails to implement preventative systems, to investigate abuses or take corrective actions).

That said, we have found that few agencies (even within the UN) are requiring child protection as a condition of funding. Furthermore, as our experience shows, achieving safe environments for children is not simply a matter of pointing to the standards and the standard system. Rather, it requires engagement with agencies – staff, boards and benefi-

ciaries – on the substance of their rights and duties and the process for ensuring they are secured. Ultimately our organisations should aim to create a real protective environment for children rather than just a passport for funding. ■

## FEATURE ARTICLE

### A view from South Sudan: Working with peers to improve prevention and response strategies to SEA

Moses Singei\*

Saturday 22 January 2005 was a significant day for South Sudan. After 22 years of civil war, the government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement signed a peace agreement that allowed hundreds of thousands of refugees and internally displaced people to return home. People were going home by road and by river barges. Some, who could not wait for organised transport, trekked. The scorched-earth tactics used during the war left entire villages razed; they often wiped out everything, including animals and crops.

The huge influx of people also created an unprecedented need for the basic goods and services supplied by local and international organisations. Hence, when I joined Malteser International, a German NGO in the state of Rumbek in 2005, I found myself part of a huge population of humanitarian staff working to meet people's basic needs and to alleviate their suffering. Although we were offering much needed services, it struck me that the circumstances of power and extreme vulnerability, could allow service providers to take advantage of their position to sexually abuse and exploit beneficiaries. Having participated in BSO's training programme in Nairobi, I knew there were practical ways to prevent and respond to SEA in NGOs and to advocate on the issue.

My initial strategy was to raise the issue at the monthly meeting of the local NGO coordinating committee. Chaired by a representative of the government of South Sudan, participants in the committee represented the church, NGOs and UN agencies managing project activities in the state. The committee was not keen on integrating preventing sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) into their project activities because they felt that it was not within their mandate. A proposal to create an SEA sub-committee to train NGO staff members and receive complaints in the state was also rejected on grounds of the deteriorating security situation. Local militia remained active and there were increasing reports of rape and violence, including revenge killings, as returnees came back to find their land occupied by people who had stayed behind.

Instead, it was agreed that SEA should be integrated into the agenda of the local working health committee which met monthly to review issues like child health, maternal care, HIV/AIDS and sexual and gender based violence. This, like the other committee, drew from all NGOs operating in the state.

Integration into the health sector sub-committee did have some benefits. Personally, it was exciting to use my knowledge to advocate to a core group of individuals on the importance of preventing and responding to SEA. I developed a close relationship with a small team with whom I shared PSEA material and engaged in discussion on best practice in the workplace. In this way, the committee allowed my message on PSEA to crawl out of the wood-work.

Nonetheless, my feeling was that SEA did not receive the reception it deserved. There was some quiet opposition to the integration of SEA, as representatives routinely failed to feed back to the committee about work in their organisations. Also, when asked, organisations were unwilling to identify key staff to be focal points, claiming that SEA was beyond their mandate. So, even

though a number of individuals identified with me their involvement and participation was limited. I sometimes felt like a one-man show where I was the only one advancing SEA with no support and backing.

I traced these challenges to a number of factors. First, many committee members had no knowledge of PSEA and believed it was not relevant to their mandate. Second, they felt that SEA was not an urgent matter compared to other health issues affecting the local people. Third, an individual was spearheading SEA, a sensitive issue which, in normal circumstances, would be driven by an organisation. Finally, as staff in the NGOs and UN agencies did not know about SEA, they did not feel ownership of the project.

These were part of the many obstacles I encountered in my attempt to improve the prevention and response to SEA in South Sudan. It was a time-consuming and slow process of persistent advocacy to encourage agencies to integrate SEA prevention and response strategies into their programming. Even so, I am confident that, in some way, I have made an impact on the problem of SEA in the Lake State: my training as an investigator and my work on the committee, enabled people in other organisations to learn about SEA by humanitarian workers and to gain confidence in identifying and responding to SEA in their organisations. ■

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### Where are we and what are we doing now?

#### Where are we?

The short answer is that we have moved! The slightly longer answer is that, on 1 April 2007, BSO left its former home at the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA), to join the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership – International (HAP), the humanitarian sector's first international self-regulatory body.

Head-quartered in Geneva with staff around the world, HAP's mission is to make humanitarian action accountable to its intended beneficiaries. It works towards this goal by promoting principles and standards on humanitarian accountability, and by certifying agencies that meet those standards.

For BSO, integration into HAP is an opportunity to both continue its

existing work, which ICVA fostered in the Project's early phase, and to integrate SEA awareness, and SEA prevention and response capacities, into general accountability systems, where they belong.

#### What are we doing?

Since the last newsletter, BSO has continued to power through its timetable of workshops. Joined by "graduates" of our two "Training of Trainers" workshops in Geneva, the team has facilitated no less than seven learning programmes internationally.

More workshops will be held in Nairobi in May and Geneva in June. We will then recommence after the summer break with more Investigation, Trainers, and Management workshops. Locations confirmed so far are Washington DC, Monrovia and Nairobi.

The finalised timetable will be posted on our newly-launched website

towards the end of June. Please check there, closer to the time, for exact dates and locations:

[www.hapinternational.org](http://www.hapinternational.org)

#### WHO HAS HELPED US?

*Naturally, this flurry of activity was only possible with the support of our institutional homes, ICVA and HAP, our NGO partners, Mercy Malaysia, IRC and InterAction, and our corporate sponsor, Petronas.*

*Our sincerest thanks go to them all; we look forward to working with them again soon.*



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