

WPT Meeting with Protection Actors leads to Resumption of Night Patrols



Case study | November 2019



Photo: Members of WPTs in Bentiu POC/Nonviolent Peaceforce

During the course of its work in and around the POC, NP's Bentiu POC team has engaged directly with local communities and other protection partners to enable better coordination and effective functioning of protection mechanisms. In doing so, one aim has been to build the capacity of local community-based mechanisms to directly advocate for their needs. NP works with five WPTs in the POC: Unity of Women, Inter-Church Committee, Nuer Ka Nguon, Women's Association, and Rial One. Their total memberships comprise of approximately 450 women. Over time, consultations with the Women's Protection Teams (WPTs) highlighted the need to create direct communication channels between various partners and community groups to provide them with a platform to voice their concerns. After a series of leadership and advocacy trainings with these WPTs, the team found it an opportune time to bring together the communities with protection actors from the UN.

In September and October this year, as a result of the team's facilitation of a series of meetings between the leaders of the Women's Protection Teams (WPTs), UNMISS, and UNPOL, night patrols were resumed within the POC. According to community members, security in certain blocks within the POC had significantly decreased after UNPOL's decision to not patrol the area at night.

The purpose of the meeting was threefold: to create a functional communication channel between UN protection actors and the local community; to acknowledge, increase the visibility and improve the influence of female leadership within the community; and, to provide the WPTs with the opportunity to highlight their protection related activities, such as the impact of their own patrols in hotspot areas within the POC. In addition, such meetings provide the women of the POC a platform to voice feedback and concerns with the principal protection bodies operating both inside and outside the POC with the rationale that protection strategies should be informed by the local population.

Representing UNPOL were the agency's gender team, including the team lead and the Gender Officer. NP had previously met with the senior most UNPOL member of staff in the POC to discuss the value of the WPTs in providing information and sharing feedback on framing the UN's protection strategies both within and beyond the POC. UNMISS was represented by their Civilian Protection Advisor whose participation was particularly valuable due to his ability to influence the patrol strategies of peacekeepers outside of the POC. This was of high relevance to the WPTs given that most of them are particularly vulnerable to sexual assault and other types of violence when collecting firewood outside the POC.

In both meetings that lasted over two hours each, NP's role as a facilitator was crucial: NP has already established a working relationship with these women, in addition to closely coordinating with other protection actors as well. Following the format of WPT meetings, NP effectively conducted the meetings in a way similar to those conducted with the WPTs before, only rather than referring feedback to agencies at a later stage in multi-partner meetings, the women could communicate directly with the relevant decision-makers. These meetings were also an opportunity for NP to advocate to UNMISS and UNPOL on protection gaps identified by the team together with the communities.

During the first meeting conducted on September 24, the WPT leaders identified the firewood collection area of Rubul-Wahl as particularly insecure at that time. The UNMISS representative noted this feedback and later re-directed the UNMISS Mongolian Battalion to patrol this area. The WPT leaders also discussed UNPOL's stationary presence in the buffer zone after dark and the resumption of mobile patrols at night, as had previously been the case. One leader raised a specific case of a solar lamp being dug out of the ground in Sector 3 Block 5, a task which took a considerable amount of time and would have been interrupted by a mobile patrol. UNPOL noted the feedback and, within two weeks, POC residents reported that mobile patrols had resumed at night.

Further, the meeting provided NP and UNMISS an opportunity to coordinate their efforts; as NP informed the women of the team's intention to patrol the firewood collection area of Sikasi on Thursday that week, the UNMISS representative re-directed the UNMISS Ghanaian Battalion to patrol a different area so as to avoid duplication of efforts and to respect NP's mandate of not working directly alongside armed actors. Given the cultural sensitivities around the reporting of GBV cases, NP also advocated for the hiring of female language assistants by both UNMISS and UNPOL.

A second meeting was conducted on October 1, where in addition to the first meeting, the WPT leaders highlighted the impact of their recent independent activities in addressing protection concerns, especially those pertaining to women and children. This included their engagement with women setting out to collect firewood to identify insecure areas and report on security concerns or incidents, and to encourage women to move in groups for greater safety. Two women recounted separate incidents where WPT members on patrol saved children from drowning in the quarry pools that often flood during the rains. Another woman, Chairperson of the ICC, described interpositioning herself between gang members and a man they wanted to kill, thereby saving his life.

The UNPOL representatives were particularly impressed by these reports of women taking responsibility for protection in the community. In describing their protection work within the community, WPT members also highlighted some of the challenges they face including intimidation and abuse from adolescents while on patrol. Both NP and UNPOL encouraged the women to report such cases to the nearest UNPOL officer. As a result of these meetings, UNPOL committed to working with the WPTs, particularly in terms of providing trainings. NP welcomed this commitment and agreed to support this working relationship by facilitating increased cooperation and coordination.