VOICES FROM BOR
Reflecting on a mental health and psychosocial support project at the Bor protection of civilians site in South Sudan
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Introduction

With the crisis in South Sudan well into its second year, the psychosocial impact of the conflict persists. The experiences of violence, displacement and confinement among IDPs have contributed to community-wide emotional distress. At the time of this writing, more than 150,000 people were seeking shelter at crowded UNMISS PoC sites across the country, and safe returns were not possible in many areas due to renewed conflict and fear of ethnic targeting.

Research in early 2014 revealed that 80 per cent of IDP respondents in the UNMISS PoC site in Bor, Jonglei State, experienced psychosocial suffering, very often linked to the conditions of living in the PoC. Many IDPs even referred to the feeling of "being in jail" due to an overwhelming fear to leave the site. Civilians in Bor—like thousands of others across the country—experienced some of the worst abuses of the conflict, including an attack on the site itself on 17 April 2014, which led to the death of 47 people sheltering in the PoC.

In response to these needs, IOM began piloting a psychosocial support project at the Bor PoC in September 2014, with a strong focus on capacity building and community participation. IOM trains IDPs on psychosocial support, enabling them to identify and develop activities that would best meet their community's needs.

This booklet includes a collection of life stories from 12 IDPs participating in this project. The idea to create this booklet came from the IDPs themselves, who wanted to share their stories and discuss the impact the crisis has had on their lives.

Throughout the testimonies, a common theme emerges: the sense of responsibility to help others. IOM's project aims to support community-based outlets for positive individual, family and community-level coping mechanisms. Although the suffering is immense, many people living in PoCs take an active role to support each other and promote resilience.

The crisis also affects IDPs' sense of identity and how they view their roles in both their families and communities. IOM works with IDPs to encourage a positive sense of identity, providing IDPs an opportunity to become positive role models.

With IOM's support, IDPs developed seven psychosocial support mobile teams focused on different themes: an educators group (targeting school-aged children and youth), a women's group, a sports group, a cultural group, a mediation group, an interfaith group and a group of lay counselors.

As these stories show, supporting people to express and engage with their full range of emotions is an important part of the psychosocial support process, empowering IDPs to exert a positive and active influence on the overall wellbeing of their community. As one participant explains: "I have grown in strength and resolve. I believe that if we come together as a group, then we can use our experience of suffering to offer comfort and support to others. The suffering that people are facing is not new. We can help those that endure pain to cope, as we have coped."
Andrew Mayuang Keak
Andrew is the leader of the Cultural Group established as part of the IOM mobile psychosocial teams.

I joined the army at a young age after the SPLA came to recruit boys to fight in Anyanya 2. By 1997 I had graduated and taken my place on the front line. By 2013 eight years after the conflict, I had moved to Juba with my wife and children. The crisis changed the life we had built there together.

When the fighting erupted in Juba, I was serving with my unit. Having the Nuer scarification was a death sentence unless I escaped Juba. I fled with my comrades but could not take my family with me. I told my wife to go with the children to the UNMISS base in Juba.

I marched with my comrades out of Juba. When we reached a place called Kaltho we were attacked and our group was separated. After 12 days of wandering we were captured by the SPLA and held in prison for five months, all the time expecting that we would be killed. I am sure we would have been, were it not for the kindness of one man, a major in military intelligence. He freed us, urging that we should flee to the nearest PoC site: Bor.

When I reached the PoC, I was welcomed and even asked to act as the Secretary of the camp leadership. I was determined to help others and was proud to be one of the first people trained in PSS and to begin working with the Culture Group. In this setting it is easy for youth to forget their traditional culture. It is vital that, despite our situation, they should stay in touch with those traditions. We hold dances and report on ceremonies to bring those traditions to life. These activities have entered into their minds and they now work together as brothers and sisters.

Doing this work helps me fill, in a small way, the hole left by my absent family. It is hard without them. I know that they are in PoC1 in Juba but I cannot reach them. I can speak to them on the phone but until Madeleine from ACTED took a photograph of me to them, my small children did not know what their father looked like. But I have to persevere. I believe that everything has a beginning and an end and that I trust in God that I will see my family again.

“I believe that everything has a beginning and an end.”
“The suffering that people are facing is not new. We can help those that endure pain to cope, as we have coped.”

I have suffered many sorrows in my life, particularly since the crisis engulfed South Sudan. These experiences help me work with young women who have lost their husbands. I may not be able to offer them money or things but I can advise them, and influence them, and ultimately help them.

My own husband was killed in the fighting in Malakal and I have been separated from others in my family. Not everyone is used to dealing with loss but I believe there will be a time when I will enjoy life again. I can teach this to the young women whom I work alongside.

My greatest achievement has been working with a young widow who lost her husband. She is wracked with grief and every struggle with her children reminds her of that loss. I spoke with the lady and helped her change her situation, helped her to work through her grief. This work also helps me to cope with the difficulties of my life inside the PoC. I have grown in strength and resolve. I believe that if we come together as a group we can use our experience of suffering to offer comfort and support to others. The suffering that people are facing is not new. We can help those that endure pain to cope, as we have coped.

When I am stressed or unhappy I take solace in the church and in raising my children. I attend the Church of Ngundeng, the Nuer prophet. Through prayer to Ngundeng I can ignore all the bad things that are happening.

The comparison between my old life and my life in the PoC is the most difficult thing for me. I used to be a successful woman. I ran three businesses on behalf of the government. I was able to live a good life. I was self-reliant. Here I am forced to live from the hand of others as if I were a child. It is difficult to remember my old life and the things I used to do. Now I have my family and the Church alone to sustain me.

I pray for peace and being able to resume a normal life. Until that day I have ideas that I think can make a real difference in the lives of young widows in the PoC. I will continue to work with IOM to reach that goal.

Elizabeth Nyawech Duop Bohk

Elizabeth is a member of the IOM PSS Widows Support Group.
Hoth is a member of the IOM PSS Sports Group.

“As part of a team you know that your teammates see you as their brother and they become like family.”

Before I came to the camp I had been studying in Uganda. I was visiting with family in Bor at the time of the crisis and was forced into the PoC camp. I wanted to continue studying and to become a doctor. The crisis interfered.

I am young and have not suffered many hardships or relished many joys. I just concentrate on the sports activities here in the camp. I am very interested in sports and have always played football. Here we have a number of teams and play many tournaments organised by the Sports and Youth Groups and assisted by IOM. Sometimes my team wins and sometimes we lose but either way I am very happy we have this outlet.

Before the sports teams, we had so many problems. Many youth were drinking and fighting; people were idle, bored and confined. Young men especially were a source of problems. Many would speak only to their small group and isolate themselves from others. Since the group began youth are engaged and busy. After youth play sports, they feel tired and happy and want to rest instead of going to seek trouble.

Sport changes behaviours. It changes you from a negative person into a positive person. Sometimes you felt that others saw you as a bad person but as part of a team you know that your teammates see you as their brother and they become like family. This is a great feeling. Being a member of the Sports Group can also upgrade your status and increase feelings of self-worth. If you become a well-qualified player you can be asked to play for other teams or to train other players.

Since these changes started, relations with the rest of the community have improved dramatically. Dissatisfied youth used to rob and steal; they used to drink and fight. Now these things happen less and less. We invite the older people, women and the children to come and watch the football tournaments. Our relations with the older people are good now and they are supportive of the Sports Group.

For now things are good. We still face many difficulties but with the support of the humanitarians, the schools and the Sports Group I will be ok. I care about my future. I want to get my degree in order to serve my people. I will teach them how to come together through sports.
Despite my name, I grew up a Lou Nuer in Akobo County, Jonglei State. My father was the youth leader in my community and I inherited those aspirations from him. When father grew old, I followed in his footsteps and became youth leader.

From childhood to maturity, your parents teach you how to be. Father always had a special philosophy. He knew that it was important for the community to love each other and to be accepting of new people. He believed in reconciliation over violence; in solving issues in a peaceful way. I believe in that same philosophy. It is beautiful when the community love each other and live in peace.

Living in peace is hard in the PoC. We are a free people but here we are not free. We cannot move outside. We cannot move anywhere. We have been here for almost two years and although it is difficult, things are improving. Being in the educators group has made a real difference. Before we began our activities, we were so bored and people were becoming exhausted by the monotony and struggles of life in the PoC. Now we have activities like dancing, dramas and singing. Our activities bring people together. We perform in public so that all can see us and join us. We take note of those who turn away from us and make a special effort to bring them into our groups.

As well as performances, the Educators Group also carry healthy messages around the camp. When the school announces that it is open we circulate around the camp to make sure all the people know. We engage with the children to make sure that they know the importance of going to school.

Within the groups we discuss our difficulties and share our experiences. Those who have had difficult experiences reassure us that just as our problems had a beginning they will also have an end.

My role in the Educators Group is very good for me. I like to spread the important messages and help the children. It is so important that they receive a good education.

I have many plans for my future. I want to continue emulating my father. Although he is in Akobo West, I know that he would be proud that I am among the youth leaders of the PoC and playing a role in the Educators Group, helping our people.

“We are a free people but here we are not free. We cannot move outside.”

“Malakal” is also the name of the capital of Upper Nile State.

Malakal Bol Machar

Malakal is a member of the IOM PSS Educators Group.
Mariya Nyayok Yoach

Mariya is the Widow’s Support Group Facilitator, a group sponsored by the IOM PSS programme.

“My greatest achievement in the camp can be seen in the happiness and renewed purpose of the women I work with.”

I work with young women who have lost their husbands and the PSS training from IOM helped increase my abilities, allowing me to help young ladies in a better way. Separation from family is an issue that resonates deeply with me. Before now I have been separated from my parents, husband and now my children. It is this well of experience I draw upon to help the young widows in Bor PoC.

As a child I was separated from my parents after our house was torched by Arab tribesmen during a raid. Later, after my husband recovered from Kala-azar sickness in Khartoum I was separated from him after I myself fell sick. The difficulties of moving during Anyanya 2 left us separated for a long time and I almost hung myself in despair. Now the crisis has ripped my own children from me. It is difficult to live without them but I persevere.

The young women in the PoC are deeply affected by the war; they have lost husbands and children to disease and fighting. The measles outbreak of early 2014 left many mothers feeling abnormal and stressed. The April 17th attack, following so closely behind, evoked desperation within our hearts. People feared for their lives. It was the place of the older women to console the younger and to help them develop the resilience needed for this difficult time.

After receiving the PSS training from IOM I find that my advice is making more sense to the young women, they listen to me and change their mood and behaviours. One thing in particular has remained with me. Before, when I helped someone, I would go and speak to others about their problem to share the understanding. Now, I know to respect the person’s privacy and speak of it to no-one.

My greatest achievement in the camp can be seen in the happiness and renewed purpose of the women I work with. Before they were listless and without care for themselves. Now they are engaged with the community and are revitalised.

However, the thing that gives me the greatest pleasure is seeing my children, those who have remained with me, grow into good adults. I may have been separated from family throughout my life but I rejoice in the ones that have remained by my side.
“We feel isolated...this isolation means that we have to take care of ourselves and of each other.”

When the Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed in 2005 we celebrated the victory of the South Sudanese people. We thought that all the pains of the long walk were over and we could enjoy the fruits of our independence. Then in 2013 war and ruin returned. Now we live here in the PoC and we feel that we aren’t like other people. Our lives are full of pain.

The children suffer the worst. We had hoped that those born during the years of Anyanya would lead normal lives. Instead, they are in the bush fighting, as their fathers and grandfathers fought before them. My own son was born in 1994 and is now on the front line, struggling for our survival. If we were not at war, perhaps my son would be studying for his degree right now. It is sad to think of what might have been. If the government would follow the course of democracy instead of violence, our children could be in school. Instead, we are at war.

It is awful to remember the things that have happened. The stories are a leaden weight in our hearts. We feel isolated. Isolated from the rest of South Sudan by the gates of the PoC and isolated from the rest of the world by the silence of the international community. This isolation means that we have to take care of ourselves and of each other.

The Embroidery Group’s main duty is to console the relatives of those killed in the fighting. Women are suffering the most. We counsel them but they cannot help comparing their lives now to how they were before. Many of the women lived in good situations. Now their husbands are fighting or dead and they remain alone with the children. We do what we can to help these women remain strong so that they can wait out the end of this crisis.

As difficult as our situation is, things have improved, especially since moving to the new site. Now women are dressing nicely and feel like human beings again. It is a good sign that people are letting their children go to school again. Fear is reducing.

IOM has really contributed to this change in the PoC. They have developed initiatives that help people reduce stress. We have gained strength from the skills IOM taught us. We have the skills to help people cope.

Mary Nyajuaini Bikhan

Mary is an IOM PSS team member in the Embroidery Group.
Nuer Nyang Deng
Nuer is an IOM PSS team member for the Sports Group.

“I now feel like I have a purpose and am totally engaged in helping youth in the PoC through sport.”

Before, in the old PoC site, I was thinking very badly because I had lost friends and relatives to the conflict. The training I received from IOM, and opportunities I have taken since, have changed things for me completely. I now feel like I have a purpose and am totally engaged in helping youth in the PoC through sport.

After the training, I decided to begin the football group to address the issues of youth disengagement and idleness. I organised football teams and secured permission from the Camp Manager and UNMISS to have a football field. IOM has also supplied us with sports equipment.

We have organised sports tournaments and they have become big social events, and a good opportunity to spread important information. This is why we invite the elderly people. The old ones have good experience and knowledge and people listen to them. They have recently advised people against abusing women and to use sport as a way of releasing energy.

We have also established fans teams as a way to engage people who don’t want to play. We have a group of 30 youth who support the teams. They help me organise tournaments; collect chairs for the elders spectating area; and escort the players onto the pitch. I want them to feel more involved in what we’re doing so I have submitted a proposal to IOM requesting that they be given uniforms.

Some youth don’t want to take part. They prefer to drink and remain idle. I make a special point to reach out to these people. I tell them to set aside alcohol and not to shy away from people; we welcome anyone to the group. Sometimes members of the team regress and start to drink and fight again. When I see this I will organise a special tournament and show that person that they are always welcome back.

The members of the Sports Group now see each other as brothers and sisters. They play together peacefully and love for each other grows within their hearts.

Before we received training from IOM we were stressed and negative but things have changed. I would like to receive more training so that I can come up with fresh ideas that can benefit youth and keep me motivated to carry on working for my community.
My passion in life is education. It is the gateway to everything I want to achieve. My dream is to become a surgeon. South Sudan has so few surgeons. If I can finish my education and realize my dream it would make me very proud. The crisis and my status as an IDP have interrupted my dream for now.

Restarting my education has been difficult within the PoC. When we first moved here we were without a school. After some months, the community arranged for a learning space for primary students although it was very basic. Later, after we moved into the new site, we found a new school and were able to start studying again in earnest.

I am in P8 now and I am getting ready to take my Primary Leaving Certificate examinations. My favourite subject is Science as this will take me toward my goal of becoming a surgeon. I hope to take a degree in biology when we are at peace.

As I approach graduation from primary school I face some serious problems. My class has no textbooks for P8 and I have nothing with which to revise apart from my notes. When I pass my exams I will face an uncertain future.

There is no secondary school in the camp and therefore no access to formal education. I worry that my education will again be interrupted.

For now, I take great pride in the fact that I can read and write. If someone writes to me I need not seek out someone to read it for me. If I write a letter, I can write it myself. My secrets are my own again.

I also take solace in my membership of the volleyball team. It allows me to stay active so I do not dwell on my problems. We practice often and play games against other teams. I have risen to the position of team captain and I take this responsibility very seriously. It is important for me to display leadership qualities and to take care of my team. If they quarrel, I calm them. If they need to increase their skills, I train them. I try to set the example for my team.

Education and sport form the bedrock of my life in Bor PoC. I pray that I will continue to be able to play and learn in order to achieve my dreams.

Nyambuoy Wal Tuony

Nyambuoy is a member of the Sports Group and the captain of a volleyball team.
I have suffered seriously in my life. I have been attacked by wild animals; seen relatives killed; been injured in a mine blast; been lost in the bush without food; hidden from attackers amongst the bodies of the dead; and been caught in the crossfire of sparring warlords. I have lost children and uncles, aunts and siblings.

Once, my husband returned home having taken strong drink. He tied my hands together with rope. He proceeded to tie me to a post in the tukul. He went outside and in a few minutes I realised he had set the tukul on fire. As the fire raged around me my bonds came loose and I was able to escape. Many of the tukuls in our village were destroyed along with mine.

The day the first bullet of the crisis was fired in Bor town was also the day I heard that my sister, who was taking care of my children, had been killed. I was living in Bor at that time so I ran straight away for the protection of the UNMISS camp.

Working with the Embroidery PSS group has helped me to re-orientate myself and remain resilient. I still have the spirit of resistance because I receive comfort from the words of others. The group meets every Monday and Wednesday, 15 of us in total. As we work on our embroidery we talk of our problems. We give comfort and advice and hope that through our collective efforts we can raise the morale of the women in the camp. If they have become affected by bad thinking, we take steps to give them extra strength and heart.

In all, the crisis has taken 17 members of my family. I would like to send a message to our leaders and to the international community. You must help us! Please let your eyes linger on what is happening in South Sudan. We have remained strong and resilient but we have only so much hope.

“We have remained strong and resilient but we have only so much hope.”

Nyarock
Ruot Riek Dak

Nyarock is a member of the Embroidery Group established by the IOM PSS mobile team.
“For myself, I understand that it is not possible to be happy all the time.”

I have always been a hard-working woman. I take great satisfaction in having been able to support my husband and children. Before the crisis we prospered and my husband had been able to take four more wives. I have always believed that if you are healthy, you can be self-reliant and better yourself and those around you. By struggling for such betterment even God can be happy with you.

I first entered Bor PoC soon after the fighting broke out. I soon saw where I could help those around me. Many children had been separated from their parents in the first bloody days of the fighting. I found eight such children and decided to bring them into my home and under my protection. I already had five children of my own but I was able to feed and clothe them all and make sure they were safe.

As well as my responsibilities at home, I have found a place within the group of women at the Hair Salon, sponsored by IOM’s PSS programme. I like to work with others and saw that there were young women in the camp who could use my help. Before the young women started working with the Hair Salon they were very distressed; many had lost husbands or family members to the war and had isolated themselves from the community. Now, through the support of the women in the Salon, the young ladies again feel like they are part of the community. They have blossomed.

For myself, I understand that it is not possible to be happy all the time. I try to remain positive but sometimes become stressed. The children under my care are a heavy burden but I cannot desert them while my own children are happy and healthy. When I get stressed, I pray to God and He helps me realise that the causes of my stress will come to an end and I will be happy again.

The Nuer of the PoC are resilient and are working to make the best of this situation. I have begun to cultivate the land and improve the nutrition of my family. We have some job opportunities from the INGOs and sometimes we get things from outside the gate. If, at the end of the crisis, the children are healthy I will know that God is happy with what I have done for them.
I have seen bad things and good things in my life. My experiences have taught me one important and lingering truth – a person can suffer many difficult and painful moments in their lives but through their struggle can learn a resilience that promises normality and happiness for the future.

I had a normal childhood. I grew up with my parents in Akobo until I found my husband. We had five children together before he passed away. I had been a good Christian since birth, and my faith and the support of the community helped me to recover after the loss of my husband. It was at this time I moved my family to Kenya.

As I had overcome my own struggles so was I asked to help the community overcome its own conflicts when, in 2005, fighting broke out between two clans. I returned from Kenya and took up the position of Peace Maker, the only woman to be so nominated. Many people had died on each side and people were afraid; children were being targeted and the communities could not move freely. The Peace Makers on each side led prayer sessions and meetings and we were able to reunify the two clans.

In 2006 I returned to South Sudan and settled in Bor. I lived there with four of my children until the crisis forced us into the PoC camp. Although life was very hard, we thought we had found a safe place. The attack on April 17th has taught us that we can never be completely safe. This is the most painful feeling in the heart of our people.

The PSS training has enabled us to deal with such stress and to help other people. I myself work as a Lay Counsellor. The PSS groups have resolved many challenges and made people and the community stronger. The community had become so rigid; the youth would drink and fight but now they have learnt to live and work together.

I already had experience in resolving conflicts but the PSS training helped me speak to people with a soft tune and to persuade, rather than admonish them. Before, I might have left people humiliated and neglected. Now I can intervene for the benefit of all. These are the second steps of our lives in the camp and in future our people will be stronger and more resilient for them.
“I fear that our culture will become lost.”

I am an old man and am wedded to the old ways. I treasure Nuer traditions. I served in Anyanya I and Anyanya II and retired a Colonel. I have served my country with distinction and see my next duty as supporting our tribal customs while we are here in Bor PoC.

The things that are happening in South Sudan today are causing our children to lose direction. Traditionally in South Sudan we used to interact well with other tribes. We used to incorporate people from other tribes without discrimination but things are changing.

I fear that our culture will become lost. Young ones are not even learning to speak Nuer. They learn only English. Our children used to play Kuree and Walee (traditional Nuer ball games).

I am determined that that the youth of today will not lose sight of their heritage. I work with the Culture Group to make sure that our history remains central to camp life. Before the crisis there was a government institution that supported culture and heritage.

The Culture Group runs a number of activities. They organise traditional dances and have arranged performances at weddings and naming ceremonies. They also organised a cultural competition between blocks to promote traditional activities amongst youth.

I believe we can do more. Mothers are the ones to pass on knowledge to the children so we have to teach women about Nuer traditions. We also need books that will help teach people the Nuer language and cultural practices.

The loss of tradition is not the only difficulty we face. The services we receive are not enough and do not take into account the different needs of old people and children. We also miss our freedom of movement. Although we thank the UN for their protection, we feel claustrophobic. The camp is a jail guarded by the hatred of countrymen.

I do not despair though. I go out; I meet with and speak to people. I like to talk to the children. Teaching them of our ways helps me to resist all that has happened to us. I believe that there is a good future ahead of us.

Riek Wanjang Yak

Riek is a member of the IOM PSS Cultural Group.
**Glossary**

**Anyanya I:** A southern Sudanese separatist rebel army formed during the First Sudanese Civil War (1955-1972) between the northern and southern regions of Sudan.

**Anyanya II:** Refers to the second guerrilla war that southern Sudan fought against the northern part of Sudan (now the Republic of Sudan) after the breakdown of the Addis Ababa Agreement in 1983. The term translates as “Snake Poison” in the Ma’dí language found in Uganda and South Sudan.

**Camp management/manager:** Camp management is the organisation entrusted with coordinating the activities of humanitarian agencies operating within an IDP, refugee or PoC site. Camp management also liaises with the camp population and administrators. In the case of the PoCs, UNMISS is the camp administrator.

**April 17th attack:** On 17 April 2014, an armed mob attacked the Bor PoC site in Jonglei State, demanding the expulsion of youth from the Nuer ethnic group. At least 47 residents of the PoC were killed during the attack.

**IDP:** An internally displaced person (IDP) is someone who is forced from their home by natural or man-made phenomena and currently resides within their home country. An IDP differs from a refugee, who has fled their home country and sought refuge abroad.

**INGO:** International non-governmental organisation

**Kala-azar:** A potentially fatal parasitic disease of the internal organs. Kala-azar is present in Asia, South America, and Africa; the African strain is particularly prevalent in South Sudan.

**PoC:** Protection of civilian (PoC) sites are located within the premises of UNMISS bases. When violence erupted in December 2013, South Sudanese fled to UN bases across the country for protection, and the bases became de facto PoC sites. The bases were not originally designed to shelter thousands of IDPs; however, the evolution of the PoC sites on such a scale as is seen in South Sudan, as well as the longevity of the residents, is unprecedented.

**PoC1:** The first of three PoCs established in the UNMISS base known as “UN House” on the outskirts of Juba, the capital city of South Sudan.

**PSS:** Psychosocial support

**SPLA:** The Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) is the armed forces of South Sudan and the military wing of the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM), the governing political party founded by Dr. John Garang and currently led by President Salva Kiir.

**UNMISS:** The United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) was established in July 2011. The mandate of UNMISS was reinforced and reprioritised on 27 May 2014 to emphasise the protection of civilians, human rights monitoring and support for the delivery of humanitarian assistance and the implementation of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement.