



Minerva Access is the Institutional Repository of The University of Melbourne

Author/s:

Olliff, L;Baguot, L;Lazzati, L;Verghese, D;Fernandez, B

Title:

How do Australia-based migrants help in times of crisis? A case study of the South Sudanese diaspora's response to conflict and displacement in Abyei

Date:

2024

Citation:

Olliff, L., Baguot, L., Lazzati, L., Verghese, D. & Fernandez, B. (2024). How do Australia-based migrants help in times of crisis? A case study of the South Sudanese diaspora's response to conflict and displacement in Abyei. School of Social and Political Sciences, The University of Melbourne.

Persistent Link:

<https://hdl.handle.net/11343/361312>

HOW DO AUSTRALIA-BASED MIGRANTS HELP IN TIMES OF CRISIS?

*A case study of the South Sudanese diaspora's
response to conflict and displacement in Abyei*



THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

2024



The research team is very grateful to members of the South Sudanese community in Australia who participated in this study for their generous contribution of time and valuable insights.

This study was made possible by funding from the Australian Research Council Linkage Grant Diaspora Humanitarians: How Australia-based migrants help in crises abroad (LP200200817), and from the University of Melbourne Faculty of Arts Policy Enhancement Grant 2022.

Research team contributors to this report:

Research co-design: Lem Baguot, Louise Olliff, Lorenza Lazzati, Delvin Verghese, Bina Fernandez

Data Collection: Lem Baguot

Data Analysis: Lem Baguot, Louise Olliff, Lorenza Lazzati

Report Writing: Louise Olliff

Report Production and Design: Lorenza Lazzati

Suggested citation:

Olliff, L., Baguot, L., Lazzati, L., Verghese, D., Fernandez, B. 2024. How do Australia-based migrants help in times of crisis? A case study of the South Sudanese diaspora's response to conflict and displacement in Abyei. University of Melbourne.

CONTENT

Context.....	6
Main Activities.....	8
Needs.....	11
Modalities.....	12
Motivations.....	14
Collaborations.....	15
Impact & Effectiveness.....	16
Challenges.....	17
Recommendations.....	18





About the research

In 2022, researchers from the University of Melbourne undertook a project exploring how Australia-based migrants (diasporas) help in times of humanitarian crises overseas. The project involved community researchers from eight diaspora communities (Afghanistan, Indonesia, Lebanon, Myanmar, Nepal, Pacific Islands, South Sudan and Syria) to co-design methodology, engage communities and collect data to find out *how*, *why* and *what* was done by communities in Australia in response to specific crises or events. The project aims to better understand the strengths and challenges faced by Australia-based migrants responding to different kinds of crises (disasters, conflicts and complex crises), and to identify potential tools that can support diaspora communities in their responses in the future. More information about this project can be found at <https://diasporahumanitarians.com/>.

About this report

This report is a summary of findings for the case study on the **diaspora's response to conflict and displacement in the Abyei area, a disputed administrative region on the border between Sudan and South Sudan**. Lem Baguot was the community researcher leading the research for this case study, in collaboration with Professor Bina Fernandez (Chief Investigator), Dr Louise Olliff (Research Associate) and Lorenza Lazzati (Project Officer). Data was gathered from interviews and focus group discussions involving 20 participants from the Abyei community in Melbourne. Data collection took place between June and October 2022. Interviews and focus groups were conducted in person and in community languages (Dinka and Arabic). These were audio recorded and then translated and transcribed. Transcripts were thematically coded using Nvivo. The names of participants quoted in this report have been changed.



FINDINGS:

Crisis context:

How did the nature of the crisis shape diaspora responses?

This research took place **at a time of acute crisis** in the Abyei area of South Sudan. Substantial flooding had taken place alongside an ongoing conflict and new incursions from both the north (Sudan border) and south (with neighbouring community). Some villages had been burned by armed groups, summary killings had taken place, and people had fled ‘into the bush’ which was ‘in the water’. Access to affected populations by humanitarian actors was extremely challenging at this time.

This period of crisis in Abyei sits within the **context of a much longer and complex conflict and history** that is tied to the decades-long civil war that resulted in South Sudan becoming an independent state in 2011. In the negotiations that took place in the lead-up and aftermath of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement that ended the second Sudanese Civil War, the people of the Abyei Administrative Area became citizens of both South Sudan and Sudan. A referendum in 2013 saw the people of Abyei vote to become part of South Sudan, however the outcome of this referendum has not been accepted by the two state parties and the region remains disputed territory. As Mary describes:

We are in so much pain [because] of what is happening in Abyei. We were born in war and grew up in war, and our children are also born and grew up in war. We had hope that the war would come to an end when the Comprehensive Peace Agreement was reached... and now, the conflict that was thought to have been solved is back, and our people are dying again. Abyei is like a pathway that anyone could pass by and do whatever he or she feels like. (translation)

The unresolved, long and complex nature of this conflict was described in detail by many participants, who spoke about how the diaspora’s response was difficult to sustain support and momentum for in this context. As one participant mentioned, the schools that were built with fundraising and donations from the diaspora in the past have since been destroyed, and there was a sense that now ‘people are not settling’. What community members felt they could do were ‘very small things’ to help people affected by this crisis survive, but their actions were described as **‘a drop’ compared to what was needed** to resolve the conflict that would allow people to sustain themselves.

You know the case of Abyei needs to be solved; to be resolved to finish to the final, because those who are affected are civilians, they don’t know about the case really. Now local people are not going to the farms, because when you go to that farm you can be killed. (Deng, translation)

But now it looks as if it is a serious humanitarian disaster that is there now. That’s the problem. The floodings. The displacement... The local community itself, there’s nothing [we] can do to help them from here. That is why when you see this, it’s just like a drop of what these people can do. But they are meeting every week. Every week, I keep going. (David)



Main activities:

What did the Abyei diaspora do?

Most participants spoke about the diaspora's response mostly being at a **household-to-household** or **community-to-community level**; with families in Australia sending money directly to family members overseas, or community associations collecting funds to support communities back in Abyei.

In terms of the most common activities, participants spoke mostly about making **financial contributions**. This included transferring money to family and friends (i.e., remittances), but also contributing funds to collective efforts through community associations.

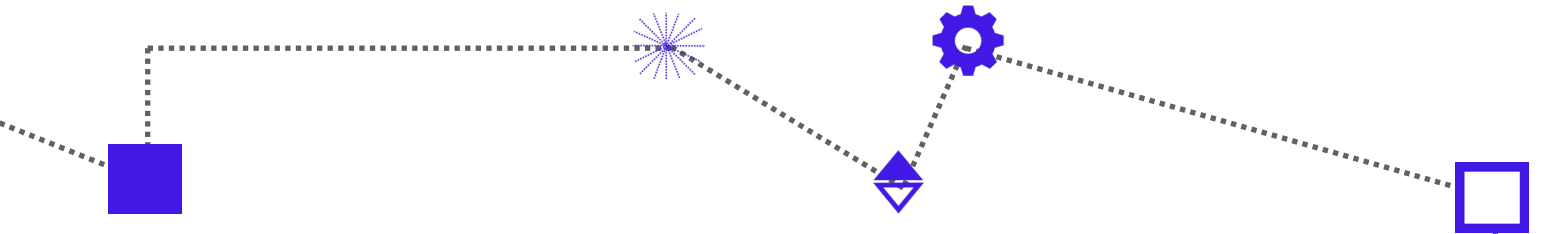
What we do here, at times we do fundraising and individual/membership contributions and send that off to [people in Abyei] via our local coordination. We do not have any other support, people lack food, and if there was a means and help, then we (the community) here could help, even with basic plastic sheets for tents for making makeshift shelters. (Malek, translation)

As an elder... if the community meet, I say a word like what I am talking now, and tell them that we need to collect something, for example, we need to collect \$1,000 to give to the community so that to support things at home there. (Santino, translation)

Funds raised by the community were used for the **procurement and distribution of material goods** – food, clothes, medicines, books and other educational supplies, and basic household goods like mosquito nets and plastic sheets – either sent by container from Australia or purchased in neighbouring countries and transported to Abyei.

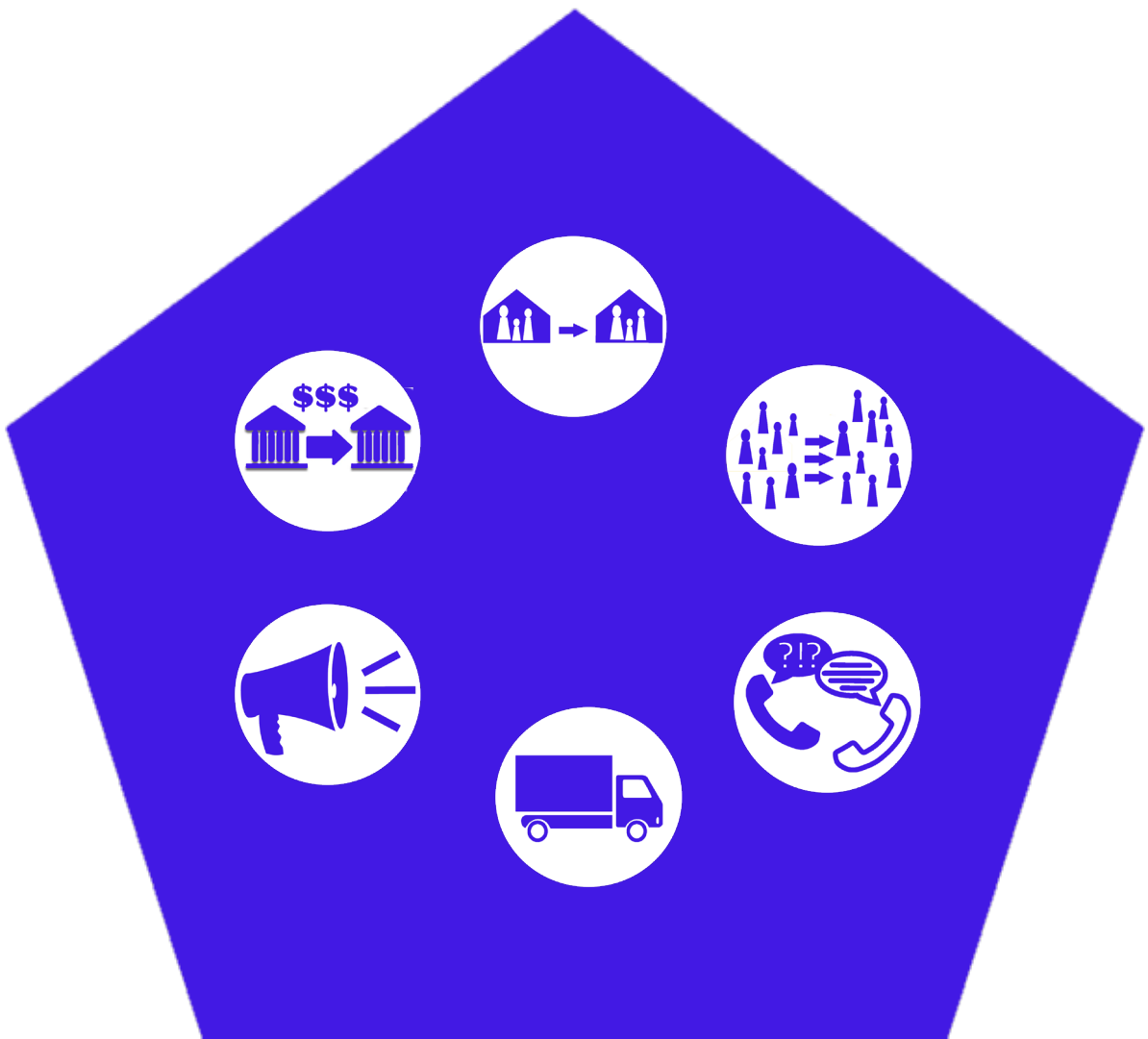
Our capacity is to support food items and health items because we don't have capacity or power to build something, we don't have much that money to build schools and so forth. (Deng, translation)

A frequently mentioned activity of those in the diaspora was **influence and advocacy** work, trying to raise awareness in Australia and internationally about the situation in Abyei and to put pressure on different actors (the United Nations, regional bodies, governments, and humanitarian organisations) to step up their response to the conflict in Abyei. As David describes:

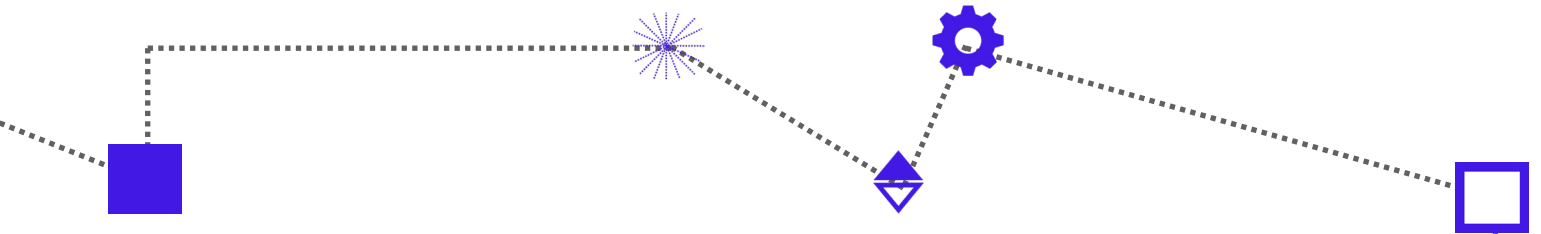


So, a lot of the senior members of the community have been writing books and papers and presenting to all, and then to the African Union. [...] The other thing they do is writing petitions and trying to do that advocacy. They go sometimes to Canberra. They have been to Canberra a few times. And they've wanted Australian government to respond to that conflict, to that crisis.

Finally, **psychosocial support** was discussed by one participant, who spoke about the 'small hope' that diaspora networks in Australia try to give to people affected by this crisis by sending money, goods and spending time on the phone with people affected by the conflict in Abyei.







Needs addressed:

What needs within crisis-affected communities were addressed?



Conflict resolution – advocacy and influence toward the resolution of conflict.



Emergency shelter – plastic sheets and mosquito nets for those internally displaced.



Food and basic necessities – clothes, food, water, blankets, including for those internally displaced.



Health care – access to basic medicines.



Modalities:

What tools helped to facilitate diaspora responses?

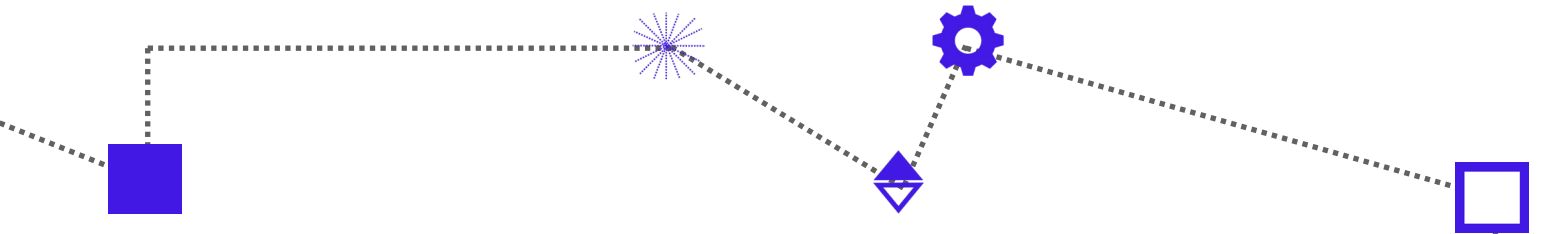
Social networks were central to how the Abyei diaspora mobilised and responded. Social networks in Australia were used to raise funds by holding community events. The Abyei community association in Melbourne worked directly with affected people through community leaders in Abyei and in the wider diaspora. This involved **community leaders travelling** between Australia, South Sudan and other parts of the world where the diaspora is located to facilitate distribution of funds collected in Australia.

I went there [and] we collected money to buy tents. The UN of course is there providing small things, but it is not enough, is not sufficient for everyone. So, we support by collecting some money... I went there in 2008. In 2011 when war broke out, I went there. In 2013 when another war broke out, I went there too. In January 2022, I was there in Abyei when people were killed... (Deng, translation)

In terms of influence and advocacy, the Abyei community in Australia is **well connected with the wider diaspora** in the United States and Europe, which means that key points of advocacy and influence are coordinated and responsibility to advocate distributed across a wider social network.

The community here is not small, it is part of the big (global) community, but as a region, each region is asked, the Americans are working towards this, but we need Australia, like the way they are here, to really pick up the voice of the community. (David)

Sending material items by container from Australia was discussed as a good strategy in the past but was seen as less effective now due to the logistical difficulties and cost of transporting goods from the port in Kenya (Mombasa) through Uganda and South Sudan. There was reference made to procuring goods in Sudan and sending these to Abyei, but the conflict and risks of confiscation of goods by armed groups was cited as a major challenge and pushed costs of transportation up significantly.



And now they see it is much cheaper buying things in Uganda and Kenya. [But] because those are inferior drugs or counterfeit in East Africa, that's why sometimes they try to take it from here... The organisation, yes, they organize well, with people stationed at the ports of clearance and the transporters. They move like that. [But] that takes almost tens of thousands of dollars for one container to get there. (David)

... to get items here is easy, but shipping is very hard, but we tried so hard because what [it costs to transport a] container took is a lot. If a container went three or four times a year it will do something. We took chairs, things for schools, because people sit on the ground, but when we brought chairs into hospitals and schools, even batteries and some rolls of rugs. We found them in stores, and we put them in a container, and they help a lot. (Francis, translation)





Motivations:

Why did the diaspora in Australia respond?

When talking about what prompted those in Australia to continue to respond to the ongoing or periodic crises in Abyei, there were two key themes. Several participants spoke about the need to respond being tied to obligation and concern for people who are considered ‘part of us’ and **characteristic of collectivist communities**.

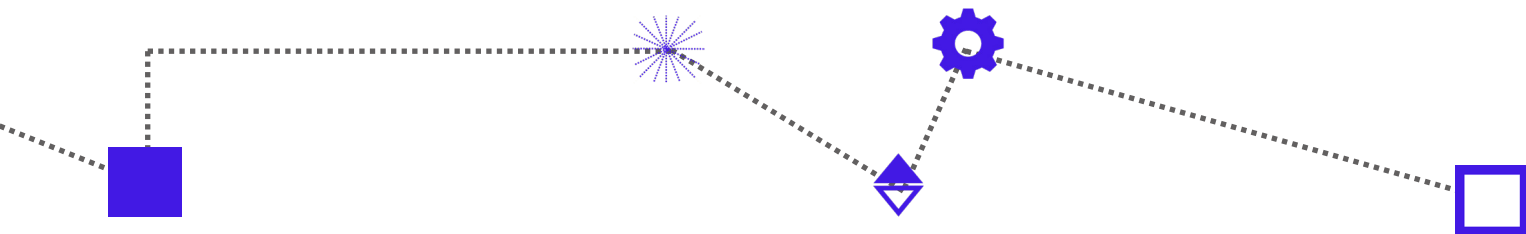
The issue of Abyei is a big concern to those living in Diaspora, people here are continuingly supporting those people at home...; their daily living comes from us here. People there harassed and we are also afraid here, because they are part of us, and everyone here has relatives living there [and] all these people are our people, and if we heard that they are running and living under trees, how can we feel here? (Deng, translation)

We are a community which always works collectively. If you have an issue, for example, medical expenses... and you as an individual, you cannot afford it. Then the community comes together, they raise funds, and they support you. And you do that. So next time, you will know definitely the community would be there to help you. So [many] still have big family roots home. That’s what really forced them to also work with that. It is traumatizing and emotional to them, but they have to do it. And that’s why we keep coming back to work together. (David)

The second theme relating to motivations relates to the first theme but spoke more of **emotional drivers** — the guilt, worry, stress and pain felt by people in Australia. Research participants expressed great distress about what was happening to their people in Abyei and that this was causing them **pain, sickness, stress and sleepless nights**. In their suffering, they felt compelled to act.

As I am talking to you now, we get calls that people are killed in the roadside. This has given us sickness, some have high blood pressure... that is because of what we hear from back home. As I am talking to you now I am sick because of what I used to hear from homeland. To stay like now I am staying here in this good house, you sleep well, but hearing that your own person back home is suffering and dying, your heart would not settle. (Mary, translation)

When one receives distressful messages here either from your father, uncle, mother, aunty, and siblings that people are in dire need and have nothing, one is left distraught, stressed and depressed. (Malek, translation)



Collaboration:

How did the Abyei diaspora connect with other actors?

With regards to relationships between the diaspora community in Australia and other actors responding to the complex humanitarian needs in Abyei, the strongest connection was between diaspora networks and **local organisations** or initiatives by **individuals or small groups from within crisis-affected communities**. These local actors were seen as trusted and embedded in crisis-affected communities.

The local community down there knows the local NGOs that are working. So they partner like that with other people. (David)

Other **institutional humanitarian actors were discussed more in terms of the lack of connection or collaboration**. This included humanitarian NGOs, multilateral UN agencies and government actors.

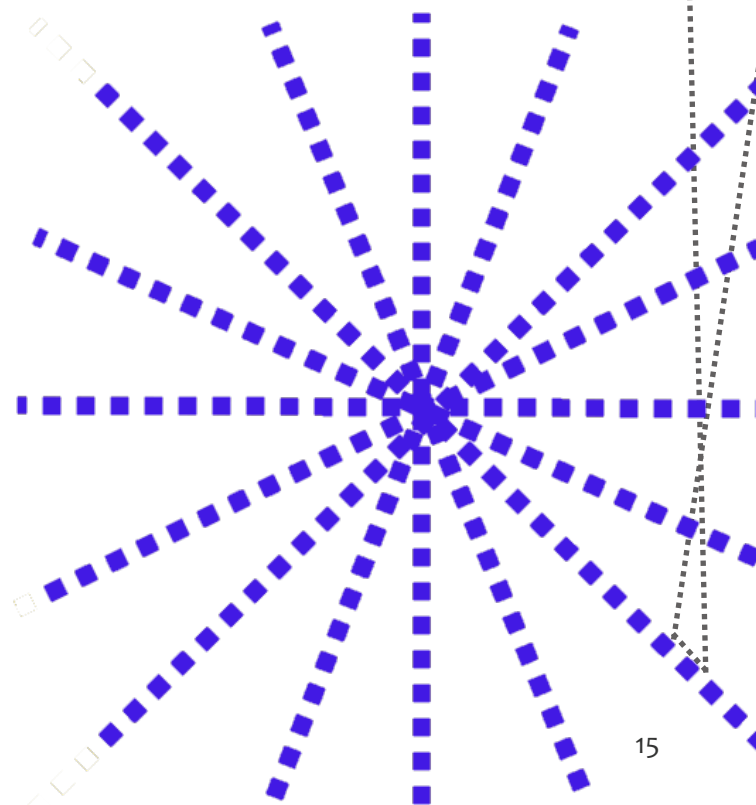
We don't have contacts, coordination, and links with [humanitarian organisations]. We don't have connections with them. (Akol, translation)

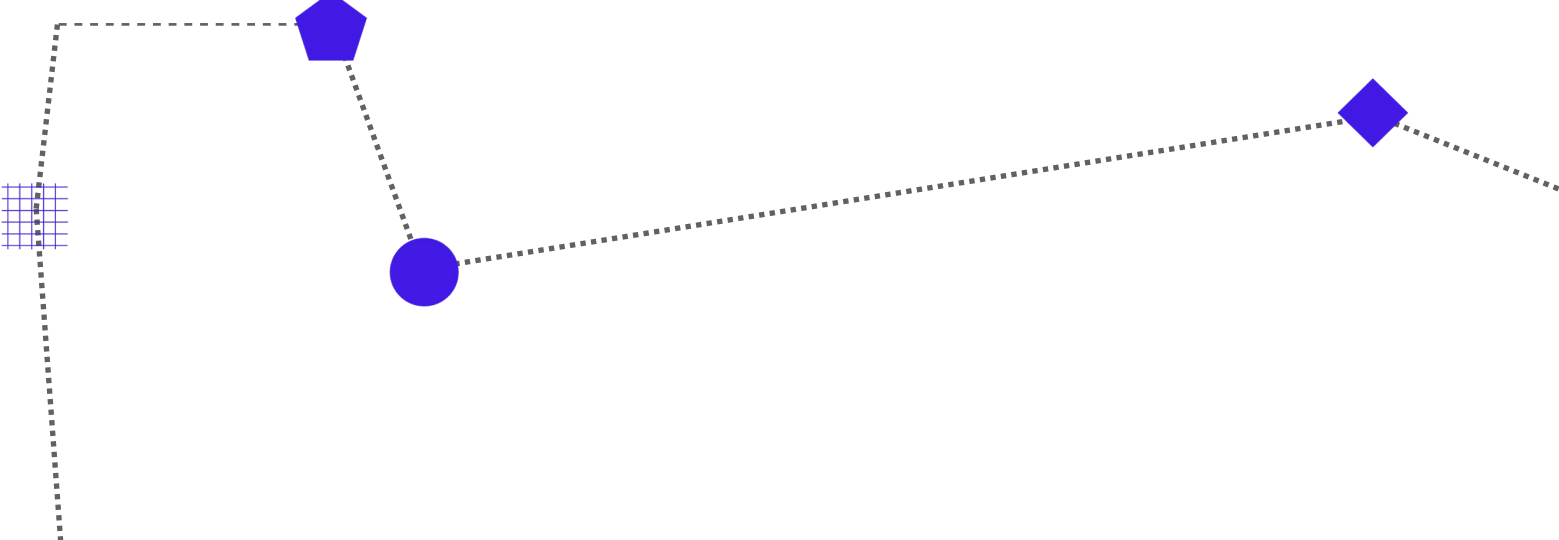
We have IOM in South Sudan, but IOM in South Sudan and LWF and World Food Program, they don't have links with the community here. And [we] need that network so that [we] can coordinate together with them. [...] The South Sudanese community is not very connected with international NGOs, except the local NGOs that are established by [us]. (David)

That is the problem, that we don't have access to ... people of government, the government of of Australia, to tell them that there are people who are in need there. (Michael, translation)

Connections and collaboration within **faith-based networks** was more apparent. A religious leader from the South Sudanese community in Melbourne, for example, had reached out to a local Bishop to try to mobilise support from within the church.

We have had meetings... I do have another meeting [later] this month with the bishop... And then we will discuss about the issue of... I [will] give them the report that I have from Abyei, so we are going to discuss about that. And I hope that maybe there will be a link for us to operate between Abyei and Melbourne. (Michael, translation)





Impact and effectiveness: What made a difference?

Participants in this research spoke frankly about the limited impact they felt they had responding to the significant needs of those affected by conflict, displacement, and flooding in Abyei. While their focus was on trying to influence more powerful and better-resourced actors to respond, there was **frustration at the limited impact the community had in engaging the Australian government to influence its response** to this situation. This was contrasted with what was seen as more impactful engagement by the diaspora with the UK government.

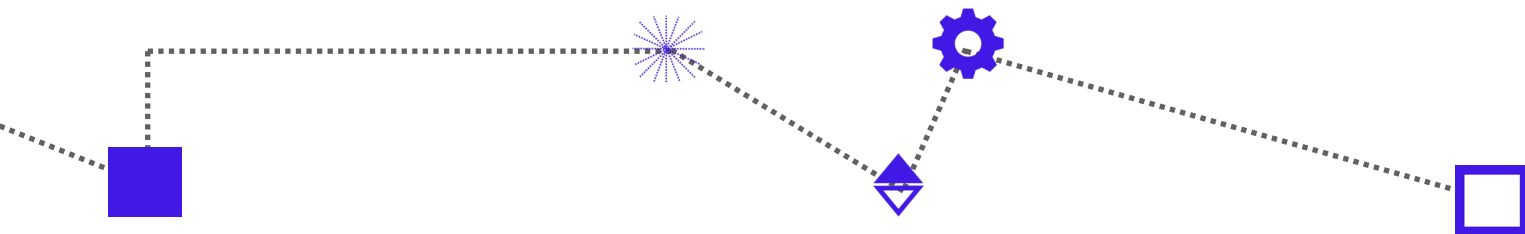
We tried to do a peaceful demonstration... we went to Canberra where the Federal government is, but we got no positive response... We went... like three times to Canberra when the attacks occurred in Abyei, where homes were burned down. We went out onto the street, we hired buses... but nothing come out of that visitation. (Francis, translation)

I went there and I went to the UK Parliament, and I presented the situation of Abyei, and then they're just saying that we are going to, to find out how to support those who are affected by the war. So, they are now arranging... to send some food items, non-food items for [those internally displaced]. (Michael, translation)

There were **mixed views on the impact and effectiveness of sending small amounts of money or material goods to crisis-affected communities**, again within the context of the sheer scale of need. As one participant said: 'It might not help tens of thousands of people there, but it helps at least a few hundred'. This was echoed by other participants, who said:

It's not really very effective. [We] do it. Of course, [we] do a little bit. But given the number of people, the displacement, the massive displacement. That's why [we] are asking others. [We] need more help. (David)

What we collect here cannot help all these people, but it is not like nothing... Because our collection cannot reach to \$10,000. In the region, even to send a million cannot help fully support, let alone \$10,000... Sometimes what we collect can [only] reach to \$3,000. This amount of \$3,000 cannot help this big region, but we tried it with troubled minds, and with no ways to power. (Francis, translation)



Challenges:

What was difficult or didn't work?

That **the underlying conflict in Abyei remains unresolved** was described as a major difficulty for diaspora networks in Australia trying to support those in Abyei. The lack of resolution of the conflict meant that assistance could not be reliably provided, costs of transporting goods was prohibitive for smaller actors like them (i.e., because trucks carrying goods needed armed escorts at this time), and the capacities and resources within the population in Abyei itself had been so diminished by the repeated and long-term nature of the conflict. As one man described, people used to be able to farm and at least feed themselves, but now they are too afraid.

A second key challenge for the Abyei diaspora was **the limited resources that community members in Australia had to draw on**, with many people struggling financially and finding it difficult to contribute to sending money overseas while also meeting the needs of their families in Australia.

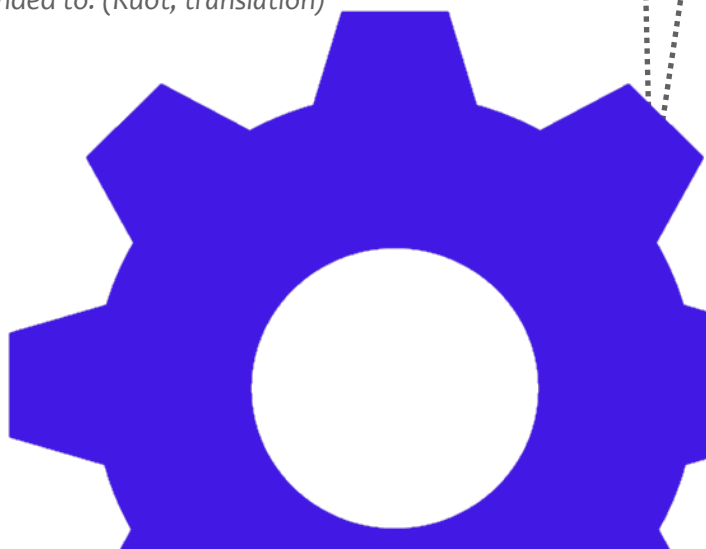
We rarely raise enough funds that can help and support the displaced persons. We don't have any other support, those of us (reference to elderly) who are not working and getting a pension, we divide our pensions, giving half as part of our contribution towards the fundraising and individual family support. (Malek, translation)

Many people are not working, they just have small casual jobs. This small amount they divide; a small amount for their children to live on and sending a small amount of money to support those who have fled and lived under trees, just to eat at least and to drink water. (Deng, translation)

Finally, the **lack of interest and engagement with more influential or institutional humanitarian actors** that may be able to assist, add to or contribute to the diaspora response was discussed in focus groups. A recurring theme was the challenge faced by community advocates in knowing how to access and influence the Australian government. In this, it was acknowledged that Australia 'is really not very much in Africa' and comparisons were made between the Australian Government's humanitarian response to disasters in the Pacific compared to events in the Africa region.

The government of Australia is very hard to be contacted by our small communities. In Australia to sit with someone from the government officials and report your case to him/her is very hard. (Francis, translation)

We have never met a member of parliament that might know our case, or who knew who we were. Normally when people have a representative in parliament, that representative will raise the people's issue and communicate on their behalf, that always makes their case easier. That is what I think was what was missing/lacking in why our case had never been heard or responded to. (Kuot, translation)





Recommendations:

What could help diasporas respond to humanitarian crises in future?

Three key themes emerged from participants about what could help the South Sudanese diaspora in Australia to respond to humanitarian crises in future, and not only in the Abyei area. These were:

1. Stronger collaboration between diaspora communities and the humanitarian sector to deliver aid.

There should be stronger engagement by institutional humanitarian actors (e.g., INGOs, governments) and diaspora communities who can act as a bridge. The humanitarian sector (government and INGOs) could potentially help diasporas with procurement and transportation of goods, which is expensive and red tape makes it hard, and the community can contribute funds and provide linkages and connections to local organisations or initiatives in crisis-affected areas.

2. Stronger linkages between the Australian Government and diaspora communities on foreign affairs

Diaspora communities need a mechanism to access government and potentially inform its engagement on issues in which communities in Australia have significant knowledge, expertise, and investment. In the case of the Abyei crisis, the diaspora community in Australia are asking for the Australian Government to use its diplomatic channels to push for the resolution of the border dispute between Sudan and South Sudan at an international level.

3. Tools and support for smaller communities on effective fundraising.

Diaspora communities need support to increase their fundraising capacity that goes beyond pooling resources from within their own community networks. This is particularly the case for small and emerging communities that may have access to fewer community-based resources and need support to engage wider social networks and utilise more effective fundraising strategies.





School of Social and Political Sciences