Community engagement with armed actors in South Sudan

Reducing violence and protection risks

Gemma Davies and Leigh Mayhew with The Bridge Network

February 2024

HPG Humanitarian Policy Group

ODI

THE BRIDGE

This PDF has been prepared in accordance with good practice on accessibility.

Graphic: Tim Harcourt-Powell

Acknowledgements

About this working paper

About the authors

Gemma Davies is a Senior Research Fellow with the Humanitarian Policy Group at ODI.

Leigh Mayhew is a Research Officer with Global Risks and Resilience at ODI.

The Bridge Network is a non-governmental organisation based in Juba, South Sudan. It was formed by a group of educated young South Sudanese to intervene in the production of local knowledge through research. It operated as a network of researchers until it was registered in 2020 by South Sudan's Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, a government wing responsible for the registration and coordination of non-governmental agencies.

Contents

List of boxes and figures

Boxes

Figures

Acronyms

ARCSS	Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan
CSRF	Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility
GPAA	Greater Pibor Administrative Area
INSO	International NGO Safety Organisation
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
MSS	Measuring Safety and Security
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
R-ARCSS	Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan
RSRTF	Reconciliation, Stabilization, and Resilience Trust Fund
SPLA	Sudan People's Liberation Army
SPLM	Sudan People's Liberation Movement
SPLM-IO	SPLM In Opposition
SSCC	South Sudan Council of Churches
SSNLM	South Sudan National Liberation Army
UN	United Nations
UNDSS	UN Department of Safety and Security
UNMISS	UN Mission in South Sudan
WFP	World Food Programme

Executive summary

South Sudan has a complex multilayered history of violence and conflict, which continues to have a devastating impact on civilians. Communities can and do influence the behaviour of armed actors by engaging in dialogue to reduce violence. They are highly strategic in their choice of who represents them, maximising opportunities to leverage entry points and exert influence. Close ties – including through familial, kinship, social and trade links – can provide critical entry points to initiate dialogue. As a result, communities often have more entry points, or better ones, or both, and therefore more influence over armed actors embedded in or with links to communities. While community representatives are often drawn from positions of authority, they are chosen based on positions of moral respect such as faith, spiritual and maternal authorities, who can remain calm, persuasive and non-partisan.

This research is based on interviews and focus group discussions with over 200 people. It seeks to understand how communities develop and shape their engagement with armed actors in order to strengthen their protection, and the factors, actions and actors that affect the terms of this engagement. It goes on to assess the opportunities, challenges and risks for national and international peace, protection and humanitarian actors, to adapt their approaches based on a strengthened understanding of community engagement with armed actors, as well as exploring opportunities for greater complementarity between humanitarian (protection) and peacebuilding action.

Key findings

Humanitarian actors are too often unaware of localised conflict dynamics – including dynamics between communities and armed actors. Humanitarian actors are often blind to the interaction of their own presence and operations with conflict dynamics. While recent years have seen greater awareness of, and investments in, the need for conflict analysis and conflict-sensitive approaches, there are risks that these remain unevenly applied, and prioritised only following high levels of conflict and violence, rather than to reduce and prevent escalations of violence. Humanitarian actors can learn from peacebuilding actors, who commonly take a nuanced approach to conflict and conflict-sensitivity analysis. This must inform adaptations and action in programming approaches and decision-making, particularly given the real risk that humanitarian assistance can be co-opted and do harm.

Time and again, 'mainstream' humanitarian protection actors are reluctant to work in greater complementarity with peacebuilding organisations, who they perceive as ill-equipped to promote protection, as well as due to perceived tensions with humanitarian principles. However, this demonstrates an apparent lack of understanding that humanitarian and peacebuilding action are often working towards similar objectives, particularly when working with communities. Humanitarian interventions to reduce violence and facilitate dialogue are too often ad hoc and ill-equipped to address structural drivers of violence and conflict. They also fail to implement adaptive approaches towards

reducing violence. Throughout humanitarian responses globally, the major focus of protection action has been on the consequences of violence and other risks civilians face in conflict – so-called remedial and environment-building activities – rather than on seeking to prevent or reduce threats of violence.

Many humanitarian organisations also hold tightly to humanitarian principles, and perceive engaging with armed actors as a high-risk strategy which may undermine neutrality. Yet this suggests a fundamental misunderstanding of humanitarian principles. The application of humanitarian principles needs to be reconsidered. Absolutist approaches to principles can be a significant barrier to strengthening approaches to reduce or prevent violence, and can lead to aid delivery that is blind to the conflict dynamics it operates within. This requires reflection among humanitarian organisations – and the donors that support them – on the role they play, wittingly or not, in the political economy of South Sudan's complex conflicts. It requires acknowledgement that maintaining the status quo undermines contributions towards reducing violence towards a lasting, positive peace. To enable such a peace requires safe spaces for honest conversations between humanitarian and peace actors, donor states and diplomatic actors.

When humanitarian and peace actors undertake joint analysis and complementary approaches, the quality and level of analysis can be rich, allowing for responsive approaches across organisations to leverage relationships, dialogue and assistance, to reduce or prevent escalations of violence. A number of humanitarian, protection and peace organisations now support using early-warning systems to identify and warn about threats of violence. However, they are predominantly piecemeal, while international organisations often lack the capacities and networks to effectively respond, especially when it comes to facilitating dialogue between communities and armed actors for example, due to a lack of personnel with mediation or negotiation skills.

Engaging communities and supporting dialogue is a critical entry point to strengthening complementary approaches between humanitarian, protection and peace action. Solutions should be community-owned and -led. Humanitarian, protection and peace actors supporting community engagement should understand existing community dynamics, approaches and mechanisms, and build from there. This requires respect for norms, values and traditions, and careful support for them. Importantly, it means solutions and the mechanisms to achieve them cannot be externally designed or imposed, recognising the harm this can cause. Inclusivity is crucial, but cannot be tokenistic. Care must be taken to bring in representatives with genuine authority and influence. A representative approach is not necessarily inclusive.

External actors can play a connecting role, supporting communities to cut through power dynamics between different stakeholders and help communities reach outside the power structures they would usually interact with. Facilitating dialogue requires sustained presence. Building trust is critical, by demonstrating a non-partisan position and credibility. Dialogue is iterative, and interventions to support it should reflect this. This requires flexibility, an ability to adapt, a readiness to accept and deal with setbacks, and even an openness to failure. It requires patience, perseverance and a willingness to take

risks. There are significant structural and systemic barriers to achieving this: competitive, project-based approaches; rigid, pre-defined programme design and monitoring; and unrealistic expectations and short timeframes.

Facilitating dialogue can help change the calculations made by armed actors and those that support the use of violence, regarding the gains, losses and risks of their actions. Relatedly, long-term socioeconomic drivers of violence must be addressed, as the provision of livelihood alternatives, for example, can change calculations by providing an alternative to the economic benefits of the use of violence, and ultimately reduce or interrupt violence. This is where complementary, layered approaches between humanitarian, peace and development actors are critical – but these must all work towards the same objective of reducing violence, built from a shared analysis of the uses of violence, with sustained development action to address the drivers of violence. Attention should also be given to the status and social mobility that joining armed groups can offer, and how to leverage the influence of armed actors as leaders towards promoting restraint.

Lessons in preventing and reducing violence

So what does all this mean for those supporting communities when it comes to strengthening protection, and preventing or reducing violence? Firstly, there needs to be a mindset shift. International actors must accept that peacebuilding action can and should be deployed in areas of high-intensity violence. They should consider providing resources to facilitate dialogue and understand that supporting livelihoods can be a frontline strategy to reduce levels of violence and the economic purpose it serves. It requires a change in risk appetite and the early intervention of development actors and those that fund them. And it means redefining the understanding and implementation of humanitarian principles to ensure humanitarian actors are using their full toolbox to reduce violence. This could even mean considering leveraging assistance to incentivise the reduction of violence when it is linked to dialogue.

When considering supporting dialogue, thought must be given to who is best placed to assume a lead role, and at which times. International organisations should be humble, and not assume there is a lead role for them. This requires a willingness to listen and to adapt according to community and armed actors' suggestions. This may require a greater leadership role for local peacebuilders, with international humanitarian and peace actors supporting them from behind.

Lastly, there needs to be reconsideration of what constitutes success. A sole focus on top-down national-level peace processes towards stability cannot be the only approach. This can and has triggered further violence, promoting negative peace as opposed to conflict transformation, and undermined progress towards lasting peace. But focusing solely on communities is not enough. By starting from communities, national and international actors can cautiously connect layers, identify and support champions for peace, and mitigate the influence of spoilers – that is those who perpetuate or

have an interest in perpetuating violence. This means acknowledging that western notions of success may not be applicable or appropriate. As South Sudan approaches its first elections, the international community would do well to do acknowledge this, and act upon it.

Recommendations

Humanitarian, protection and peacebuilding actors

- **Prioritise and resource quality conflict-sensitivity analysis.**
  - Proactively focus on how external interventions contribute towards reducing violence, rather than solely on mitigating measures towards 'do no harm'.
  - Prioritise the personnel to support this.
  - Ensure analysis routinely informs programming and decision-making.
  - Promote platforms for shared and common analysis. Consortia of humanitarian, protection and peacebuilding actors can be one approach to facilitate this.

- **Ensure violence-reduction interventions are based on community agency, ownership and solutions.**
  - Ensure that these in turn are based on micro-local community stakeholder analysis.
  - Respect community norms, customs and values, which can support promoting restraint.

- **Build meaningful networks, linkages and communication channels in communities with those that have an interest in reducing violence, as well as those with an interest in perpetuating harm**, for example faith leaders, spiritual leaders, perpetrators, spoilers, national and local government.
  - To enable this requires higher risk tolerance, recognising that though these are more unpredictable actions and actors, their involvement is necessary for concrete outcomes to reduce violence, and support the agency of communities.

- **Strengthen and prioritise space for strategic platforms focused on reducing violence built on trusted, equal partnerships, using area-based approaches**.
  - To be effective, these will likely need to be developed around informal relationships and trust in advance of more formal coordination platforms.[1]
  - Ensure coordination platforms are focused around common objectives, shared analysis, cross learning, and joint action towards realising objectives. Seek ways to utilise technology to support this.
  - Work towards and incentivise true partnership approaches towards common outcomes.

---

1   For more information see CSRF (2022): 'Having informal relationships, networks and trust between humanitarians and peacebuilders provides a foundation for more formal coordination and collaboration'.

- **Understand that working towards violence reduction objectives requires a realistic and shared theory of change, with layered approaches between humanitarian (protection) and peacebuilding action.**
  - Ensure specific, focused, targeted approaches that clearly demonstrate how activities contribute to reducing violence, and how such approaches are mutually reinforcing.
  - Design interventions that are adaptive, iterative and flexible – for example, by drawing on adaptive management approaches.

- **Use the full toolbox to reduce violence and promote peace.**
  - This includes considerations towards incentivising restraint and providing alternatives to the use of violence. Inevitably this will be beyond the remit of one actor alone.

- **Reconsider how humanitarian principles are understood, used and implemented.**
  - Ensure that the principle of humanity remains the goal, and impartiality the objective.
  - Understand that neutrality and independence are tools, and that compromises of principles may be necessary to achieve the goal of humanity.

- **Scale up conflict-sensitive livelihoods programming, including in areas of high-intensity violence, as part of violence prevention/reduction programming.**

- **Continue to provide evidence and learning to donors and diplomatic actors on the costs of not proactively reducing violence, setting out why it is in their interest to support such initiatives.**
  - Use this evidence in order to influence the political will to meaningfully change ways of working.

UNMISS

- **Focus more on bottom-up approaches to supporting communities when seeking to reduce violence.**
  - Listen to communities.
  - Ensure community-level dialogue and relationship-building is sustained over the long term.
  - Recognise the role of civil society, national and international humanitarian, protection and peacebuilding organisations and complement them.

- **Recognise that despite the mandate of the mission, enhancing the protection of civilians, and building an environment for positive peace, requires ownership of communities, and local and national government.**
  - This may require accepting and assuming more of a supporting and connecting role, while supporting national and local actors, including communities and civil society, to assume a leading role.

Donors and diplomatic actors

- **Create safe spaces for honest conversations with partners and key stakeholders on the benefits of proactively seeking to reduce violence.**
  - Do the same to allow discussion of the comparative advantage of different sets of actors in working towards this, and the risks of not prioritising conflict-sensitive approaches to reduce violence.

- **Prioritise funding of conflict-sensitive analytical capacity.**
  - Enable and insist that it informs programme adaptations.
  - Enable, incentivise and monitor programme pivots based on conflict-sensitivity analysis.

- **Incentivise complementary, layered approaches between humanitarian (protection) and peacebuilding action in realising common objectives.**
  - Incentivise and support more risk-tolerant approaches.

- **Promote and incentivise spaces for strategic dialogue based on equal partnerships and trust.**
  - Disincentivise organisations and individuals prioritising individual agency mandates and 'successes'.

- **Work in partnership with humanitarian and peace actors to design violence-reduction interventions and monitoring mechanisms that are long-term, flexible and adaptable.**
  - Insist on and support a realistic theory of change.
  - Instill good practice (the Peacebuilding Opportunities Fund is a good mechanism in this regard).

- **Reconsider the parameters of success.**
  - Acknowledge that facilitating dialogue, negotiations and mediation is as much about the process as the outcome.
  - Accept and support actions that may fall short of, or fail to achieve, intended results in the short term, but can strengthen effective solutions (and outcomes) in the long term.

1   Introduction

South Sudan has a long and multilayered history of violence and conflict. The impact on civilians has been devastating, with widespread and horrific killings and violence, state-sponsored extrajudicial killings, systematic sexual violence against women and girls, and the use of children as combatants by state and non-state armed groups (UNOHCHR, 2023). Conflict drives massive levels of humanitarian need, livelihood loss and displacement. Aid diversion has long been a strategy of state and non-state armed actors on such a scale that some assess that humanitarian assistance has in some ways become a war economy in and of itself (see Boswell et al., 2019; Craze, 2023a).

Today, violence and conflict are compounded by the wide availability of small arms, the proliferation and fragmentation of armed actors, shifting alliances, and influences within and between local, subnational and national conflict dynamics – including the instrumentalisation of local and subnational violence by national political elites. In the absence of a properly functioning state, communities have formed armed groups for their own protection – but these actors have themselves often become a key source of threat.

Against this background of entrenched conflict and violence, a wide array of humanitarian, protection, peacekeeping and peacebuilding actors have been present in South Sudan for decades. These include the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) and other United Nations (UN) political and humanitarian actors, using a range of approaches to reduce threats of violence and promote peace.

This study seeks to understand how communities develop and shape their engagement with armed actors in order to strengthen their protection, and the factors, actions and actors that affect the terms of this engagement. It goes on to assess the opportunities, challenges and risks for national and international peace, protection and humanitarian actors, to adapt their approaches based on a strengthened understanding of community engagement with armed actors, as well as exploring opportunities for greater complementarity between humanitarian, peace and protection action.

1.1   Definitions

Communities are 'diverse, heterogeneous, and continuously shifting' – as are identities, which change over time, influenced by internal and external factors (Deng, 2021).

When referring to communities in this research, we refer to communities' own perceptions of community. In South Sudan, interviewees largely defined communities as groups that share similar customs, values, culture and tradition – often linked to ethnic and sub-ethnic groups. While most respondents referenced communities as linked to specific geographic areas, they also acknowledge that some people can move to a different area, or even outside the country, and belong to the same community.

There is not always a clear distinction between communities and armed actors. Some may 'double hat', taking on roles as both civilian and armed actor. Civilians often have existing bonds to armed actors based on family, kinship, identity and ideology, and affiliation to an armed actor can be viewed as a means of protection.

This research takes a broad perspective of armed actors, referring to any individual, group or institution that is armed and a threat to the safety of communities. This can include state and non-state armed actors who are parties to conflict, community-based armed actors, and politically and/or criminally motivated armed actors (including violent organised criminal groups).

The research has focused on the armed actors that communities engaged with when seeking to influence their behaviour to reduce threats of violence. Often these were armed actors that communities had entry points to engage with, often based on kinship, familial or cultural ties. Inevitably this means that the paper focuses predominantly on community-embedded armed actors and/or non-state armed actors. In some areas, communities referenced government armed actors. But rarely did they feel that they had entry points to engage with and/or influence the conduct of perceived 'foreign' armed actors – whether from different nationalities, religions or ethnic groups – such as those from Sudan or international armed actors such as UNMISS (see also Barbelet et al., 2023).

1.2   Methodology and research limitations

This research took place throughout 2023. Interviews and focus group discussions were carried out in three subnational locations in Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA), Jonglei and Western Equatoria with over 160 people, overlayed with over 50 interviews with relevant experts and stakeholders in Juba and at an international level. Stakeholders consulted include a broad spectrum of communities and community leadership (youth, women, traditional, spiritual leaders), armed actors, faith leaders, government and military representatives, as well as representatives of civil society groups, national and international humanitarian, protection and peace organisations, UNMISS, donors and embassies.

The research took an iterative, snowballing approach. By working in partnership with South Sudanese experts at the Bridge Network, hosted by Nonviolent Peaceforce while collaborating with the World Food Programme, the research team worked with partners to map relevant stakeholders at national, subnational and local levels.

This research does not represent a full analysis of conflict and community dynamics across South Sudan, or the activities of external actors to reduce violence. Rather, it represents a snapshot of views, experiences, approaches and learning from the communities and external actors supporting them that we interacted with throughout the course of the research. As such, the experiences and lessons documented do not assume to be representative across South Sudan, but rather provide a snapshot of learning to inform policy and practice.

2   Conflict dynamics and the uses of violence

2.1   War economy and the politics of peace

South Sudan became an independent country in 2011 after decades of conflict with the Sudanese government in Khartoum. Two years later, in 2013, civil war broke out as the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) split into two rival armed factions: the SPLM/Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) under President Salva Kiir, and the SPLM In Opposition (SPLM-IO) under Vice President Riek Machar. Conflict was briefly interrupted by an Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS), signed in 2015, before resuming again in 2016. The Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) was signed in 2018, but South Sudan is still affected by escalations of violence and conflict. Both the 2015 and 2018 agreements contributed in some areas to a local-level resurgence of violence or higher levels of violence than previously experienced (WFP, 2021; Craze, 2022). The two agreements are viewed as repeating the same failure to address local drivers of violence, elite enrichment and unaccountable governance, and incentivising continued violence (Craze, 2020; 2022). While there are indications that overall levels of violence have reduced (Dawkins et al., 2023), the power-sharing arrangement set out in the R-ARCSS opened opportunities for the instrumentalisation of violence at some sub-national levels to undermine the power of rivals. Ultimately, this fails to build the grounds for longer-term positive peace.

Loyalty to the government is often bought, rather than earned through legitimacy. Political rivals have used violence, or the threat of violence, as a way of earning rents through government patronage networks. The ability to access this revenue through political positions appointed by the government has become increasingly prized (Craze, 2023a). Those loyal to the government act with impunity, whether they raid communities or attack humanitarian conveys.

Given the financial value of the volumes of humanitarian assistance delivered in South Sudan, along with the lack of basic services delivered by the government, aid provides both a lucrative resource and a political tool utilised by competing elites. The taxation and diversion of aid allows elites both to profit from assistance, and to use it to undermine rivals (Craze, 2023b). South Sudan has a 'political marketplace' where multiple armed actors are willing to sell their services to political actors (Boswell et al., 2019). The international community has become part of these dynamics, including by focusing on stabilisation and 'ultimate peace' above all else (Pinaud, 2021). There is a lack of social contract between the state and citizens in South Sudan. For the majority of the population, basic services are delivered by aid actors, not the state. Enforcement of rule of law is selective, and impunity is pervasive.

Security Sector Reform and Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration processes have failed to deliver a single unified armed force willing to provide or capable of providing security to the population as envisaged by the R-ARCSS. Indeed, it is an open question whether all signatories are committed to

this. Some within government, including President Kiir, reportedly view a unified national army with suspicion, and instead back forces such as community-embedded armed groups with personal loyalties to individual politicians, rather than to the state (Craze, 2023b). Security Sector Reform has encouraged a system whereby factions inflate numbers in order to secure more resources and as a way of recruiting more members in case of further violence (McCrone, 2020). The disarmament process has been uneven; some communities have been disarmed, whilst others have not.

In the absence of reliable state-led security provision, many communities rely on community-embedded armed groups for protection. Community-embedded armed groups date back to the colonial period. Whilst initially installed to provide security, in some communities such groups also form a core part of a community's governance structure, and provide other services besides security (Harriman et al., 2020). There is no neat separation between community-embedded armed groups and the communities they emerge from. In some areas, these groups form part of a 'hybrid' security arrangement, supported or directed by the state (ibid.). In the post-2013 context, the aims of many community-embedded armed groups have evolved, and some, such as the Arrow Boys in Western Equatoria and the White Armies in Jonglei, have become embroiled in national political rivalries (Harriman et al., 2020; McCrone, 2020).

2.2 The uses of violence

Within South Sudan, armed actors use violence to serve multiple functions: political, economic and social. The motivations behind the use of violence are not driven solely by national elite manipulation: local armed actors also have their own agendas, which may or may not align with those of elites (WFP, 2021). At times, they are in direct competition. Conflict dynamics shift rapidly as armed groups splinter and allegiances change.

There has also been an evolution in the nature of violence. The proliferation of small arms has altered the way traditional practices such as cattle raiding and age-set competition[2] are conducted, often with great human cost (Wild et al., 2018; Pendle, 2021). These changes have occurred in tandem with an undermining of traditional sources of authority and governance and the practices used to restrain violence. Women and children have been increasingly targeted, where they were traditionally protected under South Sudan customary law (Diing et al., 2023). These factors have contributed to increasing levels of intra- and intercommunal violence in some areas.

This evolution in the use and nature of violence is taking place within a broader context of socioeconomic change. South Sudan has moved towards a market-based economy, whereby wage labour has increasingly replaced older forms of exchange of livestock and land (Thomas, 2019). Conflict has accelerated this change, through the displacement of populations away from household farming activities and the increasing concentration of land and cattle in the hands of elites (Craze, 2023b). At

---

2 Age-set groups are predominantly male generational groups within certain communities. Age-set groups take on the role of governance and security for their community for a set period, after which the younger age set is expected to challenge their power (Harriman et al., 2020; Murle Heritage, n.d.). For more information see sub-section 2.3.1.

the same time, a lack of economic opportunities has resulted in a system in crisis, with communities struggling to survive. Acts of violence, such as the evolved nature of raiding, are in part a response to the economic challenges communities face – they offer 'the only means of societal advance' (Interview 24, 2023). While acts of violence may be a means of social mobility and survival, they can also encompass honour, shame, trauma and revenge.

2.3   Subnational conflict dynamics

2.3.1   Jonglei and the Greater Pibor Administrative Area

The main conflicts in Jonglei and the GPAA (see Figure 1) are between sub-ethnic groups from the Dinka, Nuer and Murle ethnic groups. Although conflict existed between these communities prior to SPLA-led conflict with Sudan, this period has influenced current violence, specifically the Dinka Bor, Lou Nuer, Gawaar Nuer and Murle. Not all of South Sudan's communities supported the SPLA, and these divisions were exploited by the SPLA and Sudan. This resulted in animosities which have lasted up until today (Diing et al., 2023). The increased power of the Dinka Bor was resented by the Nuer and Murle, and there is a perception among the Dinka and Nuer communities that the Murle did not contribute to South Sudan's war of liberation (ICG, 2014; Diing et al., 2023). The outbreak of civil war resulted in split loyalties between the government and SPLM-IO. At times, violence in Jonglei reflects rivalries between political elites in Juba (Diing et al., 2023). There has been a further splintering of armed actors and rivalries, with the emergence of SPLM-IO Kitgwang.

Violence is underpinned by powerful negative stereotypes that depict the Murle as hostile, inherently violent, uncontrollable and undereducated. Alongside this, there are strong perceptions among Murle people that state forces have instrumentalised violence and stoked internal divisions between Murle communities (Murle Heritage, n.d.). Years of communal conflict marginalisation and longstanding political grievances led to the forming of the Murle-led South Sudan Defence Movement/Cobra Faction, which led two rebellions in 2010 and 2012 under the leadership of David Yau Yau. Peace talks at the end of the 2012 rebellion resulted in the creation of the GPAA in 2014 (CSRF, n.d.; Murle Heritage, n.d.).

Community-embedded armed groups are highly influential among their respective communities in both Jonglei and the GPAA. In Jonglei the White Armies, a loose and incohesive collective of Nuer youth, have become a key actor, and for the Murle, age-set groups have traditionally played a protective role. Age-set groups have become an increasing threat to other communities, with some small groups carrying out violence based on personal self-interest.

Figure 1   Map of South Sudan and the focus areas of this case study
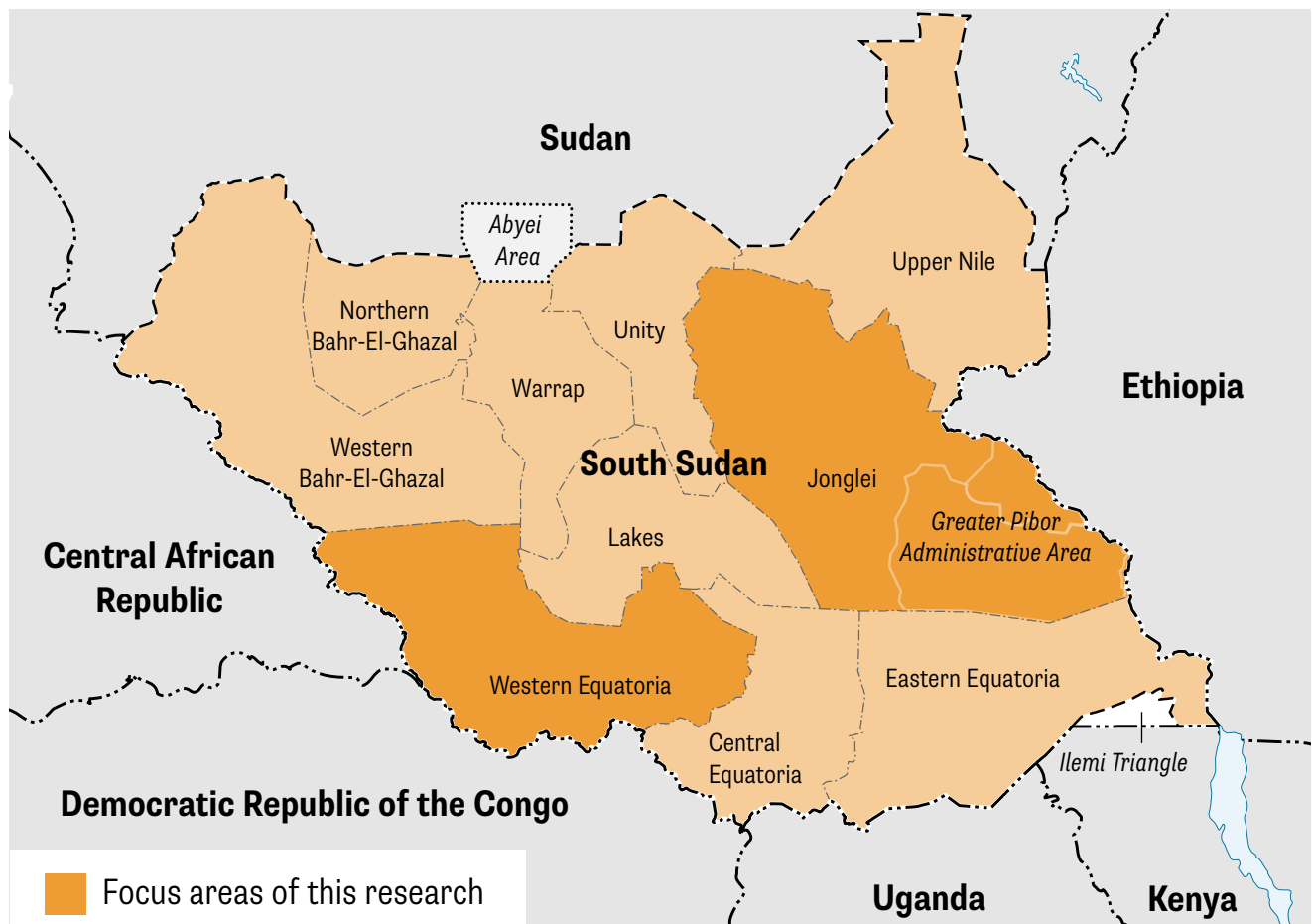
Source: UN.org

2.3.2   Western Equatoria

The outbreak of violence in Tambura County in the summer of 2021 and ongoing tensions in Western Equatoria (see Figure 1) are linked to inter-elite rivalries over power sharing arrangements and political ambitions across state and national levels (van der Spek et al., 2021; Watson, 2021; Craze, 2023c). To further political aims, competing elites have weaponised Azande and Balanda ethnic identities. This division acts as a smokescreen to rivalries within the Azande community, particularly those who wish to retain power from the Avongara elite clan within the Azande (Watson, 2021; Craze, 2023c). Whilst the violence between the Azande and Balanda cannot be viewed as historical, the use of ethnic identity for political gain has resulted in tensions between the two communities at the local level (van der Spek, 2021; Craze, 2023c).

There have also been violent clashes over competing claims over access to land and water between farming communities and pastoralists. Whilst the majority of communities in Western Equatoria practise farming, the state also contains a main migratory route for pastoral communities such as the Ambororo from Sudan and Dinka pastoralists from Bahr El-Ghazal (CRSF, n.d.), who have increasingly

settled in the state. Western Equatoria is also home to the Arrow Boys, formed in 2005 to defend against the Ugandan Lord's Resistance Army. Subsequently the group evolved, focusing its attention on Dinka cattle groups and government forces, and it became increasingly involved in conflict dynamics at the national level (McCrone, 2020). In 2015 the group split, with one splinter forming the South Sudan National Liberation Army (SSNLM) whilst another aligned itself with the SPLM-IO (Jok et al., 2017; McCrone, 2020). Although peace between the SSNLM and government was achieved, tensions with the SPLM-IO-aligned group continue.

3   Community engagement with armed actors: who, when and how

Communities in South Sudan engage armed actors in a bid to reduce threats of violence, coercion and deprivation. The objectives of engagement are straightforward: to feel safe, to move freely, to access livelihoods, and to live a relatively peaceful everyday life. Specifically, communities seek protection from immediate risks such as violence and killings, abductions, rape, the looting and destruction of property, disruption to livelihood activities and denial of humanitarian assistance. Dialogue can also seek to encourage armed actors to engage in peace talks.

Engagement between communities and armed actors carries risks. Suspicion on all sides is high. The presence of multiple armed actors in a given location means that communities can be accused of spying for opposing sides and risk being targeted due to perceived associations with opposition groups. Communities must often manage relationships with multiple armed actors in order to avoid being seen to support one over another. In Jonglei, for example, communities try to avoid accusations of spying by ensuring that they are seen to be speaking to all armed actors operating in the area. Spoilers can undermine the potential for successful dialogue, and within communities there can be internal divisions and disagreements over approaches to dialogue, making a cohesive community approach difficult.

3.1   Who engages?

In South Sudan, customary community governance structures are often used to engage armed actors. Chiefs, elders, the church, interfaith groups and government representatives can all act to represent communities. Leaders of youth and women's groups also play a role, as do community-embedded armed groups. In some locations, traditional governance mechanisms remain strong. In others, displacement, evolving social and political dynamics, violence and the imposition of formal government structures have undermined traditional leadership and customary governance and diminished their influence over the behaviour of armed actors.

Within the Lou Nuer community in Jonglei, community meetings are held to gain wider community views and set out the priorities, positions and stakes during negotiations. Participants include chiefs and elders, representatives of the White Armies in that area, women leaders, the church and union members. Meetings are reportedly public and any member of the community can attend and air their views. Similarly in Western Equatoria, community meetings draw on religious leaders and community elders, as well as influential members of the community such as youth and women leaders. Church congregations are also utilised to gain the views of the wider community.

Community representatives are chosen for specific qualities, including the ability to remain calm and neutral, their powers of persuasion and their experience. Being trusted and non-partisan are seen as fundamental to any dialogue. Communities need reassurance that those representing them are acting

in their interests. It is also critical in building confidence among the armed actors that communities engage with. Certain institutions and representatives, such as the church in some areas of South Sudan, are naturally respected and perceived as legitimate. However, trust must also be built during dialogue. Maintaining an openness to communities' position is critical, as is avoiding situations where the armed actor could accuse community representatives of taking sides. This can lead to armed actors having a say in who they are willing to engage with, and who participates, based on who they trust to remain neutral while carrying out dialogue.

3.1.1   The role of faith leaders

South Sudan is a deeply spiritual society. Customary belief systems and religions and their institutions are often respected and drawn upon to restrain the use of violence and promote peace. The church has historically been involved in peace dialogue and agreements through South Sudan's conflicts, including the Wunlit Peace Conference and the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. The South Sudan Council of Churches (SSCC) was formed in 2013 with the intention to promote peace.

Spiritual and faith-based individuals and institutions inspire respect and therefore trust, giving leaders an entry point to engage with armed actors. Faith institutions are often referred to in parental terms, as a way of showing that they have a community's best interests at heart, cutting through issues of politics, ethnicity and identity by situating themselves as facilitating dialogue on the basis that all people are children of god(s). Faith leaders can often be synonymous with neutrality, though they are required to demonstrate this. Some faith-based mediators emphasise their role as neutral by not involving themselves in community preparations prior to commencing dialogue, and may seek to present themselves as external to communities.

Interviewees often referred to church leaders being approached by either the community or the government to mediate and/or negotiate. In Western Equatoria, the government approached the church to break the deadlock in dialogue with the SSNLM. Its influence and leverage was demonstrated through its successful negotiation of an amnesty for members of the SSNLM. In the GPAA, existing trust in faith leaders and their role during negotiations between the Cobra faction and the government provided initial acceptance of dialogue, paving the way for peace talks.

Managing different faith and spiritual leaders during dialogue can present challenges, especially when there is a clash in belief systems or practices. For example, in some traditions the sacrificing of animals is a way of displaying agreement with an outcome of a process, but this can conflict with Christian beliefs. Church leaders interviewed stated that it was important to step back and respect traditional practices. During the Pieri peace dialogue, an influential Nuer prophet who played a prominent role in the dialogue threatened to withdraw when some meetings were opened with prayers (see also Box 1).

Box 1   Spirituality, symbolism and conflict

Customary spiritual leaders and belief systems can often play a prominent role in promoting or restraining violence. Some spiritual leaders, such as the Nuer prophet Dak Kueth, wield significant influence – often linked to their high level of embeddedness and links to certain communities and armed actors.

Dak Kueth and other leaders have at times encouraged the mobilisation of youth to carry out attacks and to raid cattle for their own gain. But they have also played an important role in calling off planned attacks. The influence of some prophets has also been politicised, diminishing their legitimacy in the eyes of some communities.

Symbolism and rituals hold an important role in both indicating risks of violence and as early-warning signals. Such practices may appear difficult to understand, but the importance of their use needs to be respected. Symbols such as the cutting of grass, and drawing circles with ash from a fire have been used by some communities as a form protection and/or early warning.

Dreams, too, can be perceived as indicators of an imminent attack. Communities take such warnings seriously and will take proactive measures, such as sacrificing a bull, to mitigate the risk of violence.

Inter-church and interfaith committees can leverage sources of influence of different faiths or denominations. The presence of shared beliefs between faith leaders and armed actors is an entry point for building trust and initiating dialogue. For example, church leaders in Yambio initiated talks with the SSNLM through prayers. They visited members of the SSNLM on a Sunday, using its symbolism as a religious day to create a 'friendly environment'.

Faith institutions can utilise their networks within communities to influence the way dialogue takes place. Church sermons provide an active audience for a message of peace. Church congregations can be used to gauge a community's openness to dialogue and their position during ongoing dialogue. Faith institutions can also leverage networks between local, national and international levels. Indeed, this is central to the vision of the South Sudan Council of Churches' 2015 Action Plan for Peace. As one faith actor stated: 'if you only rely on local approaches it won't fix the problem. You need external support […] The problem of diaspora needs external support.' Leveraging the 'global church' has allowed the various networks to identify international spoilers, where they are based, and the churches that could seek to influence them. For example, church networks have been leveraged to block the negative influence of spoilers within the diaspora in the region, and in other countries.

In the absence of adequate accountability and justice, faith institutions also play a role addressing trauma and supporting reconciliation. Faith institutions identify the importance of helping both victims and perpetrators of violence to deal with past trauma (see Box 2).

Box 2   Addressing trauma

Many people in South Sudan have lived lives deeply affected by the impact and trauma of violence. While some humanitarian, protection and peacebuilding actors have integrated mental health and psychosocial support services into their programmes, this is often on an individual, ad hoc basis. There is a need to consider collective trauma within different communities in South Sudan and integrate approaches to collectively deal with trauma.

Faith actors can be powerful agents of healing. A core pillar of the South Sudan Council of Churches is to promote reconciliation and address trauma, both from a collective and individual perspective. Services offered by the SSCC include the provision of psychosocial support and a helpline where individuals can discuss past events with members of the SSCC. While this, too, may be ad hoc, it could be an entry point for external actors to help develop more consistent and substantive approaches to addressing trauma.

The neutrality and influence of faith leaders should not be assumed and is not uniform across South Sudan. Some parts of, or leaders within, the church have not been above political influence. In Jonglei, the outbreak of conflict in 2013 resulted in leaders of denominations taking sides along conflict party lines. As a result, the church and its leaders are no longer seen as neutral, and more often than not are no longer perceived as trusted intermediaries.

3.1.2   The role of women

Women have high stakes in conflict, and therefore a strong interest in promoting peace. As one woman said, 'Women are the losers in any conflict taking place in the world'. Customary tradition in South Sudan considers women as non-participants in conflict, and as a result they should not be targeted. Perceptions that women are neutral and non-threatening can mean that women are uniquely positioned to engage given they are at less risk in some ways than men and boys. This gives space to women to prepare communities and armed actors for dialogue. They often play a pre-facilitation role, passing messages between groups. This is particularly useful when tensions are high, or insecurity has worsened – as women can move between areas more easily than men – or the risks for men to directly communicate are higher. At times, women will mobilise when there is a deadlock between communities and armed actors. Intermarriage, too, provides entry points for dialogue.

Often women have children who have joined armed groups. For example, in Jonglei, SPLM-IO and SPLM-IO Kitgwang combatants were often from the surrounding communities. One interviewee described how members of these armed groups would listen to women more than government representatives, who they did not see as part of the community.

This study also found numerous examples of women seeking to leverage their symbolic role as mothers, treating people involved in hostilities as their children, regardless of family ties. In Maban, women used their position as part of Maban's Inter-Church Committee to negotiate with SPLM-IO at a time of ongoing attacks between SPLM-IO, government and semi-affiliated Maban Defence Forces. Leveraging the perceived neutrality of the church as an entry point, women's union representatives presented themselves as mothers of fighting youths, moving combatants to tears when they described the harms they were causing to civilians. They managed to de-escalate tensions, securing an agreement from the SPLM-IO to move their military base away from civilians, while combatants called off an attack planned for a week later.

Women can also be perceived to have the qualities required for negotiation as calm, self-controlled intermediaries. As one respondent said, 'People don't listen to fathers when they challenge their behaviour, but people listen more to their mothers. Unlike fathers, mothers don't challenge all the time' (Save the Children International, 2023). Women sometimes also seek less violent solutions, for example focused on justice rather than retribution, which can be particularly effective in responding to situations of gender-based violence (Santschi and Dong, 2023).

Women have established intercommunal women's dialogues and use common spaces such as markets as an entry point to dialogue. In Western Equatoria, women formed an intercommunal group to seek to reduce violence between Dinka and Azande communities. The group identified issues that personally affected them – including high levels of rape and violence – and were able to pass messages back to conflicting groups. Traditional household roles of cooking food and delivering water are increasingly being built on to advocate for the proactive engagement of women. Some community respondents referred to the ability of women to use these entry points to connect with one another (Save the Children International, 2023), but women can also be undermined and intimidated, or forbidden by their husbands and family from directly engaging in dialogue.

The role of women in promoting violence reduction should not be romanticised (see Box 3). Women can also incite or celebrate the use of violence – including by armed youths who return from cattle raids with livestock – or, on the other hand, ridicule youths who do not participate in attacks or return without any livestock. This at times can be linked to customary traditions – for example cattle raiding – as well as a response to traumas they have experienced.

Box 3   Kabarze women

The Kabarze women are groups of Murle women self-established under the direction of a spiritual leader to address intracommunal conflict related to Murle age-set groups in 2017.

With the availability of small arms and the transition of society, age-set fighting has been increasingly violent, while the influence of traditional leadership has weakened. In situations of high levels of violence, women would self-organise and seek to de-escalate tensions:

> We have decided to play our role as mothers of these age-set groups. If they are organising themselves for fights, we move in big groups and curse them until they disperse from the assembling area. It works in most cases (Focus group discussion 2, 2023).

Murle communities interviewed as part of this research perceive that the Kabarze women were often successful where government and chiefs had failed, and spoke of the behaviour changes in youths due to the interventions of the Kabarze.

However, there are limitations to the role they can play. International organisations have weakened their role by trying to promote their influence outside of their original means (see Box 6). Given that Kabarze women were tasked with intervening between conflicting age-set groups by a spiritual leader, they do not feel it is their 'mandate' to engage in situations of intercommunal violence involving other ethnic groups.

Box source: Da Costa, 2022

3.1.3   When to engage

Communities look for signals to indicate if, when and how to engage armed actors in dialogue, and will monitor armed actors and assess their willingness to engage. In Western Equatoria, 'micro-meetings' were initiated prior to direct dialogue with the SSNLM to understand how open the group was to dialogue. Family connections to the group were also utilised to gain approval from the SSNLM for engagement.

Women and children may also be used to deliver messages to indicate that a community wants to engage, especially when there is a lack of trust between two communities and there are pre-existing relationships as avenues for engagement. Intermarriage can facilitate this process: women who have married into conflicting communities can gain information about possible attacks and pass on messages of restraint. The Murle have tied white flags to trees along routes where they know Nuer villagers collect firewood as a way of expressing a desire to reduce violence. Other actions can be more direct, such as kidnapping someone and sending them back with a message that one side wishes to talk.

Communities will also look for signs indicating when the time is not right to engage. Changes to armed actors' movements and interactions within the community, such as no longer visiting local markets, can indicate an increased risk of violence. More subtle forms of armed group behaviour may also provide an indication of an increased risk of violence. A civil society representative reported indications such as youth collecting bottles of water, presumably for long-term storage and use, which has been linked to mobilisations in Rumbek. The buying of rehydration salts at markets in higher than usual amounts in Pibor has indicated preparation for a mobilisation to carry out an attack. In other areas, a decrease in the numbers of youth attending church services or the sudden closure of businesses without warning can indicate that armed actors are planning to carry out attacks.

3.2   Factors influencing engagement

Engagement between communities and armed actors is affected by both internal and external influences, including trust, social cohesion, conflict dynamics and level of insecurity, and whether a community perceives that it is negotiating from a position of strength or weakness. It may also be influenced by the presence (or not) of a respected third party. Communities will look to navigate these different types of influences, adapting the strategies they use and who from the community is selected to be involved. Part of this includes using any leverage that the community may possess to influence the behaviour of armed actors. Close ties – including through familial, kinship and social links – can provide critical entry points to initiate dialogue. Existing trade links are also utilised between communities. In all areas, communities referred to engaging groups where there was some form of existing connection. In Jonglei, this was SPLM-IO and SPLM-IO Kitgwang. In Western Equatoria it was SSNLM and SPLM-IO. Some armed actors can recognise they have a shared sense of marginalisation with communities.

In Jonglei, interviewees reported that the first step in seeking to influence SPLM-IO Kitgwang behaviour is using family ties between the community and the group, given that many members of SPLM-IO Kitgwang were from the area. In Western Equatoria, a cross-community women's group, including both Azande and Dinka women, enabled them to pass messages of peaceful coexistence to their respective families.

Close familial, kinship or social ties can also mean that armed actors have empathy with the suffering of the community, which can in turn encourage them to engage in dialogue. In Western Equatoria, SSNLM members had family members living in local towns and were aware of the impact that ongoing violence was having. This encouraged the SSNLM to start a peace dialogue with the government, while community representatives leveraged this empathy for their continued participation in the peace dialogue. Armed actors may recognise that continued violence is a risk to the safety and security of the community to which they belong, and develop a mutual interest in reducing violence.

> It was easy to engage them because they are sons of the area […] They know any confrontation will also kill their relatives and destroy their families' livelihood such as cows (Interview 12, 2023).

Dynamics between communities and armed actors are not static. Ties between communities and armed actors can develop over time, as a degree of inter-reliance is developed during conflict. For example, interactions can take place when armed actors frequent the same local markets in order to buy food. In some cases, communities are forced to share food on the acknowledgement that if they didn't, the armed actor could take it by force. However, exchange is not always made from a position of community weakness. Some communities may view their relationship of inter-reliance from a position of strength. The offer of food and water can be made by the community in order to build a relationship with an armed actor, recognising that armed actors require resources and that they may be more likely to exercise restraint if resources such as food and water are shared.

> I said earlier that community is like water; if there is no water a fish cannot live. The same thing applies to armed actors. If they don't have a good relationship with civilians, the group will not be able to survive (Interview 10, 2023).

In some cases, the death of a certain leader can provide an opportunity for communities to engage. In the case of the SSNLM, the death of one of the groups former leaders, James Kabila, removed a potential spoiler from the peace process.

Communities can also leverage the presence of multiple armed actors. In Jonglei, interviewees referred to forming alliances with armed actors or threatening to withhold their support in order to weaken their position in relation to other armed actors present in the area. Access to information can be used, offering opportunities for communities to negotiate their safety and security on agreement that they will not provide information to rival groups.

> The community always asked armed actors to behave, to not interfere with the community way of life such as allowing them to graze their cattle, access their farms, market, not attack or be killed. In exchange, the community will allow the armed group to stay, give them food and not give out information that would compromise their position to their rivals (Interview 6, 2023).

However, this strategy can be risky and needs to be managed carefully. The presence of multiple armed actors creates suspicion. Communities have to be careful not to be seen as supportive of one group over another, which can lead to increased violence or the community in question being targeted.

The perception of whether a group is considered an insider or a foreign entity will help to determine the confidence the community has in reaching a successful conclusion. Where armed groups are considered external and where no pre-existing ties exist, dialogue is more difficult, or there is no dialogue at all. In Jonglei, government forces were considered outsiders from a different community and ethnicity who were more difficult to engage with. In Western Equatoria, communities have left negotiations with Ambororo pastoralist groups from Sudan to the government as there is not a common connection.

The type of armed actor will also determine whom communities consider best placed to engage certain armed actors as a credible interlocutor. This is particularly important for communities, not only to secure a successful outcome, but also to avoid the escalation of violence. For example, in Jonglei, engaging government forces requires conveying a level of respect and experience. This means that chiefs, rather than youths, are considered a more suitable option for engaging on behalf of the community. However, when it comes to armed actors with a larger contingent of youth, such as SPLM-IO and SPLM-IO Kitgwang, the involvement of youth leaders is seen as advantageous.

> When engaging with government soldiers, you need retired soldiers, politicians to sit with the chiefs because they might know the politicians and retired soldiers and accord them some respect. In this kind [of] negotiation we don't involve youth leaders because they are quick to anger or can alter words that might provoke soldiers. However, when we negotiate with IO or Kitgwang, we involve youth leaders because there are youth like them on these groups. So, yes, we strategise based on the armed actors we are engaging with (Interview 11, 2023).

The outcomes of engagement can be more successful if the dialogue is a balanced two-way process. It is an opportunity for communities to air their concerns and grievances, but also a time to allow armed actors to do the same. Adopting this strategy is said to have encouraged the SSNLM to engage in peace talks in Western Equatoria. Past trauma also has to be taken into account (see Box 2). For example, there is evidence that some combatants were born as a result of conflict-related rape and live with the traumatic consequences of this, which can influence their conduct. External actors who promote restraint in South Sudan note that, whilst armed actors acknowledge that targeting civilians is wrong, revenge is a strong motivating factor.

Allowing space for both civilians and armed actors to air past grievances can have positive results. However, it is not without its challenges. Perceptions of a lack of accountability and justice are strong in South Sudan, often for good reason. These perceptions, particularly among civilians, may act as a barrier to communities accepting the outcomes and agreements reached during dialogue. In Western Equatoria, whilst the outcome with the SSNLM has overall been considered a success, some spoke of a lack justice for those who were killed, raped, injured or had properties destroyed. Others said that, despite the outcome, they still 'don't enjoy the peace they talk about'. Killing continues and some communities continue to be targeted by government forces supposedly installed to protect them, with no accountability for the perpetrators.

4   External support to community engagement with armed actors

4.1   Conflict analysis and conflict-sensitivity analysis

Conflict analysis and conflict-sensitivity analysis are crucial to inform humanitarian and peace operations in order to mitigate any harmful impact of external presence. For organisations supporting community dialogue to reduce violence, such analysis at micro-local levels is imperative.

The quality of conflict and conflict-sensitivity analysis varies significantly among and between organisations in South Sudan. Analysis has often been based on misplaced assumptions and mistaken narratives. Some influential international organisations, for example, have historically labelled violence as either related to the non-international armed conflict, or localised communal violence that is not part of the armed conflict (UNSC, 2020a; 2020b). But this interpretation overlooks the interlinkages between local, subnational and national violence, including the instrumentalisation of violence by political elites and the diaspora (WFP and CSRF, 2020). How conflict and violence are framed determines the international response, and the way the international community engages with communities and the different armed actors they interface with.

There are real challenges for most organisations to grasp the complexities and interrelated drivers of conflict in South Sudan through regular, real-time analysis. Most humanitarian organisations carry out or access analysis based on their areas of operation. There are shared platforms for analysis provided by the UN Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS), the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the International NGO Safety Organisation (INSO).[3] But very few organisations have a full picture of violence; there is a lack of common understanding of how drivers of violence interrelate. In the absence of shared analysis, humanitarian organisations take different, at times contradictory operational approaches when working towards common objectives of reducing violence.

Too often, humanitarian actors are blind to their interaction with conflict dynamics. The risk that humanitarian assistance can be co-opted and cause harm is increasingly recognised. One interviewee noted the increased attention to the need to strengthen conflict-sensitive approaches that go beyond 'do no harm', towards ways humanitarian action can proactively contribute to reducing violence. The multi-donor funded Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility (CSRF)[4] is one contribution to this.

---

3   At the time of writing INSO had not had its licence renewed and was no longer operational in South Sudan.

4   The multi-donor funded facility 'seeks to maximise the positive impacts of humanitarian and development initiatives for peace, whilst avoiding harm' by providing independent analysis, training, and supporting conflict-sensitive approaches with donors, policymakers and operational organisations (CSRF, n.d.). While this is a small facility at a distance from programmes, it is recognised as a positive resource, and an entry point to strengthen interactions between peace and humanitarian actors.

There has been some increased investment in and capacity for conflict-sensitivity analysis among humanitarian organisations. In South Sudan, the World Food Programme (WFP), the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) have significantly invested in conflict-sensitivity analysis. However, humanitarian programmes significantly struggle to adapt activities according to such analysis due to their design.

The UN-led multi-partner South Sudan Reconciliation, Stabilization, and Resilience Trust Fund (RSRTF)[5] uses an innovative approach based on qualitative 'safety and security' indicators identified by communities to understand when people do, and do not, feel safe (see Box 4). For their part, peace actors undertake qualitative conflict-sensitivity analysis as standard practice through cultivating relationships with local communities over the long term, mapping the conflict system and community stakeholders and people with influence. This understanding is critical when ensuring conflict-sensitive programming, and identifying and seeking to engage individuals that have the influence to promote restraint, obtain safety assurances, and negotiate access.

Box 4   Measuring safety and security methodology

Following the 2013 and 2016 escalations of conflict, with high levels of attacks on humanitarian operations and convoys, there was broader recognition among donors and operational organisations of the critical need to have better conflict analysis, including the interaction of humanitarian operations with conflict dynamics.

The Measuring Safety and Security (MSS) methodology, an approach developed from the Everyday Peace Indicator methodology (Everyday Peace Indicators, n.d.),[i] was first introduced in Jonglei/GPAA in 2021 through lead partner WFP. It uses participatory group methods to identify indications of safety and security, starting by collecting opinions of people at the lowest hierarchies of power and working up to those at the top.[ii] Example indicators are the free movement of people, ability to trade, and people's ability to move after dark.

This is complemented by monthly ethnographic diaries using observation as a tool to understand how indicators relate to people's interactions and perceptions. Using these methodologies has allowed RSRTF partners to understand not only changes in indicators of safety and security, but importantly how they interact with programme interventions. They have been of particular use when dealing with unpredictable or unforeseen events, allowing interventions to adapt in real time (WFP, 2022).

---

5   The South Sudan RSRTF is an inter-agency pooled fund pioneering a whole-of-system approach to reconciliation, stabilisation and resilience to build peace and stability. For more information see Box 4 and https://mptf.undp.org/fund/ssroo.

While the use of MSS indicators has confirmed localised analysis that peace actors carry out on an ongoing basis, they have also provided an evidence base to encourage programme adaptation and overcome inertia. By speaking the humanitarian language of indicators, it has appealed to decision-makers in large bureaucracies.

This analysis has led to a more nuanced stakeholder analysis beyond recognised powerbrokers, as well as a nuanced understanding of conflict drivers. It has informed, for example, decisions on programme priorities, adaptations, and when access is possible. Data is now increasingly being used to inform and pivot programming, as an early-warning mechanism, and to strengthen RSRTF's contributions to reducing violence (WFP, 2022). Given its success, this is now used in RSRTF programming across South Sudan.

While the MSS and ethnographic methodologies have demonstrated impact, there are a number of considerations to be made. Firstly, experienced qualitative South Sudanese researchers at the Bridge Network[iii] have been central to its success by ensuring nuanced, location-specific analysis, promoting approaches tailored to each community and avoiding harms. Secondly, analysis must be regular, and have strong links to programmes and decision-makers to ensure it informs programme adaptations. Thirdly, indicators may not be replicable or comparable between locations. Finally, the approach is costly. While the benefits of such approaches have had demonstrable impact, it may be beyond the capacity of smaller organisations to implement. However, working in consortia, or as part of a pooled fund as is in place within the South Sudan RSRTF project, is one approach to share costs and analysis.

When considering ways to understand how communities perceive their safety and security, consideration of using the everyday indicator methodology should be offset against the analysis that peace actors use as standard practice.

i   The Everyday Peace Indicators methodology is usually applied to post-conflict situations, based on what people's perceptions of peace in their everyday lives looks like. In South Sudan this was difficult, as many people didn't have recent memories of peace. This was adapted to situations of ongoing or high-intensity violence by seeking to understand what indicates greater safety and security in conflict-affected people's everyday lives.

ii   Agreed indicators are based on community consensus. The exercise is carried out at local levels, village by village, and measured every six months.

iii   The Bridge Network is a collaboration of South Sudanese qualitative researchers specialising in locally informed, bottom-up knowledge to provide an evidence base for humanitarian and development policy and programming in South Sudan. See more here: www.bridgenetwork.online.

Box source: WFP, 2022

Where joint analysis and complementary approaches exist between humanitarian and peace actors, the quality and level of analysis can be rich, allowing for responsive approaches across organisations to leverage relationships, dialogue and assistance to reduce or prevent escalations of violence, as has been demonstrated in some partnerships under the Jonglei/GPAA RSRTF programme (see section 4.2). But where this is outsourced, or is donor- or globally driven, analysis can be superficial.

Community-based analysis contributes to a more nuanced appreciation of how communities perceive humanitarian assistance, in turn leading to an increased understanding of perceptions of bias in the delivery of assistance. Some humanitarian organisations have sought to mitigate security risks and strengthen community perceptions of their neutrality by putting in place a linked suspension strategy – meaning that, if assistance is suspended, it is suspended among all 'linked communities', as agreed upon by all potentially affected communities.

This speaks to a wider question around the utility and application of humanitarian principles in a complex, multi-layered conflict context like South Sudan. Civilians recognise that aid is and has long been manipulated for sociopolitical and economic gain. Humanitarian organisations seeking to deliver principled assistance among contending communities must be acutely sensitive to perceptions of bias in favour of one community or locality over another. In interviews for this research, for instance, Murle communities told us how, in their view, trade and economic development had been obstructed, developmental activities such as road construction had been diverted, and humanitarian assistance had been co-opted in Jonglei/GPAA by the Dinka Bor and Lou/Gawaar Nuer groups on behalf of the state. In this context, equality of assistance is regarded as more important than the (impartial) delivery of assistance based on a humanitarian assessment of need. Equally, suspending assistance during periods of insecurity can be more acceptable than humanitarian organisations continuing to differentially deliver assistance to communities where they have access. In this context, absolutist approaches to the principles can be a significant barrier to effective, complementary approaches and outcomes, and can lead to aid delivery that is conflict-blind. Indeed, it can lead to non-acceptance of humanitarian organisations, and attacks on humanitarian operations, as was the case in this example.

While there are clearly dilemmas in taking such difficult decisions, it requires honest reflection among humanitarian organisations on the role they play – wittingly or not – in the political economy of South Sudan's complex conflicts. Organisations need to consider what is in the best interest of the civilians they are there to support, as set out by them. It requires humanitarian organisations to remember the primacy of humanity as the core goal of humanitarian action – to reduce human suffering. This may require the compromise of other humanitarian principles in order to reduce violence in the name of humanity, recognising that principles are 'subject to deliberate compromise – and indeed compromise is the rule' (Dubois, 2020). Indeed, humanitarian organisations can only undertake a full deliberation of their efforts to uphold humanitarian principles, and where intentional compromises may be necessary, if they have detailed, localised conflict-sensitivity analysis with an understanding of the implications to civilian safety.

There are a number of considerations to effectively carrying out conflict-sensitive approaches. Firstly, in-depth analysis at subnational levels needs to be adequately resourced and embedded across roles and systems, including at leadership level. Secondly, conflict-sensitivity analysis is only as good as the ability of organisations to ensure such analysis informs decision-making and adaptations in programming. But this is a significant challenge in the humanitarian sector. Humanitarian programmes are not designed to flexibly respond to real-time analysis and adapt programmes accordingly, due to rigid ways of designing and monitoring programmes according to timebound outputs and activities. As a result, organisations too often resort to pausing rather than adapting programmes. Lastly, analysis and proposed responses need to inform the decisions of managers. This requires trust, access to decision-makers, and 'brave spaces' for honest dialogue.

4.2   Opportunities and challenges to greater complementarity between humanitarian, protection and peace action

There is growing recognition that effective action to reduce violence and promote peace must be a complementary effort between humanitarian, protection and peace actors. Each set of actors brings different mandates, principles, funding sources and channels, and operational modes, all of which speak to different – but, crucially, connected and interrelated – dimensions of the same complex problem. Mandated organisations such as UN entities and the International Committee of the Red Cross often have greater access to official decision-makers and government giving entry points to undertake dialogue on sensitive issues. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and some UN agencies often have greater presence in areas of high-intensity violence, while national civil society has proximity to and understanding of communities and dynamics within and between communities and armed actors (see Box 5 on the particular example of UNMISS). Working in complementarity is a critical entry point to supporting communities and facilitating dialogue. Indeed, 'nexus' programming can only have success where community engagement is at the core of approaches (CSRF, 2023a). Making this work in practice in a context like South Sudan is, however, a significant and ongoing challenge, as the examples below illustrate.

Box 5   UNMISS

UNMISS has a broad, ambitious mandate, though some believe it has struggled to meet its protection of civilians objectives (Rosenblum-Kumar, 2023). Working through its military, civilian and police components, it engages with stakeholders at national, subnational and local levels to monitor the security situation, receive early warning of potential conflict, and deploy military personnel with the objective of defusing tensions before they escalate. UNMISS seeks to complement this by dialogue-based community engagements, as well as political engagements at the international, regional, state and national levels.

While part of UNMISS's mandate includes the prevention of intercommunal conflict through community-led approaches (UNMISS, n.d.), there are structural barriers to achieving this. By design, peacekeeping missions implement top-down approaches in line with its internationally driven mandate, in partnership and agreement with the national government.

Community and civil society perceptions of UNMISS are mixed. Whereas in some areas UNMISS has taken steps to improve regular contact with communities, in other locations, the mission falls short of effectively communicating with and garnering buy-in from communities. Interviews carried out as part of this research found that there are high expectations and misperceptions among communities of the role of UNMISS in providing protection to populations. This can result in not only a lack of ownership and low levels of trust, but can give communities a false sense of security. The presence of peacekeepers can per se provide a protective environment, as confirmed by a recent national perception survey which found that peacekeeping patrols and presence made 89% of respondents feel either a little bit safer (32.9%) or much safer (57%) (HACOF, 2023). However, this research heard a number of examples where communities didn't implement their usual strategies to protect themselves because they understood that UNMISS would protect them, which cost lives. This is particularly the case where UNMISS has a rotating, rather than permanent, presence.

The mission carries out activities focused on local and national stakeholders, including with communities and civil society, for example through initiatives such as 'neighbourhood advocacy forums' to encourage direct dialogue between political stakeholders and communities (see, for example, James, 2019). However, interviewees report that community-level initiatives are often ad hoc, rather than sustained, regular engagement with communities based on what they are already doing and are requesting from external stakeholders.

Key stakeholders participating in this research reported that some UNMISS departments and individuals have limited acceptance of the contributions of other organisations – including communities themselves – to reducing violence. This, when overlaid with own UNMISS's perception of itself as the leading organisation in this regard, can lead to territorial approaches. A mindset shift is needed, requiring UNMISS to reconceptualise and redesign approaches to supporting conflict-affected communities across local, subnational and national levels, including through bottom-up approaches. This could include UNMISS undertaking a connecting, enabling role, and creating space for communities, civil society and other organisations who are more connected to communities to lead on facilitating dialogue, rather than occupying and competing in these spaces.

The signing of the R-ARCSS in 2018 prompted increased attention to the so-called 'triple nexus' between humanitarian, development and peace action in South Sudan. Initially, the focus was more on humanitarian and development synergies, predominantly through resilience programming. However, the introduction of the RSRTF has, to an extent, brought about a stronger focus on peace across triple nexus programming in South Sudan.

The RSRTF, a multi-partner trust fund, was established by UNMISS and the UN Country Team in December 2018. Through its area-based programmes, it seeks to take a comprehensive, mutually reinforcing approach across humanitarian, peace and development action towards reducing violence, drawing on the expertise and comparative advantages of UNMISS, UN agencies and national and international NGOs. Initially planned for five years, it has now been extended to 2026. There has, however, been criticism that the fund lacks sufficient speed, flexibility and adaptability to respond to rapidly changing conflict dynamics. For example, its rapid-response mechanisms or requests to adapt planned activities can take weeks for a decision. But this can be the difference between attacks taking place, or being able to prevent and/or contain them. While non-UN peace actors have been brought in in Jonglei/GPAA, the absence of peacebuilding actors in other areas is a significant weakness (UN, 2021; 2023).

There have been barriers to working in greater complementarity due to perceived tensions with humanitarian principles, including from donors who were reticent to contribute humanitarian funding to the fund at the outset. However, this demonstrated an apparent lack of understanding that humanitarian and peacebuilding action are often working towards similar objectives, particularly when working with communities. As one interviewee said, while humanitarian organisations do not need to shape the political landscape, they have a responsibility to promote peace (or reduce violence).

Established in 2019, the United Kingdom-funded Peacebuilding Opportunities Fund seeks:

> to deliver outcomes which ensure that targeted communities are more harmonious and resilient to conflict, and that political, socio-economic, and cultural institutions key for handling conflict and establishing the conditions for sustained peace are strengthened and more inclusive (Oxford Policy Management, n.d.)

The contextually driven mechanism has a strong focus on process and adaptation, with a framework designed to allow for an iterative approach. One of its key strengths – and a counterpoint to criticisms of the RSRTF – is rapid decision-making, often in a matter of hours and days, while the monitoring framework is designed for flexibility and adaptation.[6]

---

6   Based on a realistic theory of change, the programme is monitored through a results framework rather than a logical frame-based approach, using process indicators. The theory of change can (in theory) be revisited. Milestones were adaptively defined and considered alongside the theory of change, with annual reporting against milestones. Importantly, where milestones have not been achieved, there is flexibility for justified pivots. In so doing, the monitoring itself was appropriately iterative, reflecting the complex and messy reality of trying to reduce or contain violence.

One key takeaway from the programme is the importance of community-level focus, often above national politics, to leverage change towards violence reduction. This is strengthened if conflict actors are directly and consistently engaged, and if traditional and spiritual leadership and practices are respected (ibid.).

Both of these examples illustrate at once the importance of, and the challenges to, developing a holistic approach that seeks to ensure that organisations and workstreams do not continue to work in siloes. Effectively leveraging contributions across partners requires a layered, coherent approach, based on a considered, realistic theory of change with each organisation setting out how their activities contribute to reducing violence. Peace actors need to be engaged early and given the space to play a central role in interrupting violence.

Even in countries where there is already a range of humanitarian and peace organisations, they might be working in different geographies, towards different priorities and targeting using different modalities. But this does not necessarily have to be the case. Donors and member states have a significant role in incentivising a more coherent, structured approach for humanitarian, peace and development actors to work in greater complementarity. While this has been happening to an extent through the RSRTF in Jonglei/GPAA, it would be significantly strengthened if donors incentivise more coherence and ensure that the efforts of all partners are contributing to reducing violence. In particular, interviewees felt there are still limited platforms for strategic dialogue and honest conversations outside of project-focused coordination – though this is often built on mutual trust between key individuals.

However, many interviewees highlighted significant risks to the nexus approach, particularly of becoming projectised or donor-driven. Project-based approaches drive competition, risk duplication, and could lead to tick-box approaches that result in 'a cookie-cutter approach to dialogue'. As one interviewee stated, ultimately, competition 'defeats the purpose of complementary approaches' (Interview 32, 2023).

4.3   Links between local, subnational and national approaches to reduce violence

Given the lack of trust in national government, civilians often have far more confidence in local processes than national ones. Violence-reduction activities should start at the local level, while cautiously connecting with subnational and national dynamics. As one government official said:

> Peace should be built from the local level up. Local chiefs should be empowered. The conflict eroded the power of chiefs and traditional authority. This needs to return. We need to strengthen local structures – people want law and order, they don't want conflict. The social contract should be built at the local level, not the national level (Interview 16, 2023).

Donors, humanitarian and peace actors now increasingly acknowledge the risks of focusing on national conflict drivers without understanding local drivers. Linking local conflict dynamics to subnational and

national dynamics is widely regarded as a positive step that has enabled the identification of who should be involved in dialogue. However, identifying how to operationalise local-to-national approaches to reduce violence and circumnavigate the influence of political elite without directly accusing them is an extremely challenging endeavour. There are risks to connecting the different layers, including further instrumentalisation of violence. However, not doing so would result in the influence of national and international spoilers – and therefore their influence on local dynamics – being overlooked, and would therefore undermine opportunities for violence reduction to hold.

Notwithstanding the challenges and complexities, humanitarian, protection and peace organisations have critical roles in facilitating safe spaces for dialogue. As one interviewee stated, such dialogue can also support communities to build an understanding of the collective power they have over the elite, and with external support, consider ways to leverage it. External actors also have a critical role as connectors between local, subnational and national levels. Respondents recognised that by mapping the conflict system and networks that connect them, external actors can promote inclusive dialogue, and connect communities to power structures outside of the community level. Faith actors have played critical roles in this regard, focusing at the grassroots level while seeking to safeguard against harmful influences of the elite, including the diaspora.

Political and donor support to such approaches – both through diplomacy and programming – is critical. Mediators involved in national peace dialogue relayed the need for complementary private diplomacy of embassies to encourage all parties to engage in discussions in good faith. Their role in safeguarding the space for adaptive, potentially risky programming and giving political support is also seen as critical. But again, this requires sustained engagement, political support and funding.

4.4   Early warning and early response

Civil society, working with communities, has initiated approaches to identify and warn about imminent threats. Early warning and early response is a key strategy of South Sudan's Ministry of Peacebuilding. The ministry established peace committees with the view to enabling communities to communicate with the state government when threats of violence increase. In theory, this should trigger government action at the state or national level.

One civil society organisation has installed a conflict early-warning system, supporting communities to monitor changes in armed actor behaviour – which could indicate preparation to carry out attacks – more systematically, and seek to intervene to prevent violence or abductions. Through a broad network of community reporters across the country, alerts are channelled through a verification centre. Responses can range from alerting customary authorities, or trusted individuals and institutions such as faith actors, to initiate dialogue and prevent attacks from taking place. Media is also used as a means to pressure armed actors to restrain the use of violence when they back out of a process of dialogue – a particularly useful tool when armed actors seek political legitimacy and/or community acceptance.

A number of humanitarian, protection and peace organisations now support using early-warning systems for risks of violence. Approaches include working with communities to identify indicators of threats of violence and seek to prevent attacks, as described above; mapping conflict risks and providing rapid support to a range of services, reinforcing local conflict-management mechanisms; and initiating an early-warning system to monitor human rights abuses.

While these are all positive examples of actions that are being taken to interrupt violence, they are predominantly piecemeal. Where international organisations are involved, they often lack the capacities and networks to effectively respond – for example, due to a lack of personnel with mediation or negotiation skills, or due to a lack of knowledge of local networks of trusted individuals or institutions who can facilitate dialogue with and between communities and armed actors.

4.5   Protection: preventing and reducing threats of violence

Throughout humanitarian responses globally, the major focus of protection action has focused on the consequences of violence and other risks civilians face in conflict – so-called remedial and environment-building activities – rather than seeking to prevent or reduce threats of violence (Cocking et al., 2022; Davies et al., 2023). Indeed, NRC carried out a rapid review of Humanitarian Response Plans in 2022 and found very few planned activities focusing on prevention of harm to civilians. There is growing recognition in the humanitarian sector of the need to adapt humanitarian protection action towards an increased focus on preventing and reducing the threats of violence, coercion and deprivation (Davies et al., 2023).

Nonviolent Peaceforce distinguishes itself in the field of protection and peacebuilding through an approach that is markedly different from traditional actors in the sector. It prioritises understanding violence and addressing its root causes, rather than merely focusing on response to violence. This strategy stems from an acknowledgment that sustainable peace is deeply rooted in the underlying factors driving conflicts. By working hand-in-hand with community members, Nonviolent Peaceforce not only gains nuanced insights into the unique contexts and dynamics of each area but also empowers these communities. For example, it dedicates considerable effort to developing the capacities, confidence and legitimacy of local actors, enabling them to actively participate in and lead violence-prevention initiatives. This collaborative approach ensures that solutions are not only context-specific but also sustainable, as they are anchored in the community's own strengths and resources.

One of its core focuses is the bridging role it plays between communities and armed actors. Nonviolent Peaceforce proactively supports communities to directly engage with armed actors and duty bearers, and works with stakeholders to influence the behaviour of armed actors towards promoting restraint. It encourages nonviolent approaches to resolving disputes through community-owned solutions, promoting inclusive approaches and building trust. Additionally, Nonviolent Peaceforce engages youth who have joined, or are at risk of joining, armed groups or gangs. This can give youths a sense of purpose, transforming their role as (potential) perpetrators of violence, to champions of restraint

(Nonviolent Peaceforce, 2024). As Nonviolent Peaceforce states: 'Too often dismissed without being attempted, "transforming enemies into allies" is a powerful strategy of nonviolence that remains very applicable in the context of South Sudan' (2022).

There is recognition that communities proactively use the presence of international organisations strategically. For example, women protection teams that Nonviolent Peaceforce works with wear T-shirts to give them visibility, clarify their role and lend them legitimacy when they directly engage with armed actors. Academics have argued that this can serve a protective function, giving a message that they have international support. This protective presence can apply even when international organisations are not physically present (Gray, 2023).[7]

However, when it comes to cooperation, too often 'mainstream' humanitarian protection actors state that they are carrying out dialogue and are reluctant to work with peacebuilding organisations, who they perceive as ill-equipped to promote protection. But such dialogues are too often ad hoc, carried out through the lens of social cohesion, and are ill-equipped to addressing structural drivers of violence and conflict or adaptive approaches towards reducing violence. Many humanitarian organisations perceive any role engaging – including facilitating dialogue – with armed actors as a high-risk strategy due to their role as perpetrators of abuses, and as compromising humanitarian principles, unless for the purpose of negotiating access. But as Nonviolent Peaceforce states, instantly dismissing engagement with armed actors without assessing how to manage potential risks means that any efforts to prevent or reduce violence will be minimal. And, although concerns around undermining neutrality suggest a fundamental misunderstanding of humanitarian principles, they remain a significant barrier to strengthening approaches to reduce or prevent violence.

Ultimately, territorial approaches of humanitarian protection actors, a low-risk appetite and misinformed understanding of principles, often delinked from context, are significant barriers to more effective, complementary approaches to reducing violence – including with peacebuilding actors.

4.6 Facilitating dialogue

In South Sudan, one of the critical roles that humanitarian and peacebuilding actors undertake to reduce violence is to facilitate dialogue between conflicting communities and/or communities and armed actors. This, too, must be based on detailed analysis of conflict and individual dynamics to identify entry points to engage, the willingness of all parties to engage, identifying representatives to be involved, and ensuring all interlocutors are prepared. It also requires identifying who has a stake in peace, as well as those who are perpetuating, or have an interest in, violence. One peacebuilding actor noted that analysis should be informed by how communities themselves analyse conflict, and informed by the calculations they make.

---

7 For more information on Nonviolent Peaceforce's approach in South Sudan see https://nonviolentpeaceforce. org/where-we-work/south-sudan/.

Individuals and organisations facilitating dialogue in South Sudan all noted the necessity to identify and deploy individual(s) who have a trusted relationship with both communities and armed actors. One facilitator noted that in preparing for dialogue, it is necessary to identify a common interest between parties involved. This interviewee initiated dialogue based on the common interest of all parties to have access to food and to ensure that markets continue to function. Through their facilitation role, external actors can build trust and acceptance. This cannot be rushed. If not given adequate time, it can fuel further violence. Nor can dialogue take place at the height of violence when tensions are high. Inclusivity is crucial, but this cannot be a tokenistic tick-box affair and care must be taken to bring in representatives with genuine authority and influence. A representative approach is not necessarily inclusive. For example, during the early stages of the Pieri process in Jonglei/GPAA, community representatives involved spoke of how they had little influence over, or even contact with, influential armed youths who had not been included. Further attacks took place soon after agreements had been reached, undermining trust in the process. As one representative from a protection organisation said: 'Excluding some groups from peace spoils peace. If there are people excluded from protection, the protection is weak (Interview 27, 2023).'

External actors also need to be prepared to adapt quickly to rapidly changing dynamics: meetings can be abruptly cancelled, groups can withdraw at the last minute or locations might need to be changed. Connecting local, subnational and national stakeholders can garner the support of allies, and mitigate the influence of spoilers. Sometimes a mix of formal dialogue and more informal discussion will be required, over a period of months and years in order to build familiarity, trust and acceptance (see Peacebuilding Opportunities Fund, 2021).

The connecting role external actors can play can cut through power dynamics between different stakeholders and help communities reach outside the power structures they would usually interact with. Some organisations in South Sudan facilitate dialogue between communities and formal state security actors. Protection and peacebuilding actors spoke to the benefits of bringing local government, state security actors and communities together, allowing state and security actors to hear the issues and threats communities are facing directly, and to discuss community-devised solutions. This approach has been effective in breaking down negative perceptions and stigmas between security actors, communities and armed youths, allowing communities to discuss the impact of violence and helping security actors understand the impact of their response on armed youths and communities alike. This has at times seen members of armed youth groups become champions towards promoting peace.

External actors also have a role to play in supporting negotiated agreements. Under the RSRTF in Jonglei/GPAA, for example, the return of hundreds of abducted women and children supported by protection actors has proved a significant entry point to building trust (Deng et al., 2022b). Communities interviewed as part of this study reported that it gave them confidence in the commitment of armed actors to peace at the time.

When considering supporting dialogue, thought must be given to who is best placed to assume this role, and at which times. This may require a greater leadership role for local peacebuilders, with international humanitarian and peace actors supporting them from behind (see Box 6).

Box 6   Working with community structures

Humanitarian, protection and peace organisations supporting community dialogue were broadly in consensus that, where possible, the starting point should be working through existing community governance structures that have trust and legitimacy. However, these customary governance systems have evolved in different ways, and are functional to different degrees. Experience of working with one structure may hold little relevance in another location. External actors need to consider the dynamics of community leadership and governance mechanisms, including how these structures may have evolved as a result of conflict. In areas of South Sudan where local government is not trusted and can instrumentalise the use of violence, its inclusion can cause harm and undermine trust.

Where influential leaders or individuals are corrosive or incite violence, external actors may need to introduce their own, non-organic structures. Care is needed to ensure they are not causing harm, for example by undermining customary leadership and/or the influence of community members to restrain the use of violence.

Like other contexts with high levels of international presence, South Sudan has multiple, overlapping, externally established committees: protection committees, peace committees, development committees, youth committees, women's committees and so on. These often serve the interests and needs of the international organisations that set them up, rather than the communities they are ostensibly intended to support. International organisations need to listen to communities, build on what makes sense for them according to their own internal structures, organisation and governance, and ensure that non-organic structures do not undermine existing mechanisms, authority and influence.

4.6.1   Whose peace? Ownership of dialogue

This research received strong feedback across communities, government, humanitarian and peace actors that successful dialogue must be owned and led by communities. There can be no one-size-fits-all approach. As one mediator stated:

> Let the engagement and negotiation be owned by the community and armed actors. Let them make their suggestions. You are a facilitator and cannot place yourself in front. All you need to do is remind them of their obligation to their communities, society and family […] The most important thing is that the peace is theirs, not yours (Interview 28, 2023).

Where external solutions are imposed without taking into account the specific dynamics, culture and context within communities it can lead to mistrust and insensitive approaches, and can endanger the entire process. The same mediator told us:

> In most cases some actors, both national and external, would assume western approach is the best. But in my 33 years I have seen many of such ideas worsen the conflict. Don't suggest to the community how they can address the conflict, let them suggest and you add to what they say (Interview 28, 2023).

This requires international organisations to be humble, not to assume there is a role for them, and to take their lead from community-identified solutions and approaches. It involves consideration of the needs, interests and positions of communities, and ensuring that they are central to designing the process and content of dialogue, with external actors playing a supporting role. It requires a willingness to listen and to adapt according to community and armed actors' suggestions. To support this, there is a strong need for national and international coordination with communities and civil society.

Locally owned approaches to reduce violence also require acceptance of customs and practices which may not conform to traditional approaches to dialogue. For example, the sacrifice and eating of livestock together is a strong customary tradition across different ethnicities in South Sudan to indicate the successful end of a dialogue, as are offerings of food prior to commencing a dialogue. External actors need to respect and consider supporting local customs, which demonstrates a significant commitment to peace.

There is a need to understand that ritual and symbolism as a means of communication in South Sudan are also important. Singing and dancing are often expressions (and repositories) of knowledge and opinion. They are 'culturally situated mediums used to challenge oppressive power structures or call for accountability' (Da Costa, 2023). For example, in South Sudan, the songs that communities sing during a peace conference indicate whether it is viewed as a success. But external actors are often unaware of the meaning, power and relevance of what is being sung. If external actors seek to understand this, they can better understand the outcome of a dialogue (ibid.).

4.6.2   Resources and logistics of facilitating dialogue

While communities should take the lead in carrying out dialogue with armed actors, they can often struggle to allocate the resources required to do so. At times, persuading all parties to engage in dialogue can require providing some immediate support to the needs of communities. This is where humanitarian actors can come in – to provide initial support to prepare the ground for dialogue.

There is a significant logistical aspect to facilitating dialogue – especially in South Sudan where conflict takes place across vast terrain with extremely limited road and communications connectivity. External actors can provide logistical support in South Sudan – for example by providing transport for representatives to participate in dialogue. Sponsoring and organising the means for dialogue itself is

a crucial aspect of effective facilitation. This comes at a significant cost and can face many challenges due to seasonal changes and rapidly changing levels of violence. It requires taking risks, assessing the best option in rapidly changing circumstances, and aligning and taking action – often in extremely short timeframes (Interview 29, 2023). But this requires a shift in donor attitudes. When resource provision has not led to immediate concrete outcomes, or a dialogue has not taken place, it can be perceived as inefficient and a waste of funding. However, these are calculated risks, and investments in the value of the process itself, even when there aren't immediate results (Interview 9, 2023).

Supporting the means to communication is another practical contribution external organisations can make. Some organisations have provided communications equipment, while others have allowed the use of their communication equipment to facilitate dialogue. This can sensitise conflicting armed actors to the views of their opponents.

4.6.3   Changing calculations

There was strong consensus across organisations of the necessity to seek to influence the calculations armed youths make by discussing the gains, losses and risks to individuals, their families and communities of participating in large-scale attacks. Respondents reported that long-term, sustained dialogue has led to a change in attitudes. Where influential individuals such as prophets are involved in instigating large-scale cattle raids, they often take a significant proportion of the livestock. Facilitators have sought to break down the calculations armed actors make in carrying out attacks. Individual members of an armed group would usually take home 1–2 head of livestock in a 'successful' raid. By setting these gains against the risks of armed youths being injured or killed, and of the high probability of revenge attacks against their families and communities, offsetting their personal gains against the gains the prophet makes, youths who regularly participate in violent attacks can, and have, changed their calculation in favour of *not* using violence. As one faith leader described:

> If you calculate all of this. If you sit with them and practically count their losses. You ask – why are you listening to that person? You ask why the prophet, who has never gone there [participated in attacks], why that person is enjoying peace when you're not enjoying it (Interview 5, 2023).

In one instance, when armed actors were mobilising to carry out an attack, organisations who had direct contact with armed actors were able to deploy arguments to influence their calculations. Additionally, they sought to limit support to the leader and influenced the movement of targeted livestock. This led to the attack being called off.

This approach is also used with communities who support the use of violence. Some community members celebrate youths who have returned from attacks with livestock or abducted civilians. When facilitators discuss the high risks to their families, the risks of violence or abductions of women, children and livestock through revenge attacks, this has also led to changes in behaviour. Community

interviewees in GPAA recognised that while there can be individual resource gains to carrying out attacks, this can come with significant cost to the community. Some had started requesting youths not to participate in attacks, and had sought to punish those that did.

Consideration should also be given to the status associated with the use of violence – particularly given that the use of violence is one of the critical avenues to achieving social mobility. One approach that has reportedly seen positive results is leveraging the influence and status of armed youth leaders to promote restraint instead of instigating violence.

External actors and facilitators support communities to consider non-violent approaches to resolving disputes and grievances – and the benefits of resolving conflict through non-violent means. Given that the occurrence of violence is so entrenched in parts of South Sudan, people need convincing that non-violent means of resolving disputes and grievances is in their interest, and alternatives have to be supported. But, even if there are changes in behaviour in the short term, there are high risks that calculations can again change towards the use of violence if socioeconomic alternatives to the use of violence are not realised, and grievances are not addressed.

4.7   Supporting alternatives to violence

In South Sudan, while there has been significant investment in dialogue, there has often been far less follow-up. But 'dialogue is the starting point' (Interview 5, 2023). As one government official put it:

> We need to address the issues that people are raising, deliver what they say they need. We need to find ways to give what people asking for (Interview 16, 2023).

One of the most significant risks to a sustained reduction of violence is if tangible benefits are not realised. This includes linking peacebuilding to development and livelihood initiatives that provide youth with a meaningful economic alternative to violence (Comerford, 2022). This was systematically highlighted as a critical and urgent requirement. Sustained incentives must be offered to restrain the use of violence, complemented by long-term, multi-year support to restore the confidence of communities and demonstrate tangible change in their lives. For example, connecting communities and support for livelihoods and education with a specific focus on youths and women were commitments in the Pieri Peace Process (Pieri Peace Agreement, 2021). The credibility of organisations facilitating peace dialogue has at times been undermined when commitments were not delivered, undermining trust in the peace process. This also raises questions of organisational accountability to delivering the commitments they have made.

There has been progress through some of the nexus programming – notably the RSRTF in Jonglei/ GPAA, which is found to have been 'noteworthy for leading with a strong peacebuilding and social cohesion element and linking humanitarian relief efforts to these pillars' (Deng et al., 2022a). When organisations work in complementarity, it can strengthen the incentives to reduce violence. For example, at a time when attacks were anticipated in Jonglei and GPAA, WFP (through ForAfrika, and

Peace Canal) implemented a three-month intervention targeting youths at risk of carrying out attacks to support the construction of the road network across Jonglei and GPAA. In consultation with communities, organisations ensured there was equal representation across different ethnic groups. This weakened incentives to mobilise, and led to less violence in border areas than anticipated. Additionally, there were fewer attacks on humanitarian convoys along these roads at the time of, and immediately following, the intervention.

Greater effort is needed to leverage development programming towards reducing violence by addressing the socioeconomic drivers of violence. However, development actors are largely absent in South Sudan, and there is an almost complete absence of long-term funding – including to incentivise stronger governance to sustain and support development over the long term.[8] Where institutions – for example, the World Bank – are present, their risk appetite is low and they rarely operate in areas with high levels of violence. The World Bank's focus is on secure areas, and building out to more insecure areas from there – which has the secondary impact of contributing to the marginalisation of areas such as parts of Jonglei and GPAA, as these areas are deemed too insecure to deliver long-term development support.

Violence reduction is intrinsically linked to access to livelihoods (Santschi and Dong, 2023). However, there are long-standing perceptions that livelihoods programming is not possible in areas with high levels of violence, and that donors would not risk supporting such initiatives. But this is not necessarily the case, and where organisations can demonstrate that livelihoods support can tangibly reduce violence, donors can and have come on board. The evaluation of phase one of RSRTF in Jonglei/GPAA found that, while livelihoods interventions had played a crucial role in reducing violence, uncoordinated implementation across the region had left major gaps, as not all communities felt that their material situation had improved (Deng et al., 2022b). This saw a shift in the second phase of RSRTF in Jonglei/GPAA to focus all activities on the 'four corridor' border areas between Jonglei and GPAA where levels of communal conflict are often acute, with a strong livelihoods component.

Livelihood opportunities should also be based on an adequate understanding of the culture of communities they are targeting, to ensure that the livelihood options offered are appropriate and accepted. For example, some sub-ethnic groups such as lowland pastoralist Murle clans perceive agriculture as work for the poor and weak. Male youths will therefore not engage with livelihood opportunities focused on agriculture, and can be encouraged not to do so by elders. This comes back to listening to communities, and ensuring they are consulted as to the relevance and appropriateness of externally supported interventions.

Trade routes and markets are another entry point to promote incentives for a more lasting reduction in violence. For example, in GPAA, communities from Manyabol and Anyidi living near a key trade route reported that between 2014 and 2019 they had benefited from relative peace, enabling them to use

---

8   When the 2013 conflict escalated, donors withdrew governance funding support – for security sector reform, as well as development funding. Today, there are pilot attempts to reinstate some development approaches, but these are not sustained and are not long term.

the road for cattle trade and other business. When one Murle clan sought to mobilise youth to attack another, armed leaders and youths at risk of participating in violence refused to mobilise, supported by families and kinship networks. As one interviewee said, 'They refused their call for war […] they are willing to maintain the peace, because we all benefit from it' (Focus group discussion 3, 2023). This demonstrates the strength of collective incentives in reducing violence.

4.8   Challenges and risks of violence reduction action

As one interviewee said, dialogue is iterative and interventions should mirror this. This requires flexibility, adaptive approaches, a readiness to take risks and the capacity to take quick decisions. And yet almost all interviewees across humanitarian, protection and peace organisations engaged in this research cited the near-complete inability of programmes to adapt and respond to change. A widely cited critical risk to tangible outcomes in reducing violence is projectisation – when support to dialogue becomes (and is approached as) a project.

Structural barriers are also significant. The humanitarian sector is a competitive marketplace, particularly in South Sudan where funding has been dwindling in recent years. Competition for funding and territorial approaches linked to organisational and sector mandates can lead to competitive 'quick-fix' approaches, duplication of effort and a lack of coordinated, phased activities. Competition also means that critical information is not shared between organisations.

There can also be risks to facilitating dialogue. Suspicion is a risk faced not only by communities. Facilitators and staff working for organisations facilitating dialogue have been accused of being spies, passing information from one armed group to another, or via third parties, including through international organisations. While there are potential risks, this is not a reason to discount supporting dialogue. When risks are effectively managed, the outcomes of dialogue can be profound. As with any intervention, mitigating measures can be put in place, including by building trust, taking a neutral stance and ensuring transparent dialogue. One of the most significant risks, though, is if commitments made as an outcome of successful dialogue – including the positive benefits of restraining the use of violence – are not realised.

5   Conclusion

Communities can and do influence the behaviour of armed actors by engaging in dialogue to reduce violence. They are highly strategic in who represents them, maximising opportunities to leverage entry points and exert influence. While representatives are often drawn from positions of authority, they are chosen based on moral respect such as faith, spiritual and maternal authority, with specific qualities such as the ability to remain calm, persuasive and non-partisan.

External actors are too often unaware of localised conflict dynamics. While recent years have seen greater investments in and awareness of the need for conflict analysis and conflict-sensitive approaches, the practice remains uneven and is generally only prioritised following high levels of conflict and violence, as opposed to there being sustained investments to reduce and prevent escalations of violence. Humanitarian actors can learn from peacebuilding actors, who more commonly take a nuanced approach to conflict-sensitivity analysis. Such analysis must be closely linked to and inform programming approaches and decision-making in order to mitigate the risk of humanitarian assistance exacerbating conflict.

This requires political will – both from humanitarian organisations, and importantly the member states that support them – to accept that humanitarian assistance is part of the political economy of conflict. It requires acknowledgement that maintaining the status quo undermines contributions towards reducing violence, towards a lasting, positive peace. To enable such a peace requires safe spaces for honest conversations between humanitarian and peace actors, donor states and diplomatic actors.

Engaging communities and supporting dialogue is a critical entry point to strengthening complementary approaches between humanitarian, protection and peace action. Solutions should be community-owned and -led, building on existing community dynamics, approaches and mechanisms, and not externally designed or imposed, recognising the harm this can cause. These should be based on and respect the norms, values and customary traditions of communities and armed actors.

Facilitating dialogue requires sustained presence. Building trust is critical, by demonstrating a non-partisan position and credibility. Dialogue is iterative, and interventions to support it should reflect this. This requires humanitarian, protection and peacebuilding actors – as well as the donors that support them – to be flexible, to adapt, and to accept a readiness to deal with setbacks, and even an openness to failure. It requires perseverance and a willingness to take risks. This requires sustained investments over the long term.

Structural and systemic barriers must be addressed. These include addressing competitive, project-based approaches, and redesigning rigid, pre-defined logical-framework programme design towards more adaptive management approaches, with a focus on process and outcomes rather than outputs (see CSRF, 2023b). This requires incentivising the efficiency gains in taking complementary and reinforcing approaches (rather than single organisational, competitive, non-aligned approaches).

Complementary and layered approaches between humanitarian, peacebuilding and development actors, including through facilitating dialogue, can help change the calculations made by armed actors, and by those that support the use of violence. Long-term socioeconomic drivers of violence must be addressed. To be effective, these must all work towards the same objective of reducing violence, using mutually reinforcing approaches, built from a shared analysis of the uses and drivers of violence, with long-term development support to sustain a reduction in violence. Attention should be given to the status and social mobility that joining armed groups can offer, and how to leverage the influence of armed actors as leaders towards promoting restraint.

So what does all this mean for those supporting communities when it comes to protection, and the prevention and reduction of violence? Firstly, there needs to be a mindset shift. International actors must accept that peacebuilding action can and should be deployed in areas of high-intensity violence. They must provide resources to facilitate dialogue and understand that supporting livelihoods can be a frontline strategy to reduce levels of violence and the economic purpose it serves. It requires a change in risk appetite and the early intervention of development actors and those that fund them. And it means redefining the understanding and implementation of humanitarian principles to ensure humanitarian actors are using their full toolbox to reduce violence. This could even mean considering leveraging assistance to incentivise the reduction of violence when it is linked to dialogue.

Ultimately, there needs to be reconsideration of what constitutes success. A sole focus on top-down national-level peace towards a lasting reduction in conflict cannot be the only approach. However, focusing solely on communities is not enough. By starting from communities, national and international actors can cautiously connect layers, identify and support champions for peace, and mitigate the influence of spoilers. This means acknowledging that western notions of success may not be applicable or appropriate. As South Sudan approaches its first elections, the international community would do well to acknowledge this and act upon it.

The following recommendations are predicated on the exertion of political will and a prioritisation of resources.

5.1 Recommendations

5.1.1 Humanitarian, protection and peacebuilding actors

- **Prioritise and resource quality conflict-sensitivity analysis.**
    – Proactively focus on how external interventions contribute towards reducing violence, rather than solely on mitigating measures towards 'do no harm'.
    – Prioritise the personnel to support this.
    – Ensure analysis routinely informs programming and decision-making.
    – Promote platforms for shared and common analysis. Consortia of humanitarian, protection and peacebuilding actors can be one approach to facilitate this.

- **Ensure violence-reduction interventions are based on community agency, ownership and solutions.**
  - Ensure that these in turn are based on micro-local community stakeholder analysis.
  - Respect community norms, customs and values, which can support promoting restraint.

- **Build meaningful networks, linkages and communication channels in communities with those that have an interest in reducing violence, as well as those with an interest in perpetuating harm**, for example faith leaders, spiritual leaders, perpetrators, spoilers, national and local government.
  - To enable this requires higher risk tolerance, recognising that though these are more unpredictable actions and actors, their involvement is necessary for concrete outcomes to reduce violence, and support the agency of communities.

- **Strengthen and prioritise space for strategic platforms focused on reducing violence built on trusted, equal partnerships, using area-based approaches**.
  - To be effective, these will likely need to be developed around informal relationships and trust in advance of more formal coordination platforms.[9]
  - Ensure coordination platforms are focused around common objectives, shared analysis, cross learning, and joint action towards realising objectives. Seek ways to utilise technology to support this.
  - Work towards and incentivise true partnership approaches towards common outcomes.

- **Understand that working towards violence reduction objectives requires a realistic and shared theory of change, with layered approaches between humanitarian (protection) and peacebuilding action.**
  - Ensure specific, focused, targeted approaches that clearly demonstrate how activities contribute to reducing violence, and how such approaches are mutually reinforcing.
  - Design interventions that are adaptive, iterative and flexible – for example, by drawing on adaptive management approaches.

- **Use the full toolbox to reduce violence and promote peace.**
  - This includes considerations towards incentivising restraint and providing alternatives to the use of violence. Inevitably this will be beyond the remit of one actor alone.

- **Reconsider how humanitarian principles are understood, used and implemented.**
  - Ensure that the principle of humanity remains the goal, and impartiality the objective.
  - Understand that neutrality and independence are tools, and that compromises of principles may be necessary to achieve the goal of humanity.

---

9   For more information see CSRF (2022): 'Having informal relationships, networks and trust between humanitarians and peacebuilders provides a foundation for more formal coordination and collaboration'.

- **Scale up conflict-sensitive livelihoods programming, including in areas of high-intensity violence, as part of violence prevention/reduction programming.**

- **Continue to provide evidence and learning to donors and diplomatic actors on the costs of not proactively reducing violence, setting out why it is in their interest to support such initiatives.**
  - Use this evidence in order to influence the political will to meaningfully change ways of working.

5.1.2   UNMISS

- **Focus more on bottom-up approaches to supporting communities when seeking to reduce violence.**
  - Listen to communities.
  - Ensure community-level dialogue and relationship-building is sustained over the long term.
  - Recognise the role of civil society, national and international humanitarian, protection and peacebuilding organisations and complement them.

- **Recognise that despite the mandate of the mission, enhancing the protection of civilians, and building an environment for positive peace, requires ownership of communities, local and national government.**
  - This may require accepting and assuming more of a supporting and connecting role, while supporting national and local actors, including communities and civil society, to assume a leading role.

5.1.3   Donors and diplomatic actors

- **Create safe spaces for honest conversations with partners and key stakeholders on the benefits of proactively seeking to reduce violence.**
  - Do the same to allow discussion of the comparative advantage of different sets of actors in working towards this, and the risks of not prioritising conflict-sensitive approaches to reduce violence.

- **Prioritise funding of conflict-sensitive analytical capacity.**
  - Enable and insist that it informs programme adaptations.
  - Enable, incentivise and monitor programme pivots based on conflict-sensitivity analysis.

- **Incentivise complementary, layered approaches between humanitarian (protection) and peacebuilding action in realising common objectives.**
  - Incentivise and support more risk-tolerant approaches.

- **Promote and incentivise spaces for strategic dialogue based on equal partnerships and trust.**
  - Disincentivise organisations and individuals prioritising individual agency mandates and 'successes'.

- **Work in partnership with humanitarian and peace actors to design violence-reduction interventions and monitoring mechanisms that are long-term, flexible and adaptable.**
  - Insist on and support a realistic theory of change.
  - Instill good practice (the Peacebuilding Opportunities Fund is a good mechanism in this regard).

- **Reconsider the parameters of success.**
  - Acknowledge that facilitating dialogue, negotiations and mediation is as much about the process as the outcome.
  - Accept and support actions that may fall short of, or fail to achieve, intended results in the short term, but can strengthen effective solutions (and outcomes) in the long term.

References

Barbelet, V., Ekomo Soignet, K.M. and Yidong, M.C. (2023) *Community engagement with armed actors in the Central African Republic: preventing and reducing protection risks and violence.* HPG working paper. London: ODI (www.odi.org/en/publications/communityengagement-with-armed-actors-in-the-central-african-republic-preventing-and-reducing-protection-risks-and-violence).

Boswell, A., Yamanaka, N., Sarkar, A. and de Waal, A. (2019) *The security arena in South Sudan: political marketplace study.* London: London School of Economics and Political Science (http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/id/eprint/102894).

Cocking, J., McGoldrick, J., Finney, N., et al. (2022) *Independent review of the implementation of the IASC Protection Policy.* HPG report. London: ODI (https://odi.org/en/publications/independent-review-of-the-implementation-of-the-iasc-protection-policy/).

Comerford, M. (2022) *Towards dealing with the past in Greater Jonglei: learning from the Pieri Action Plan for Peace.* Juba: CSRF (www.csrf-southsudan.org/repository/towards-dealing-with-the-past-in-greater-jonglei-learning-from-the-pieri-action-plan-for-peace/).

Craze, J. (2020) *The politics of numbers: on security sector reform in South Sudan 2005–2020.* London: London School of Economic and Political Science's Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa (https://www.lse.ac.uk/africa/assets/Documents/Politics-of-Numbers-Joshua-Craze.pdf).

Craze, J. (2022) *When peace produces war: the case of South Sudan.* Riyadh: King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies (www.kfcris.com/en/view/post/371).

Craze, J. (2023a) 'Pay day loans and backroom empires: South Sudan's political economy since 2018'. Geneva: Small Arms Survey (https://smallarmssurvey.org/resource/pay-day-loans-and-backroom-empires-south-sudans-political-economy-2018).

Craze, J. (2023b) *Making markets: South Sudan's war economy in the 21st century.* Somerville, Massachusetts: World Peace Foundation (www.csrf-southsudan.org/repository/making-markets-south-sudans-war-economy-in-the-21st-century/).

Craze, J. (2023c) *Jemma's war: political strife in Western Equatoria.* Geneva: Small Arms Survey (www.smallarmssurvey.org/resource/jemmas-war-political-strife-western-equatoria).

CSRF – Conflict Sensitivity Resource Conflict (n.d.) 'About CSRF'. Webpage (www.csrf-southsudan.org/about-us/).

CSRF (2022) *Better together? Prospects and lessons for improving coordination and collaboration between humanitarians and peacebuilders in South Sudan.* Juba: CSRF (www.csrf-southsudan.org/repository/better-together-prospects-and-lessons-for-improving-coordination-and-collaboration-between-humanitarians-and-peacebuilders-in-south-sudan/).

CSRF (2023a) *Community engagement and the inter-agency collaboration across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus (HDP) in South Sudan.* Juba: CSRF (www.csrf-southsudan.org/repository/community-engagement-and-inter-agency-collaboration-across-the-humanitarian-development-peace-hdp-nexus-in-south-sudan/).

CSRF (2023b) *Adaptive management for aid in South Sudan: CSRF discussion paper.* Juba: Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility (www.csrf-southsudan.org/repository/1-csrf-discussion-paper-adaptive-management-for-aid-in-south-sudan/).

Da Costa, D. (2022) 'The Kabarze: a novel platform for women's involvement in age-set tensions'. Blog. Murle Heritage (www.murleheritage.com/videos/the-kabarze-womens-involvement-in-age-set-tensions).

Da Costa, D (2023) 'The politics of being Murle in South Sudan: state violence, displacement and the narrativisation of identity' *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 3: 404–423 (https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2023.2259547).

Davies, G., Bongard, P., Mayhew, L. and Barbelet, V. (2023) 'Community engagement, protection and peacebuilding: reviewing evidence and practice' *Humanitarian Exchange* 82: 6–11 (https://odihpn.org/publication/community-engagement-protection-and-peacebuilding-reviewing-evidence-and-practice/).

Dawkins, S., Oringa, C., Deng, D. and Pospisil, J. (2023) *Perceptions of peace in South Sudan: patterns in perceptions of safety since the 2018 R-ARCSS.* Edinburgh: PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform, University of Edinburgh (https://peacerep.org/publication/perceptions-of-peace-patterns-in-perceptions-of-safety-since-r-arcss/).

Deng, D. (2021) *Land, conflict and displacement in South Sudan: a conflict-sensitive approach to land governance.* Juba: CSRF (www.csrf-southsudan.org/repository/land-conflict-and-displacement-in-south-sudan-a-conflict-sensitive-approach-to-land-governance/).

Deng, D., Dawkins, S., Oringa, C. and Pospisil, J. (2022a) 'Policy brief on national identity: national survey on the perceptions of peace in South Sudan'. Edinburgh: PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform, University of Edinburgh (https://peacerep.org/publication/national-identity-perceptions-of-peace-in-south-sudan/).

Deng, D., Logo, K.H. and Pospisil, J. (2022b) *Evaluation report: RSRTF area-based program in Jonglei and the Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA).* Washington DC: DETCRO.

Diing, A., Gew, C. and Pendle, N. (2023) *Law during conflicts: Jonglei state and Greater Pibor Administrative Area.* Juba: The Bridge Network.

Dubois, M. (2020) *The triple nexus – threat or opportunity for the humanitarian principles?* Berlin: Centre for Humanitarian Action (www.chaberlin.org/en/publications/triple-nexus-threat-or-opportunity-for-the-humanitarian-principles-2/).

Everyday Peace Indicators (n.d.) 'EPI tool development'. Webpage (www.everydaypeaceindicators.org/epi-tool-development).

Gray, F. (2023) '"A different kind of weapon"? Nonviolent action and the protection of civilians in violent conflict'. D.Phil thesis, Australian National University.

Harriman, L., Drewry, I. and Deng, D. (2020) *"Like the military of the village": security, justice and community defence groups in south-east South Sudan.* London: Saferworld (www.saferworld-global.org/resources/publications/1245-alike-the-military-of-the-villagea-security-justice-and-community-defence-groups-in-south-east-south-sudan).

HACOF – Horn Africa Consultants Firm (2023) UNMISS Perception and Public Opinion Survey 2022–23. Juba: UNMISS (www.ecoi.net/en/document/2094123.html).

ICG – International Crisis Group (2014) *South Sudan: Jonglei- "we have always been at war"*. Brussels: International Crisis Group (www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/south-sudan/south-sudan-jonglei-we-have-always-been-war).

James, O. (2019) 'Neighbourhood advocacy forum strengthens civil-military relationships in Kapoeta'. UNMISS (https://unmiss.unmissions.org/neighborhood-advocacy-forum-strengthens-civil-military-relationship-kapoeta).

Jok, J.M., Schomerus, M., Kuol, L.B.D., et al. (2017) *Informal armies: community defence groups in South Sudan's civil war*. London: Saferworld (www.saferworld-global.org/resources/publications/1108-informal-armies-community-defence-groups-in-south-sudanas-civil-war).

McCrone, F. (2020) *Hollow promises: the risk of military integration in Western Equatoria*. Geneva: Small Arms Survey (www.smallarmssurvey.org/resource/hollow-promises-risks-military-integration-western-equatoria).

Murle Heritage (n.d.) 'Murle community of South Sudan'. Webpage (www.murleheritage.com/introducing-the-murle).

Oxford Policy Management (n.d.) 'South Sudan Peacebuilding Opportunities Fund'. Webpage (www.opml.co.uk/projects/south-sudan-peacebuilding-opportunities-fund).

Nonviolent Peaceforce (2022) *Interrupting cycles of violence: unarmed civilian protection in practice 2022*. Geneva: Nonviolent Peaceforce (https://nonviolentpeaceforce.org/ucp-in-context/).

Nonviolent Peaceforce (2024) *Interrupting gang violence: lessons learned from Juba IDP camp, South Sudan*. Geneva: Nonviolent Peaceforce (https://nonviolentpeaceforce.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/SNAPSHOT-Gang-Violence-Juba-IDP-Camp-1.pdf).

Peacebuilding Opportunities Fund (2021) 'Lessons learned #3: adaptive peacebuilding in Greater Jonglei'. Juba: CSRF (www.csrf-southsudan.org/repository/adaptive-peacebuilding-in-greater-jonglei/).

Pendle, N. (2021) 'Competing authorities and norms of restraint: governing community-embedded armed groups in South Sudan' *International Interactions* 47(5): 873–897 (https://doi.org/10.1080/03050629.2021.1918126).

Pieri Peace Agreement (2021) Lou Nuer-Dinka Bor-Murle Action for Peace, Jonglei State. Peace agreement signed 25/03/2021 (www.peaceagreements.org/view/2378).

Pinaud, C. (2021) *War and genocide in South Sudan*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.

Rosenblum-Kumar, G. (2023) 'As UN missions draw down, strengthening community led approaches to protection of civilians'. Blog. IPI Global Observatory, 23 May (https://theglobalobservatory.org/2023/05/as-un-missions-draw-down-strengthening-community-led-approaches-to-protection-of-civilians/).

Santschi, M. and Dong, J. (2023) *Working together for peace: recommendations for supporting local conflict prevention and resolution*. Geneva: Swisspeace (www.swisspeace.ch/articles/strengthening-local-conflict-prevention-and-resolution-mechanisms-in-south-sudan).

Save the Children International (2023) *Role of women and faith groups in community-led negotiations: internal case report on file with the access and civil-military relations unit*. London: Save the Children International.

Thomas, E. (2019) *Moving towards markets: cash, commodification and conflict in South Sudan.* Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute (https://riftvalley.net/publication/moving-towards-markets-cash-commodification-and-conflict-south-sudan/).

UN – United Nations (2021) *South Sudan Multi-Partner Trust Fund for Reconciliation, Stabilization, Resilience (South Sudan RSRTF).* Terms of Reference. New York: UN (https://mptf.undp.org/fund/ssr00).

UN (2023) *RSRTF Annual Report 2022.* Juba: RSRTF Fund Secretariat (https://mptf.undp.org/sites/default/files/documents/2023-08/2022_south-sudan_rsrtf_narrative_report.pdf).

UNMISS – UN Mission in South Sudan (n.d.) 'Mandate'. Webpage (https://unmiss.unmissions.org/mandate).

UNOHCHR – UN Office of the High Commissioner (2023) 'Statement by Andrew Clapham, Member of the Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan, to the Human Rights Council'. Statement, 7 March (www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2023/03/statement-andrew-clapham-member-commission-human-rights-south-sudan-human-rights).

UNSC – United Nations Security Council (2020a) *Situation in South Sudan: report of the Secretary-General.* Report S/2020/145. New York: UNSC (https://undocs.org/Home/Mobile?FinalSymbol=S%2F2020%2F145&Language=E&DeviceType=Desktop&LangRequested=False).

UNSC (2020b) *Situation in South Sudan: report of the Secretary-General.* Report S/2020/890. New York: UNSC (https://undocs.org/Home/Mobile?FinalSymbol=S%2F2020%2F890&Language=E&DeviceType=Desktop&LangRequested=False).

van der Spek, I., Schmidlin, N. and Diing, D.K. (2021) T*ambura: violence, displacement and response.* Juba: CRSF (www.csrf-southsudan.org/repository/tambura-violence-displacement-and-response/).

Watson, D. (2021) 'Surface tension: "communal" violence and elite ambitions in South Sudan'. ACLED (https://acleddata.com/2021/08/19/surface-tension-communal-violence-and-elite-ambitions-in-south-sudan/).

WFP – World Food Programme and CSRF (2020) *Adjusting Terminology for Organised Violence in South Sudan.* Juba: WFP and CSRF (www.csrf-southsudan.org/repository/adjusting-terminology-for-organised-violence-in-south-sudan/).

WFP (2021) *The World Food Programme and contributions to Peace in South Sudan.* Rome: WFP.

WFP (2022) *Measuring safety and security: a step-by-step guide.* Rome: WFP.

Wild, H., Jok, J.M. and Patel, R. (2018) 'The militarization of cattle raiding in South Sudan: how a traditional practice became a tool for political violence' *Journal of International Humanitarian Action* 2018: 3(2) (https://jhumanitarianaction.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s41018-018-0030-y).

The Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) is one of the world's leading teams of independent researchers and communications professionals working on humanitarian issues. It is dedicated to improving humanitarian policy and practice through a combination of high-quality analysis, dialogue and debate.