

Essential

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Working together for peace: Lessons learned from supporting local conflict prevention & resolution

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Publisher

swisspeace is a practice and research institute dedicated to advancing effective peacebuilding. Partnerships with local and international actors are at the core of our work. Together, we combine expertise and creativity to reduce violence and promote peace in contexts affected by conflicts.

About the project

The Assistance Mission for Africa (AMA), swisspeace and initially the Bridge Network implemented the European Union-funded project [Strengthening local conflict prevention and conflict resolution mechanisms](#) in Yirol East, Lakes state and Payinjiar Unity state, South Sudan from 2021 to 2023. The project aimed to identify good practices to contribute to sustainable peace and reconciliation at the local level.

The “Essentials” Series

Through its “Essentials” series, swisspeace offers expert advice and guidance for practitioners on various topics of civilian peacebuilding. This issue draws on lessons learned on the strengths and limitations of local level conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms in South Sudan for national and international practitioners working on peacebuilding in South Sudan and beyond.

Cover image

Ninrew Kuong Ninrew

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Introduction

- 1 These mechanisms vary depending on the source of conflict and context and include different actors. The term mechanisms is used throughout this paper.
- 2 The terms “local” and “local level” refer to actors, dynamics, institutions, knowledge, practices, and processes at the county, payam and boma levels in South Sudan.
- 3 World Food Programme (WFP) reported in October 2022 that about 7.76 million people face severe food insecurity. WFP 2022: Situation Report.

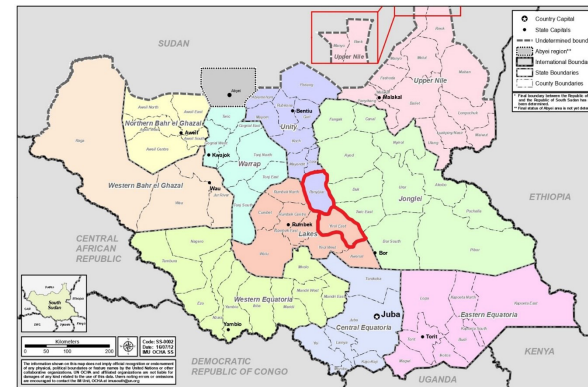
This paper, the next in swisspeace’s Essentials Series, shares findings and lessons learned on the role, strengths and limitations of local level conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms (CPRMs) amongst agro-pastoralists in Payinjiar County, Unity state, and Yirol East County, Lakes state, South Sudan.¹ These local level mechanisms play a crucial role in resolving disputes and preventing their escalation into armed violence, and have valuable insights and lessons for national and international practitioners and academia working on local level conflict prevention and resolution, as well as peacebuilding in South Sudan and beyond.

The signing of the peace agreement in 2018 substantially reduced fighting between the Government of South Sudan and armed opposition groups. However, since 2018 local level armed conflicts have intensified across South Sudan resulting in killings, displacement, and loss of assets in many South Sudanese states.² Violence has hampered access to basic goods and services, increased livelihood insecurity and contributed to the massive humanitarian crisis in South Sudan.³ Against this backdrop, locally rooted CPRMs have played a key role in fostering peace, albeit with varying levels of success. Therefore, it is crucial to have a better understanding of how these CPRMs function and identify best practices from different regions.

The research findings and insights shared in this paper are drawn from the European Union-funded project, [Strengthening local conflict prevention and conflict resolution mechanisms](#). Running from 2021 to early 2023, the project focused on two neighbouring counties in South Sudan, Yirol East in Lakes state and Payinjiar in Unity state. Both counties share agro-pastoralist and fishing livelihoods and similar socio-political systems, with residents of Yirol East speaking Dinka and Atuot, while Payinjiar residents speak Nuer. The frontlines of South Sudan’s civil war (2013 to 2018) separated the two

communities, with the government controlling Yirol East, and the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army in Opposition (SPLM/A-IO) holding Payinjiar. Despite this, the two communities avoided significant armed clashes during the civil war.⁴

Map Republic of South Sudan – Payinjiar and Yirol East highlighted⁵



The project involved a participatory practice-oriented study and a locally driven dialogue and learning process. For the study, research teams, including staff members of [swisspeace](#), the [Assistance Mission for Africa](#) (AMA) and the [Bridge Network](#) conducted key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) in both counties.⁶ Subsequent dialogue and learning events brought together key local conflict prevention and resolution actors to identify and discuss good practices, successful approaches, and to learn from each other’s experiences.^{7,8} Even though this project focused on two areas in South Sudan, based on swisspeace’s and AMA’s experience in other regions of South Sudan, the findings are relevant to other parts of the country and beyond.

- 4 Ryle J. and M. Amuom 2018: Peace is the Name of Our Cattle-Camp. Rift Valley Institute. Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility (CSRF) 2022: Yirol East and Payinjiar County Profiles. CSRF provides rich and helpful information on each county in the CSRF country profiles and on various topics, including conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and conflict sensitive aid in the CSRF repository.
- 5 UN OCHA 2012: Republic of South Sudan – Counties, as of 16 July 2012, accessed 16 January 2023.
- 6 50 interviews and 16 focus group discussions were conducted in Yirol East and Payinjiar. Respondents included local authorities, chiefs, church members, youth, women leaders, traders, cattle camp leaders, politicians, and spiritual authorities.
- 7 The learning process brought CRPMs from Yirol East and Payinjiar separately together in four meetings per county. In addition, CPRM representatives from Yirol East and Payinjiar met twice.
- 8 This paper also integrates findings of an October 2022 roundtable in Juba for South Sudanese and international peacebuilders working at the community-level.

1. Diversity, expertise, and adaptivity of local level conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms

⁹ See for example: Santschi M. 2014: "Traditional authorities, local justice and local conflict resolution mechanisms in South Sudan." In: Is Local Beautiful?, edited by S. Hellmüller and M. Santschi, 43–63. Springer.

¹⁰ County, payam and boma are the local government levels in South Sudan.

¹¹ Chief courts constitute part of the judiciary in South Sudan, with chief courts settling disputes according to customary law. Parties to the conflict can refer chief court cases to higher-level government courts. See, Leonardi C. et al. 2011: [Local Justice in Southern Sudan](#). United Institute of Peace (USIP)/ Rift Valley Institute.

A variety of actors with diverse roles engage in local level conflict prevention and resolution in South Sudan.⁹ This includes local government officials,¹⁰ chiefs, chief court members,¹¹ community and spiritual authorities, members of border and peace committees, women leaders, youth leaders, elders, clan heads, cattle camp leaders, traders, and traditional spiritual authorities such as Dinka spear masters and Nuer leopard skin chiefs and earth masters. Depending on the reason for and parties to the conflict, these actors help to settle disputes, reconcile conflicting parties, and disseminate messages of peace. During the project, respondents repeatedly underlined the importance of CPRMs in preventing or resolving conflicts and stressed their contribution to peace within and across county and state borders.

found to be flexible, locally owned and guided, based on local resources and knowledge, and a more sustainable and well-adapted option for those interested in supporting local peacebuilding. Furthermore, projects and project staff often do not continue after external funding ends, and local structures are often more resilient to crisis and continue to function when external support comes to an end.

CPRM members' decades of experience and vast expertise are an indispensable source of knowledge for conflict prevention and resolution at the local level. However, international, and national policymakers, practitioners and academics often discount their knowledge, as most CPRM members have no formal education, do not speak English, and do not use the aid community's concepts and jargon. Ignoring the expertise of local actors is lost opportunity for knowledge generation and context-adapted aid in South Sudan.

Chiefs date back to colonial native administration and form the lowest tier of the South Sudan's local government. Traditional spiritual authorities are from pre-colonial socio-political settings. Both groups currently play a crucial role in preventing and settling disputes and reconciling people in South Sudan. Chiefs fulfil various tasks - they act as intermediaries between the government and communities, informally and formally settle disputes, mobilize community members for public and aid campaigns, support aid actors in allocating assistance and, in some areas, collect taxes. Depending on the location, paramount chiefs are the most senior, followed by head or/and executive chiefs, sub-chiefs, and headmen. Community members can hold chiefs accountable by removing them.

¹² F. e. in the Pax Human Security Survey conducted in Payinjiar in May 2022, 85% of respondents noted "that dispute resolution between communities is best handled by local elders or chiefs".

Many CPRM members have significant experience with and expertise in conflict prevention, resolution, and reconciliation, having spent years resolving conflicts within and between their communities. Moreover, they are well acquainted with the local context and conflict dynamics, part of society and are often trusted by and accountable to community members.¹² CPRMs were

Depending on the conflict's cause, parties involved and location, different actors are involved in preventing and solving disputes. For example, settling disputes over payam administrative boundaries typically involves senior government authorities, politicians, and chiefs, while a dispute between relatives over a cow is usually addressed within the cattle camp and family by elders and family leaders. Church leaders solve disputes within their congregation, and also play an important role mediating local level and national level peace processes. In contrast, traditional spiritual authorities often play a crucial role in spiritually "separating" parties to the conflict, blessing peace agreements with sacrifices and compensation payments. Women and girls lead in mitigating family disputes and conflicts between women, for example at boreholes, in markets or food distribution sites, as well as give advice or counsel on sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). The youth settle disputes among themselves and reach

13 See analysis, Santschi M. and A. Mou 2022: Addressing livestock disputes with courts of former cattle camp leaders in Yirol East, Lakes state. Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility (CSRf).

14 DT Global was previously AECOM International.

out to cattle camp youth and youth from neighbouring communities to spread messages of peace.

This flexibility and adaptability of conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms are in part due to CPRMs' willingness to innovate, while remaining embedded in traditional practices. In Yirol East, former cattle camp leaders formed temporary mobile courts to settle livestock disputes and reduce the backlog of cases.¹³ In recent years, locally driven peace and reconciliation initiatives have contributed to halting revenge killings and fostered peace in Greater Yirol and Payinjiar. These initiatives included peace conferences, inter-clan reconciliation, peace awareness campaigns and meetings to settle tensions around political appointments. While some of these initiatives were locally driven, others were supported by state governments, politicians and intellectuals based in Juba, or South Sudanese and international organisations, including AMA, PAX, DT Global, the Rift Valley Institute (RVI) and the Catholic University of South Sudan.¹⁴

2. Changing context: From insecurity to peace?

Until 2021, widespread insecurity due to violence within and between Yirol East and Payinjiar counties impacted mobility, livelihoods, assets, and access to services in both counties. Participants associated armed violence with disputes over natural resources (mainly pasture, arable land, water sources, and fishing grounds), administrative boundaries, revenge killings, and conflict over livestock, including cattle raiding. In some cases, disputes related to marriage (elopement and bride wealth) escalated into armed clashes. Criminal activities such as road ambushes, rape and other forms of SGBV, and theft and looting of assets took place. Lack of rule of law, the availability of small arms, alcohol abuse, economic hardship, political instability, and influencing by national and state level actors, were identified as the key drivers of violence. In addition, widespread and devastating floods since 2019 have seriously affected communities along the Nile, such as Payinjiar, leading to displacement, loss of livestock and household assets, increased economic hardship, and contestations over land.

15 Question to incoming Commissioner in Payinjiar, September 2021.

“Who is protecting my property if I do not protect my property with a gun?”¹⁵

The consequences of insecurity included attacks and armed conflict and posed risks to women and men grazing livestock in remote areas, working in fields, collecting firewood, and traveling long distances. Revenge killings targeted any relative or community member of the individuals involved, leaving entire families feeling threatened when visiting towns or traveling to villages where rival families lived. This led to civilians feeling themselves and their property was not safe and arming themselves. Insecurity also affected local authorities' conflict prevention and

16 According to the [PAX Human Security Survey](#) in Payinjiar and Yirol East the security situation has improved within and between the two communities since 2021.

17 Statement by a peace practitioner during a meeting in Juba, October 2022.

resolution work, as many chiefs felt threatened by armed offenders and worried that they would be the target of revenge killing by convicted delinquents.

Since 2021, the security situation has improved within and between Yirol East and Payinjiar, with respondents ascribing the changed security situation to new executive members at the state and county level who have deliberately improved their provision of security and enforced the rule of law.¹⁶ As a result, individuals and groups involved in cattle raiding, road ambushes, revenge killings, attacks, and other criminal activities, have been pursued, arrested and jailed in Yirol East and Payinjiar. Some culprits have allegedly been executed. According to respondents, fear and threats are used to prevent community members from engaging in criminal activities and violence.

Moreover, awareness raising by state and local authorities, CPRMs, and aid organisations about the importance of the rule of law led to communities recognising that violence does not benefit them, but leads to loss of cattle, property, and human lives. As a result, community members began to cooperate with local authorities and discourage youth from raiding and taking revenge. Initially, however, armed youth refused to return raided livestock and fought local authorities, particularly in Payinjiar. Cooperation across county and state boundaries also increased, with authorities from neighbouring communities now returning raided livestock. The County Commissioner in Payinjiar, for example, sent raided livestock back to Yirol East County, and livestock owners from Yirol East received stolen livestock from Yirol West and other parts of Lakes state. Due to these changes, community members increasingly trusted local authorities and began to settle disputes and conflicts peacefully, without taking the law into their own hands.

“Now, people know where to go if something happens and they trust the rule of law institutions. That was missing before.”¹⁷

The improved security has positively impacted on the everyday lives of Payinjiar and Yirol East residents. Traders, cattle keepers, and travellers can now move securely along roads, in the bush, pasture and forest, both within and between the two counties. Women feel much safer collecting water, firewood and grass and cultivating more distant fields. Children walk to school and people sleep outside at night or meet for large social gatherings.

“Peace means when people dance together, conduct marriages, eat and camp together with their opponents.”¹⁸

While respondents welcomed the improved security situation, as it has allowed CPRMs to function better, successfully solve disputes, and to prevent armed conflict, others questioned its sustainability. They noted it is based on the severe enforcement of rule of law by security forces.¹⁹ Some respondents expressed concerns that any decrease in the security forces' engagement could lead to insecurity, thereby undermining the CPRMs' work and negatively impacting communities, as the CPRMs direct influence on the security situation is limited. A key concern was the sustainability of using fear and law enforcement to “enforce” peace, stressing the need to address the complex, underlying economic and social root causes of armed conflict to create sustainable, positive peace.

18 Interview with a spiritual authority in Payinjiar, September 2021.

19 Due to the improved security situation f.e. armed youth no longer pose a threat to chiefs who convict them.

It was suggested that authorities and aid actors need to address the key drivers of armed conflict and to foster positive peace by integrating peacebuilding and governance (including the rule of law) into humanitarian and development aid. In addition, respondents highlighted the importance of community-led positive conflict prevention, mitigation, and resolution initiatives to bring sustainable peace.

3. Winning over cattle camp youth and spiritual authorities to foster peace

In Yirol East and Payinjiar, cattle camp youth and spiritual authorities were identified as key actors linked to insecurity and armed violence, with accusations of cattle raiding and other violent activities by cattle camp youth who were mobilised and spiritually protected by spiritual authorities. While cattle camp youth and spiritual authorities were identified as key sources of insecurity, at the same time, it was also emphasised that they can have a significant positive role in ending armed violence and making peace.

Cattle camp youth are young men and women who live in cattle camps and care for their relatives' and community members' livestock. The cattle camp youth are responsible for securing access to water and pasture for livestock, defending livestock against attacks from other groups, and also raid livestock from other groups, using force and arms. They move with livestock seeking pastures over long distances, often to remote areas, and spend the dry season in the floodplains.

[“The youth are armed, and it is very difficult to speak with someone who is armed.”²⁰](#)

Although respondents pointed at cattle camp youth, spiritual authorities, and “criminals” (a vague concept) as the main perpetrators creating insecurity, political and military actors can also contribute to local violence. Local level armed violence is not necessarily only fuelled by inter- and intra-communal disputes. It can also be triggered and influenced by state and national level political and military interests.²¹ Critical voices accused state and national level actors of mobilizing and arming youth for their own political or economic interests.

²⁰ CPRM member who attended a meeting in Payinjiar in July 2022.

²¹ For further elaborations, see: CSRF and World Food Programme 2020: Guidance framework for understanding different forms of violence and their implications in South Sudan.

22 Doing this, they refer to concepts of accountability that may differ from international notions of accountability. CSRF 2020: [Lost in Translation: The interaction between international humanitarian aid and South Sudanese accountability systems.](#)

In addition to blessing armed youth before cattle raiding, spiritual authorities also engage in conflict prevention and resolution activities. Spiritual leaders conduct rituals and make sacrifices to reconcile parties at peace conferences and during compensation negotiations. For instance, after a homicide, negotiations for compensation payments usually start with the visit to a spiritual leader, who initiates the compensation process and can protect the culprit from attacks by the victim's family. Similar to chiefs, political and military actors, spiritual leaders have a dual role: under certain circumstances, they mobilize to defend community assets and objectives²² or advance their own political and military interests, while also having a positive role in resolving conflicts and making peace. Working with and having the support of spiritual leaders for peace and conflict resolution can significantly improve security, while overlooking or ignoring them can contribute to insecurity.

Cattle camp youth often live and travel in remote areas, far from roads, cell phone access, and administrative headquarters. This makes integrating them into conflict prevention and resolution more challenging than engaging with youth in urban areas, who also often speak English. During learning and dialogue meetings, CPRM representatives recognised they have not adequately involved cattle camp youth in their activities. In response, in Payinjiar a youth group that recurrently attended CRPM learning and dialogue meetings reached out to cattle camp youth to discuss returning raided cattle. The participating youth group concluded that this exchange contributed to the return of raided cattle by the cattle camp youth.

The barriers to engaging spiritual leaders are varied. Some church-based organisations exclude traditional spiritual leaders, due to their pre-Christian religious traditions. In other cases, individuals involved in conflict resolution reject engaging with spiritual leaders

due to allegations that some are linked to armed violence or avoid them due to fear of their spiritual power. After some conflict-sensitive persuasion, CPRM members began involving spiritual leaders in their meetings and initiatives, which had a positive impact that was appreciated by both groups.

For the aid community and government officials reaching and working with cattle camp youth and spiritual leaders can be challenging, as they can be hard to reach geographically and have different priorities and world views. Both groups focus on traditional, rural (agro-)pastoralist livelihoods and have more traditional concepts of conflict and peace, within a socio-cultural context where the defence of community assets is crucially important. Despite the logistical, language and normative challenges, however, it is not only possible, but crucial to include actors such as cattle camp youth and spiritual authorities.²³

23 The [Peace Canal](#) works closely with cattle camp youth and spiritual leaders in Jonglei state, Greater Pibor Administrative Areas and Greater Rumbek, Lakes state, constituting a successful example to learn from.

4. Gender roles, gendered norms, conflict, and conflict resolution

24 Logo K. et al. 2022: [Gender norms, conflict sensitivity and transition in South Sudan](#). CSRF.

25 Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan 2022: [Conflict-related sexual violence against women and girls in South Sudan](#).

26 Ibid.

South Sudan has a deeply patriarchal society, with gender roles and gendered norms shaping armed conflict, conflict resolution and conflict prevention.²⁴ Men hold more political and military positions than women at the national, state, and local levels, and play a more visible role in conflict prevention and resolution. Women and girls are often victims of armed conflict, and in South Sudan conflict-related SGBV targeting women and girls is pervasive and systematic.²⁵ Women and girls, however, do engage significantly and strategically in mitigating conflicts.

In South Sudan where patriarchal social norms and practices shape gender relations, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and gender inequality are prevalent even during peaceful times. During armed conflict, which is widespread in South Sudan, many women and girls experience SGBV by armed men who are rarely held accountable for their crimes. Conflict-related sexual violence can be related to societal revenge or driven “by military or political objectives to punish members of an entire geographic or ethnic community for their perceived association with the enemy, or to forcibly remove them from territories.”²⁶

During interviews and meetings, it emerged that women and girls mitigate disputes in diverse settings, including at boreholes, in families, and within and between women’s groups. Female church leaders underlined the importance of peace, rule of law and conflict resolution during church services. Moreover, women actively mediate disputes related to SGBV that could escalate into intra-communal violence, and in one rape case, women convinced the victim’s family to open a court case, rather than taking the law into their own hands.

Women and girls are considered more neutral than men, particularly young men who are associated with community defence and militarized forms of

masculinity. Traditional rules of warfare dictate women and girls should not be targeted by armed clashes and violence, and thus they fill a unique niche during armed conflict: if traditional rules of warfare are followed, they can move between communities in conflict, acting as messengers of peace and mediators.

Yet, women can also instigate violence by celebrating and praising warriors and raiders as heroes and ridiculing boys and men unwilling to take revenge or join raids, thereby reinforcing social notions of masculinity that associate men with warfare. During learning and dialogue meetings, CPRM members, including women, underlined the importance of women not celebrating men returning from cattle raiding. Instead, they should, as some women in Payinjiar and Yirol East already try to do, convince their husbands and sons not to engage in fighting and cattle raiding, demonstrating that women’s and girls’ influence can prevent cattle raids and encourage the return of raided cattle.

In Yirol East and Payinjiar, armed violence and SGBV have negatively impacted women and girls. CPRMs like women’s groups, church leaders and youth groups seek to draw attention to their concerns by exchanging with court members, other CPRMs and community members to discuss SGBV and advocate for human rights and gender equality. Nonetheless, female CPRM members highlighted that CPRMs do not pay adequate attention to gender equality and SGBV. Not surprisingly, female CPRM members felt that they are better suited than male members to settle conflicts between women, and both female and male CPRM members recommended that rape and forced and early marriage should be punished with severe penalties and called for more advocacy against early marriage.²⁷

While prevalent narratives usually point at young men, particularly cattle camp youth, as perpetrators of insecurity, respondents highlighted those young men

27 Recommendations from meeting with CPRM representatives from Yirol East and Payinjiar, September 2022.

28 Human Rights Division United Nations Mission in South Sudan 2022: Brief on Violence Affecting Civilians, April to June 2022.

29 Logo K. et al. 2022: Gender norms, conflict sensitivity and transition in South Sudan. CSRF.

30 See Sommers M. and S. Schwartz 2011: Dowry and Division: Youth and State Building in South Sudan. USIP.

face diverse challenges and were themselves victims of violence, as South Sudan has a long history of forceful conscription of men into armed groups or government forces.²⁸ Communities often pressure young men to conform to militarized notions of masculinity that associate young men with bravery, success in warfare and defending their communities and assets.²⁹

Lastly, marriage – a required, crucial step into adulthood and starting a family in South Sudan – can contribute to armed violence. Within agro-pastoralist communities, cattle ownership denotes status and wealth and is needed to marry and have children. For young men from poorer families, cattle raiding is often the only way to acquire the livestock needed to pay the bride price.³⁰ Furthermore, when families reject impoverished young men as their daughters' future husbands some couples elope, which can spark intra- and inter-communal violence. Including youth groups (young men and women) in conflict prevention and resolution initiatives provides them with the opportunity to raise their concerns and the pressures they face, including the social norms and economic obligations that create incentives for young men to participate in activities that could lead to armed conflict.

5. Exchange, coordination and cooperation of local conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms

CPRM members face various challenges, including limited resources, inconsistent access to communication and transport to facilitate frequent meetings, reach parties in conflict and to do regular outreach for peacebuilding. In Payinjiar, no mobile phone network existed until September 2022, with CPRMs, state and local authorities, and communities relying on HF radios and satellite phones to communicate. This severely limited CPRMs' and authorities' ability to communicate, provide early warnings, and cooperate within Payinjiar, as well as communications between authorities in Yirol East and Payinjiar.

Before the [Strengthening local conflict prevention and conflict resolution mechanisms](#) project began holding regular meetings for CPRMs in Yirol East and Payinjiar, they interacted on an irregular basis, working mainly within their respective groups and communities. During learning and dialogue meetings, it emerged that members of different CRPMs often saw each other as competitors, rather than collaborators, only coming together to solve urgent problems but not sharing experiences.

Recurrent exchanges brought together members from different CPRMs, including women, youth, and spiritual leaders. The approach used was purposefully inclusive, bringing in actors who are often not well represented in joint activities around conflict prevention and resolution. Women participated as members of different CPRMs, including women's groups, youth groups, church leaders, and peace committees. Women proactively engaged in these meetings, in decision making, and assumed leadership positions - in Payinjiar even a female chief took part.³¹ A participant noted because of women's active contribution, men changed their attitudes towards women and their inputs, and men were increasingly encouraging women to contribute actively during meetings.

31 Women acted as translators and as deputy focal point for the CPRMs in Yirol East.

32 Female participant at Yirol East and Payinjiar event for CPRMs in Payinjiar, November 2022.

33 Suggestion by a chief in Yirol East in during mapping and analysis in August 2021

“As women, we are reaching out to the community freely; we are welcome in the community like heroes because we preach peace and that [respect and appreciation of women peacemakers] was not the case before.”³²

The meetings facilitated by the project. Strengthening local conflict prevention and conflict resolution mechanisms have allowed members from different CPRMs to meet in person and learn about their roles and respective fields of engagement. Moreover, the recurrent meetings helped CPRM members to identify overlaps, conflict-related gaps, and opportunities for cooperation, providing a valuable opportunity to discuss underlying challenges and lessons learned. As a result, members know who to contact when there are tensions and be more proactive and forward looking in addressing conflict drivers. The exchange also allowed CPRMs to jointly develop solutions and recommendations for arising issues, and they are increasingly working together. Cooperation and coordination have improved the impact of their work and made it more efficient, highlighting the importance of continuing regular discussions and working together for peace within and between Yirol East and Payinjiar.

“I suggest to hold annual meetings to discuss what was achieved, what not and why we do not achieve it and then to decide on the way forward.”³³

Relations between Payinjiar and Yirol East

Despite the recent cattle raiding and attacks on traders, in the past Yirol East and Payinjiar had relatively stable inter-communal relations, including mutually providing refuge and support in times of crisis, trading, sharing resources and inter-marrying.³⁴ As a result of these relations, during the most recent civil war when Yirol East was government-held and the armed opposition controlled Payinjiar, the two communities did not engage in severe attacks. Mobility across the frontline, however, was difficult, which negatively impacted on the relations between the two communities. Support from AMA, DT Global and RVI has improved exchanges between the two counties.³⁵

During the mapping and analysis, as well as the learning and dialogue process, CPRM members from Yirol East and Payinjiar asked to be brought together to address disputes and other issues affecting the relationship between the two counties. In 2021, these issues included concerns about flood-displaced IDPs from Payinjiar in Yirol East, access to and control of natural resources, such as pasture in the border area between Yirol East and Payinjiar, attacks on Payinjiar traders, livestock raiding and the lack of agreement on compensation procedures between the two counties.

The relations between Payinjiar and Yirol East have further improved, and based on the enhanced relations, some of the concerns raised by CPRMs at the project's start have been addressed. Nowadays, travellers, including traders and individuals requiring medical treatment, can freely and safely move between the two counties. Moreover, IDPs from Payinjiar live in Yirol East and receive support from the local authorities, host communities and IDPs organize joint social and cultural activities, and IDP children attend schools. In addition, cattle keepers from Payinjiar moved with their livestock to Yirol East and stay in host community cattle camps,

34 For more information on the historical relation between Dinka and Nuer speaking communities in this region, see: Pendle N. 2017: Contesting the militarization of the places where they met: the landscapes of the western Nuer and Dinka (South Sudan). *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 11(1), pp.64-85.

35 In May 2021, RVI, the Catholic University of South Sudan and AMA hosted a meeting in Nyial, Payinjiar county between Dinka chiefs from different states and their Nuer counterparts in. Amuom M. 2021: [What Happened at Wunlit? Reliving South Sudan's most successful peace conference](#). RVI.

36 During meetings and outcome harvesting, both CRPM members and non-members suggested CPRMs contributed to these changes.

37 Statement by Payinjiar CPRM member who attended the Payinjiar event, November 2022.

cattle raids have decreased, and raided cattle have been returned. Finally, a further positive sign is that marriages between members of host and IDP communities are taking place, an indicator of good community relations. The CPRMs feel they contributed to these changes by facilitating meetings between host community and IDPs to discuss concerns and settling disputes among IDPs, as well as between hosts and IDPs.³⁶

“Things have changed a lot in the last two years. Right now, people move freely between Payinjiar and Yirol East. My brother-in-law felt sick. We did not have enough resources to take him to Juba or Khartoum. A Dinka family friend informed us that the person could be treated in Mapuordit Hospital in Yirol if he could be carried there. That was exactly what we did.”³⁷

Compensation payments

Since the project’s onset, the two communities have progressed in exchanging livestock-based compensation payments for homicide. Compensation only happens when communities are at peace.

Customary law, part of South Sudan’s legal system, recognises compensation. The extended family of a perpetrator is expected to pay the victim’s family compensation in the form of livestock. Compensation allows the victim’s family to marry and have children on behalf of the deceased, whose name and line will continue to exist through the offspring. Compensation has several components: it acknowledges the loss of life and punishes the perpetrator. The threat of having to pay compensation for unruly relatives fosters social control and can help to prevent violence. Lastly, the compensation payments and rituals seek to reconcile the parties. Usually, the family of a victim can choose between a compensation payment, or a statutory law verdict related to homicide which could result in a lengthy prison sentence or the death penalty.

During the mapping and analysis phase of the project, respondents from both communities called for compensation payments between Yirol East and Payinjiar, arguing that they would effectively mitigate conflict, reduce revenge killings and violence, and foster peaceful coexistence between the two counties.

38 Participant from Yirol East who attended the last event in Payinjiar, November 2022.

“If compensation is delayed, it is very difficult to calm the people down.”³⁸

To support the compensation processes, CPRM members from Yirol East and Payinjiar called for a harmonized and uniform approach to compensation. At an early November 2022 meeting in Payinjiar, CPRM representatives agreed on specific numbers of heads of cattle for compensation payments between the two communities. A participant stated that this was the first such exchange in the history of this region. The remaining step is for CPRMs to lobby and convince the

39 Facilitator of the last event in Payinjiar, November 2022.

state authorities on both sides to ratify the CPRM representatives suggestions and implement the agreement.

The discussions and negotiations between Payinjiar and Yirol East around compensation demonstrate the effectiveness of recurrent meetings. They allowed CPRM members from both counties to discuss issues of crucial importance, learn from each other, and jointly develop solutions for arising problems. Bringing them together allowed participants to learn about each other, understand the neighbouring community's perspectives and constraints, and develop a shared understanding of conflict dynamics. Moreover, it provided opportunities to build trust and strengthen relationships across county boundaries and create a community of actively engaged peacebuilders that reached across county boundaries.³⁹

Suggestions for continued cooperation and future activities

During the November 2022 meeting in Payinjiar, participants were optimistic and motivated, and decided to continue their exchange and meetings not only within but between the two counties. The CPRM members wanted to continue coordinating their efforts as peace actors to achieve better results and maintain security and good relations. In their exchanges, CPRM members underlined the importance of continued cooperation for sustainable peace in the region and South Sudan.

“This dialogue is not only benefitting Payinjiar and Yirol East counties, but it is also far-reaching to other locations in Unity and Lakes states and, indeed, “South

Sudan through messaging. If we continue these dialogues, we will even contribute to the peace of the entire South Sudan.”⁴⁰

Considering their lack of resources for recurrent meetings between the two communities, CPRM representatives chose focal points in Yirol East and Payinjiar. The focal points will proactively reach out to each other and their respective authorities if there are any concerning developments that could affect the two communities. In addition, CPRM representatives stressed the importance of lobbying other organisations and donors to address financial gaps and support them in the future.

Regarding future activities, CPRM members planned a meeting in early 2023 to discuss shared border pastures between Yirol East and Payinjiar. In addition, they suggested a dialogue with neighbouring communities along the Nile to address insecurity affecting traders and disputes over fishing grounds and taxation, as well as calling for a joint court⁴¹ and police to be established in the border region to settle disputes and provide rule of law. More generally, their priorities also included uniform disarmament, vocational training and livelihood opportunities for youth, as well as building a road between Yirol East and Payinjiar, improving communication infrastructure and constructing a market and peace centre on the counties' border to enhance social interactions between residents. Finally, CPRM members plan to seek financial support and training on trauma healing, mediation, and peacebuilding. To implement some of these suggestions and recommendations, CPRMs, including local authorities, need state-level authorities to endorse their recommendations, and aid actors to provide both financial and technical support.

40 Participant from Payinjiar who attended the last event in Payinjiar, November 2022.

41 The border court to settle disputes involving individuals from the two communities, including compensation payments.

6. Methods to put local expertise and approaches at the centre stage

The approach used by the [Strengthening local conflict prevention and conflict resolution mechanisms](#) project for its research and learning processes was adaptive and flexible. Using an adaptive approach to methodologies and planning allowed the project to take suggestions and emerging findings into account and to adapt activities accordingly. This allowed swisspeace and AMA to put South Sudanese local knowledge, expertise, and approaches at the centre of identifying issues, proposing, and then implementing solutions. As a result, there was less emphasis on external expertise and training as the starting point for conflict resolution and prevention initiatives at the community level. Findings from the project confirmed that valuing and drawing on local key actors' expertise and experience is crucial to preventing and resolving conflicts in a more context-embedded, conflict-sensitive, locally-driven, and sustainable manner.

Cooperation with South Sudanese organisations

South Sudanese organisations are often crucial entry points and catalysts for engaging with local CPRMs and working with national organisations who have a mutually respectful and trusting relationship with local authorities and community leaders. Their staff are often well acquainted with the context and current conflict dynamics, personally know members of local CPRMs, and are familiar with the needs and priorities of authorities and communities, as well as the local political economy of aid. Good relations are vital for the buy-in of local authorities and community members, designing and implementing activities and for managing the often-high expectations of authorities and community leaders vis-a-vis aid actors.

South Sudanese staff members often know key stakeholders such as county and payam authorities, chiefs, and local civil society organisations, which allows them to effectively engage with them when

designing and implementing activities. Moreover, South Sudanese staff from the area speak the local languages and know local cultural concepts and values well, while expatriates or national staff from other regions can face challenges in understanding complex and often idiosyncratic local perceptions, norms, and practices of communities. This leaves South Sudanese working with national or local organisations playing a key role as intermediaries who can help to translate local ideas, concepts, norms, and processes for external actors.

Focussing on local expertise and knowledge

Participatory research and learning and dialogue processes – two approaches applied in the [Strengthening local conflict prevention and conflict resolution mechanisms](#) project – put local knowledge and expertise at the centre of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of activities. Participatory research builds on local key actors' insights, interpretations, perceptions, and experiences and directly engages them in the research process.⁴² Local actors' extensive knowledge of the local context contributes to external actors having a better understanding of current conflict dynamics, key actors in conflict prevention and resolution, and how CPRMs are working to prevent and resolve conflict.

Directly involving South Sudanese practitioners in research proved essential for designing context-adapted and conflict-sensitive activities, as they were well acquainted with the context, local languages and participatory methods.⁴³ During the research, CPRM representatives were oriented on the project and their insights and suggestions helped in the design and adaptation of the subsequent learning and dialogue processes.

⁴² The Rift Valley Institute uses approaches that put South Sudanese expertise at the centre of their work, f.e. in the South Sudan Customary Authorities Project.

⁴³ RVI works closely with young South Sudanese scholars in both research and practice-oriented work.

44 [FAO, UNICEF and WFP 2022: Hunger and malnutrition being driven by climate crisis and conflict in South Sudan.](#)

45 Statements by peace practitioner during a meeting in Juba, early October 2022.

46 See the [Creditor Reporting System \(CRS\) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development \(OECD\) for South Sudan.](#)

Holistic and integrated approach to peacebuilding

Chiefs, local authorities, community members and other key stakeholders in local conflict resolution and prevention, as well as national NGOs, have tended to apply a more holistic and integrated approach to peace and conflict resolution than external actors. The CPRMs' analysis, shared by many local actors, sees achieving lasting and sustainable peace as inextricably linked to addressing deeper socio-economic and political considerations such as food insecurity, the livelihood crisis, and social divisions. However, unlike some humanitarian and peacebuilding actors, many local actors do not segregate their activities based on narrow funding or sectoral considerations or see value in taking that approach.

Currently, armed conflict is seen as a primary driver of high levels of food insecurity affecting many parts of South Sudan. Reflecting their more holistic perspective, many South Sudanese organisations and local level actors feel that peacebuilding should be integrated into all aid interventions.⁴⁴ Peace and peacebuilding activities, however, do not receive the same level of attention and funding as humanitarian activities, according to South Sudanese practitioners and corroborated by independent research.⁴⁵ This disparity is reflected in donor funding for South Sudan – in 2021 approximately USD 40 million was spent on “civilian peacebuilding, conflict prevention and resolution”, compared to the approximately USD 874 million allocated to “humanitarian assistance”.⁴⁶

National NGOs tend to be more deeply embedded in communities than their international counterparts. As a result, their priorities and approaches reflect those of the communities in which they work, and national NGOs often have a longer-term approach to conflict transformation and socio-economic change. Not surprisingly, national NGOs in practice often work

across silos, implementing activities that integrate humanitarian, peacebuilding, and development objectives. However, this creates challenges for many national NGOs, as their preferred programme design does not necessarily comply with funding schemes and programme designs that are often more rigid and disaggregated into peacebuilding, humanitarian aid and development focused activities.

As demonstrated by the allocation of funding, the aid architecture tends to re-enforce siloed approaches to the design, funding, and implementation of aid projects. Funding for peace building activities in South Sudan, which seek to address the social, political and economic inequities that are fuelling the humanitarian crisis, is a fraction of the funding provided for humanitarian assistance. Given the current funding environment, increasing the overall level of funding for South Sudan is not feasible. With the increased commitment to operationalising the triple nexus in South Sudan, however, there are opportunities for humanitarians and peacebuilders to collaborate more effectively with each other, as well as local actors, and ensure that humanitarian activities more purposefully contribute to peace.⁴⁷

47 The [South Sudan Partnership for Recovery and Resilience](#) is a collective of donors, UN Agencies and NGOs trying to foster cooperation between peacebuilding and humanitarian programs. See Gworo R. and J. Muorwel 2021: [Making or Breaking Silos? Resilience programming in South Sudan.](#) CSRF.

7. Conclusions and recommendations

Participatory research and analysis allowed the project to gain crucial insights into current conflict dynamics, local norms and practices, key actors, and the role, opportunities, limitations and needs of CPRMs. These insights provided relevant and context-sensitive input into the project's design and implementation, ensuring it did not undermine the CPRMs, and fostering local ownership. It is critical that international and South Sudanese organisations working with CPRMs do not overrule them and reduce the traditional and local legitimacy of the CPRMs.

The research and the subsequent joint dialogue and learning process found that a holistic approach addressing both the root causes and impact of conflict is critical to achieving sustainable peace in Payinjar, Yirol East and beyond in South Sudan. Yet, for many external actors effectively integrating peacebuilding, governance (including rule of law and justice), humanitarian aid and development activities remains elusive. Local actors, however, who have a more holistic understanding and analysis of the context, often find themselves only able to secure funding for activities that are prioritised and designed by external actors. Despite commitments by the aid community to operationalise a triple nexus approach, structural barriers continue to inhibit the allocation of adequate financial resources for peacebuilding work, acceptance by both donors and their implementing partners of flexible processes with uncertain outcomes, and adaptive funding schemes that support, but do not overwhelm, local actors.

Recommendations

Draw on local norms, practices, knowledge, expertise, and solutions. Participatory research, learning and adaptive project management can put local knowledge, expertise, and solutions, as well as norms and practices at the centre of activities supporting local conflict

prevention and resolution. Doing so requires that national and international policymakers, practitioners, and academics acknowledge and value the expertise of local actors, many of whom do not speak English and are not formally educated, as well as respect local norms and culture. Local actors, including chiefs, fulfil various vital tasks within their communities, and external actors should recognize their time is limited and valuable, and treat it as such. There is a risk, however, if external actors overrule CPRMs' authority or disregard their priorities, of undermining or negatively influencing CPRMs, thereby weakening or making them unsustainable. It is essential to mitigate this risk and to collaborate with CPRMs in a conflict-sensitive way.

Be willing to engage with actors who took part in or supported armed violence. External actors must carefully navigate the potentially divergent and contradictory priorities, standards and needs of CPRMs and their communities. During discussions it emerged that under certain circumstances, cattle camp youth, spiritual authorities, and political and military actors are the alleged perpetrators of insecurity or mobilised for and instigated armed violence. In other situations, engaging these groups is key to settling disputes and preventing armed violence. It is crucial that external actors work with local actors who have a deep and nuanced understanding of these groups' roles and various interests in violence, conflict resolution and peace building.

Actively reach out to and work with "hard" to reach actors. Cattle camp youth and spiritual leaders are key actors in addressing armed violence. However, they are more challenging to reach than other conflict prevention and resolution actors because they tend to live far away from administrative headquarters. Using a conflict sensitive approach to engaging with cattle camp youth and spiritual leaders in conflict resolution and peacebuilding is very important, and meetings and

mobile campaigns that engage with cattle camp youth need to take place in cattle camps. If direct encounters between different cattle camp youth groups are not possible, meetings can take place separately until trust is developed with the support of an intermediary or a mediator. Engaging them requires flexibility, mobility and adequate resources and innovative tools to reach out to them and to keep them involved.

Ensure that gender and gendered norms are considered in conflict resolution: Gender and gendered norms in South Sudan shape armed conflict, conflict resolution and conflict prevention. Women and girls disproportionately fall victim to sexual violence and gender-based violence in South Sudan and it is crucial to explore issues related to SGBV further with CPRMs using a context-, gender- and conflict-sensitive approach. At the same time, women and girls should not simply be seen as victims, but also have their agency recognised, as they play a critical role in both fuelling conflict and mitigating and resolving it, which is increasingly recognised by communities. Meanwhile, young men are often seen as perpetrating violence, with the social pressures for them to conform to gendered norms not necessarily considered. In South Sudan's deeply patriarchal society, men, particularly young men, face significant societal pressure to conform to gendered norms. When working with young men and other CPRM members, it is crucial to consider how such social norms can force boys and men to join armed conflicts and engage in conflict-related SGBV. This calls for a nuanced, conflict and gender-sensitive approach to engaging with young women and men in peacebuilding.

Engage with higher level authorities. CPRM representatives came up with several suggestions, which they as local level actors cannot implement on their own, including stricter punishment of gender-based violence, harmonization of compensation payments, and developing the road between Payinjar

and Yirol East. Instead, they need the buy-in, approval or support of the county commissioner and the state-level authorities. Increased exchanges and interaction between CPRMs and higher-level institutions would allow CPRMs to inform, lobby, and cooperate with state-level institutions more directly. Networking and strengthening the ties between state and national government institutions and the local CPRMs would contribute to strengthening and improving the longer-term impact of local conflict prevention and resolution initiatives.

About the authors

Dr. Martina Santschi is senior researcher/senior program officer at swisspeace. Martina has been working on South Sudan since 2007 covering various topics, including local justice, local governance, local conflict resolution, land governance, statebuilding and international aid. She has been involved in research, including extensive field research for her doctoral thesis, and practice-oriented projects for/supported by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, the Rift Valley Institute, the United States Institute for Peace, the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium, the Swiss National Science Foundation and the Swiss Network for International Studies.

Reverend James Ninrew Dong is the founder of the faith-based NGO Assistance Mission for Africa (AMA) and is a member of several boards of South Sudanese NGOs. In his work, Reverend James Ninrew is a human right activist, has been working in the fields of gender and social justice, peace and protection livelihood and capacity development in South Sudan. Since 1995, Reverend James Ninrew has been the pastor of the Presbyterian Church of South Sudan and since March 2022 he was elected as the head of the Presbyterian Church of South Sudan (PCoSS), the 34th PCoSS Moderator of the General Assembly.

About the supporting organizations

The European Union (EU) Delegation to South Sudan aims at strengthening EU-South Sudan relations by progressing peace, stability and development in South Sudan, in line with the values at the core of the Union's foreign policy. The EU Delegation works with South Sudanese civil society and government counterparts, as well as EU member states and international and regional partners, in supporting the implementation of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS). At the same time, the EU works to address the challenges of the protracted humanitarian crisis and of chronic underdevelopment. This will continue to need a combination of humanitarian assistance to the most vulnerable population, support for the delivery of basic services such as education and health, promotion of more self-reliant livelihoods besides transparent and democratic governance in the country.

Assistance Mission for Africa (AMA), a Christian Non-Governmental Organization was constituted in the year 2002, by Rev. James Ninrew. The institution's geographic coverage includes but is not limited to Unity, Lakes and Central Equatoria states of South Sudan. The organisation pursues a vision of "A just, free, dignified and self-actualizing society." Hence, AMA exists to facilitate community transformation of fear, conflict, and poverty to living just free and dignified decent lives. AMA is chairing member of South Sudan Action Network on Small Arms (SSANSA); Member of Citizens for Peace and Justice (CPJ) secretariat and NGO forum; Chairing member of Transitional Justice Working Group (TJWG); Member and active board member of Eastern and Southern African Pastoral Network (ASPEN); and Member of Coalition of European Lobby on East Africa Pastoralists (CELEP).



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