

Working Together for Peace: Recommendations for Supporting Local Conflict Prevention and Resolution

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Introduction

The 2018 peace agreement reduced fighting between the Government of South Sudan and armed opposition groups, yet, since then, local level armed conflicts have increased, resulting in deaths, displacement and loss of assets and contributing to a massive humanitarian crisis.¹ Against this background, our study and the subsequent learning and dialogue process found that locally rooted conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms (CPRMs) are a promising avenue for fostering peace in South Sudan, albeit with varying levels of success, and it is essential that policy makers engage with and increase their support for them using a context-driven, locally-led approach.

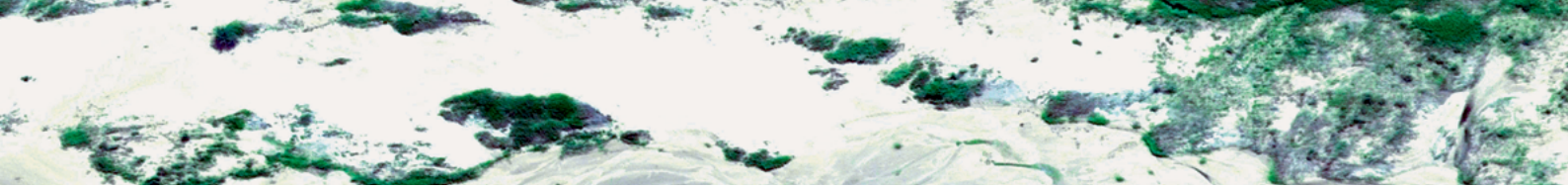
This policy brief contributes to the ongoing policy debates related to localization and the triple nexus by providing an overview of the role, strengths and limitations of local CPRMs amongst agro-pastoralist groups in South Sudan and identifies how external actors can more effectively support them.² Our findings draw from research and learning and dialogue process conducted during the European Union-funded project, [Strengthening local conflict prevention and conflict resolution mechanisms](#)³ and build on the recently published [Working together for peace: Lessons learned from supporting local conflict prevention & resolution](#) paper. The project, implemented from 2021 to early 2023, focused on neighbouring counties in South Sudan, Yirol East in Lakes state and Payinjar in Unity state and sought to strengthen CPRMs.⁴ With a team of researchers and practitioners, the project worked collaboratively with CPRM members, to identify and share good practices and successful approaches, as well as provide them with opportunities to cooperate and learn

from each other.⁵ Although this project focused on two areas in South Sudan, the recommendations are relevant to other parts of the country and beyond.

What are local level conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms and what is their role?

A variety of actors have roles in and make significant contributions to conflict prevention and resolution, within and across county and state borders. This includes local government officials, chiefs and chief court members, community and spiritual authorities, members of border and peace committees, women leaders, youth leaders, elders, cattle camp leaders, and traditional spiritual authorities such as Dinka spear masters and Nuer leopard skin chiefs and prophets. As groups or individuals, these different actors are often involved in settling disputes related to access to natural resources, administrative boundaries, revenge killings, theft, and conflict over livestock, including cattle raiding as well as due to sexual- and gender-based violence (SGBV) or disagreements related to marriage that can escalate into armed clashes.

Depending on a conflict's cause, parties involved and its location, different actors engage in preventing and settling conflicts. For instance, resolving disputes over payam administrative boundaries typically involves government authorities, politicians, and chiefs, while disagreements between relatives over livestock are usually addressed within the cattle camp, or by family elders and family leaders, and if still unresolved, the claimant can open a case in a chief court.⁶ Church leaders solve disputes within their congregation and play an important role in mediating local and national



peace processes, while traditional spiritual authorities can spiritually "separate" parties to the conflict, blessing peace agreements with sacrifices, and negotiating compensation payments.

The adaptability of CPRMs is largely due to their willingness to innovate, while remaining embedded in traditional practices. In Yirol East, former cattle camp leaders created temporary mobile courts to settle livestock disputes and reduce the backlog of cases,⁷ while in Greater Yirol and Payinjiar, local peace and reconciliation initiatives contributed to halting revenge killings and fostered peace.⁸ While some of these initiatives were locally driven, others were initiated by state governments, politicians and intellectuals based in Juba, or with South Sudanese and international organisations.⁹ Similar initiatives and mechanisms exist in other parts of South Sudan.

What are CPRMs' strengths and limitations and ways to address these challenges?

CPRMs are flexible, locally owned and guided, based on local resources and knowledge, and represent a sustainable, effective, and well-adapted option for supporting local peacebuilding. The strengths and successes of CPRMs are grounded in its members' significant expertise, indispensable knowledge, and decades of experience resolving conflicts within and between their communities. Moreover, they are well acquainted with the local context and conflict dynamics, are part of society and often are trusted by and accountable to community members. The activities and staff funded through aid projects are often short-term or can be interrupted by conflict, while local structures often continue to function when external support ends, and are, thus, more resilient to crisis.

Different factors can undermine CPRMs' work and success, however, as they often lack resources to exchange and cooperate or reach out to remote areas, and at times, they perceive each other more as competitors than as allies. In addition, armed offenders or influential actors can threaten or exert influence over CPRMs, while police forces often lack the resources or, at times willingness to arrest culprits or enforce court rules, including those from the chief court. Additional factors that can undermine the work of CPRMs and rule of law include the availability of small arms, economic hardship,

political instability and influencing and mobilization by state and national level political and military interests. Finally, while CPRM members such as chiefs, youth and spiritual authorities are crucial in conflict resolution, at times they do mobilize for armed violence, thereby undermining peace.¹⁰

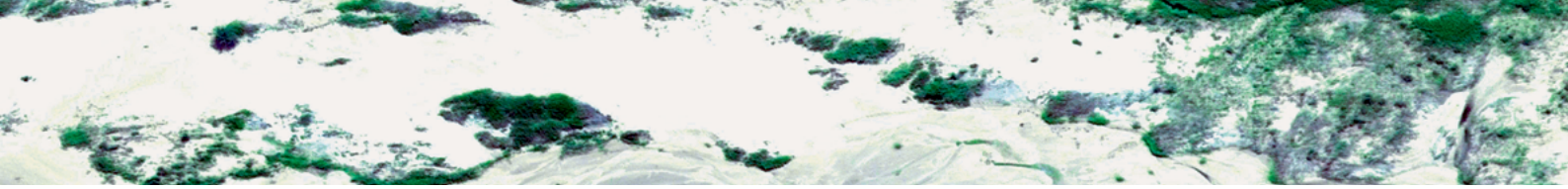
What have we learned about how external actors can strengthen CPRMs?

Support from external actors for CPRMs can contribute to strengthening them, however, a number of factors should be considered by external actors to avoid undermining the functioning and ownership of CPRMs.

[A context-embedded, conflict-sensitive, and locally-led approach requires adaptive and participatory methods based on continuous learning and responding to changing priorities and needs on the ground.](#) This will allow for activities to be adjusted based on emerging findings, and, perhaps most importantly, puts South Sudanese local knowledge, approaches and priorities at the centre of identifying issues, as well as proposing and implementing solutions.¹¹ This approach puts less emphasis on external expertise and training, instead, valuing and drawing on local key actors' expertise to prevent and resolve conflict and can result in a more context-embedded, conflict-sensitive, locally-driven, and sustainable process. To support learning, innovative qualitative methods, such as learning and dialogue processes and outcome harvesting, should be designed and implemented with local counterparts. Finally, it is critical that international and South Sudanese organisations working with CPRMs do not reduce their legitimacy by undermining their authority or by disregarding their priorities.

[Understanding gender dynamics is fundamental to understanding conflict dynamics.](#) Gender dynamics in South Sudan are often presented as binary: men (including young men) are described as perpetrators, while women and girls are victims. As noted by many CPRM members, the situation is more nuanced: yes, women and girls often suffer the consequences of armed conflict, however, they can also use social pressure to endorse conflict or act as messengers of peace and mediators for disputes in diverse settings.¹² At the same time, prevalent narratives see young men, particularly in cattle camps, as perpetrators of insecurity, often overlooking that young men are themselves victims of violence, e.g. related to forceful conscription into armed groups or government





forces. Moreover, communities often pressure young men to conform to militarized notions of masculinity that see success in warfare and defending communities and assets as demonstrations of leadership abilities and an important step into adulthood. Lastly, for poorer young men, cattle raiding is often the only way to get the livestock needed to pay the bride price to marry. Using a gender- and conflict-sensitive approach is essential to supporting women, girls, and young men to positively engage with conflict prevention and resolution initiatives.

Cattle camp youth and spiritual authorities are key for conflict prevention and resolution. Cattle camp youth and spiritual leaders tend to be associated with armed violence and local-level conflict in Yirol East, Payinjar and other contexts in South Sudan. Different obstacles render their inclusion in conflict prevention and resolution challenging: Cattle camp youth often travel in remote areas and can be hard to reach, while spiritual leaders can be excluded by faith-based organisations due to their pre-Christian religious traditions. Lastly, both groups have concepts of conflict and peace that reflect a socio-cultural context where the defence of community assets is crucially important. Consequently, they are often overlooked by external actors. However, in practice they can have a significant positive role in ending armed violence and making peace as both groups engage in mobilizing for warfare but also in settling disputes. It is therefore crucial to include actors such as cattle camp youth and spiritual authorities despite the logistical, language and normative challenges.

National NGOs and CBOs follow an integrated approach and are critical entry points and catalysts for positive change. South Sudanese NGOs and CBOs play an essential role in strengthening local CPRMs in view of their often trusting relationship with local authorities and community leaders and in depth knowledge of the context, conflict dynamics as well as priorities and concepts on the ground. Moreover, similar to members of CPRMs and communities, national NGOs tend to apply a holistic approach to conflict resolution. For them achieving sustainable peace is inextricably linked to addressing deeper socio-economic and political considerations such as the livelihood crisis, and social divisions. As a consequence, national NGOs and local organisations in South Sudan often design and implement activities that integrate humanitarian, peacebuilding, and development objectives. Yet, this creates challenges, as their preferred approach does not necessarily fit within funding siloes that are often more

rigid and disaggregated into peacebuilding, humanitarian, and development focused activities. Addressing structural barriers that inhibit collaboration between humanitarian and peacebuilders is crucial, including ensuring there is sufficient funding allocated for peacebuilding within a humanitarian context.¹³ Integrating humanitarian and peacebuilding activities will require using flexible processes and accepting uncertain outcomes, as well as a longer-term, locally-led perspective on conflict transformation.

Recommendations

A holistic approach to peace is based on learning and adaptation, having communities lead when setting priorities, seeing local actors as catalysts, not simply entry points, and tapping into local expertise and experience. To be successful, donors and their implementing partners need to move away from 'standard' approaches and tools to those that are contextually relevant, adaptive and support continuous learning (f.e. M&E).

1. **Build, value and strengthen local knowledge and expertise:** Regular exchanges between CPRMs allow them to learn about their roles and respective fields of engagement, identify overlaps in their work and conflict-related gaps, and create opportunities for cooperation. These exchanges also are a valuable opportunity to discuss underlying challenges and good practices, learn from each other, jointly develop solutions for arising issues, and be more proactive and forward looking in addressing conflict drivers. Recurrent exchange also allows CPRMs to establish trustful relations and create a community of actively engaged peacebuilders across administrative boundaries.
2. **Ensure support provided is based on a robust gender analysis:** A gender-sensitive approach considers gender roles and gendered norms and how they impact the actions of women *and* men, girls *and* boys, both negatively and positively.¹⁴ While men do play a more visible role in conflict prevention and resolution, women can also instigate violence by celebrating and praising warriors and raiders as heroes or ridiculing boys and men unwilling to take revenge or join raids,



reinforcing social notions of masculinity that associate men with warfare. Understanding the societal pressures on women, girls, men, and boys to engage in activities detrimental to peace is critical.

3. **Proactively reach out to and include hard to reach or marginalised actors:** Prioritise involving diverse members from CPRMs including women, young men (particularly in cattle camps), and spiritual leaders. The last two groups are often overlooked, as they are either in remote locations or are challenging for aid actors to engage with, despite the fact that cattle camp youth and spiritual authorities are frequently identified as key actors linked to armed violence in Yirol East and Payinjiar and beyond. Cattle camp youth move with livestock over long distances and are responsible for securing access to water and pasture and defending it against attacks from other groups. Besides blessing and allegedly mobilizing armed youth for cattle raiding, spiritual authorities also fundamental to conflict resolution by conducting rituals and making sacrifices to reconcile parties at peace conferences and during compensation negotiations.

4. **Work with South Sudanese organisations using a holistic and integrated approach:** Working with South Sudanese organisations to support local CPRMs is key. The former are often crucial entry points and catalysts for engaging with local CPRMs and have mutually respectful and trusting relationships with local authorities and community leaders. Staff of South Sudanese organisations are often well familiar with the context and conflict dynamics, personally know CPRM members, and are familiar with the needs and priorities of authorities and communities. Moreover, South Sudanese staff often act as intermediaries who can translate local ideas, concepts, norms, and processes for external actors.

[1] The World Food Programme's (WFP) November 2022 [Situation Report](#) notes that about 7.76 million people face severe food insecurity.

[2] These mechanisms differ depending on the source of conflict and context and include different actors.

[3] The project included a study (involving [Bridge Network](#)) and a dialogue and learning process. [swisspeace](#) and the [Assistance Mission for Africa \(AMA\)](#) contributed to both project components and convened a diverse group of locally-based actors in the learning and dialogue process.

[4] Populations in both counties share agro-pastoralist livelihoods, with Yirol East residents speaking Dinka and Atuot, while Payinjiar residents speak Nuer. The frontlines of the 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.

[5] For more information on good practices and lessons learned identified see Santschi, M. and J. Ninrew Dong 2023: [Working together for peace: Lessons learned from supporting local conflict prevention & resolution](#). [swisspeace](#).

[6] Chief courts settle disputes based on customary law and constitute part of South Sudan's judiciary. See, Leonardi C. et al. 2011: [Local Justice in Southern Sudan](#). United Institute of Peace (USIP)/Rift Valley Institute.

[7] 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).

[8] This includes peace conferences, inter-clan reconciliation, awareness campaigns and meetings to settle tensions around political appointments.

[9] Including AMA, PAX, DT Global, the Rift Valley Institute (RVI) and the Catholic University of South Sudan.

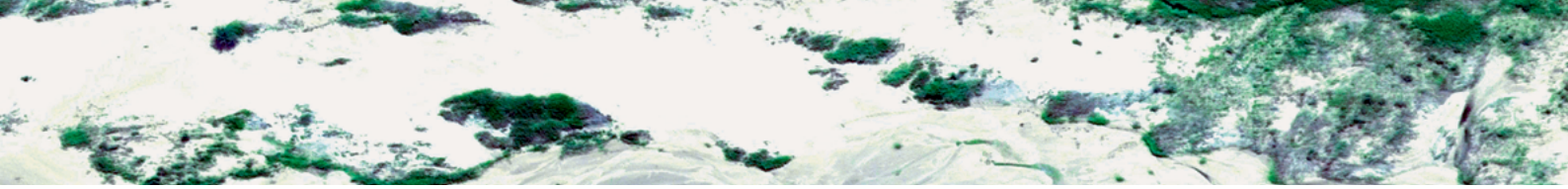
[10] CPRM members can have a dual role: in some cases, they mobilize to defend community assets and objectives or advance their own political and military interests, while also having a positive role in resolving conflicts and making peace.

[11] National and international external actors should ensure they privilege local knowledge and expertise over their own.

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

[13] In 2021, funding for South Sudan included approx. USD 40 million for "civilian peacebuilding, conflict prevention and resolution", compared to the approx. USD 874 million for "humanitarian assistance". [Creditor Reporting System \(CRS\) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development \(OECD\)](#) for South Sudan.

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



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 and practice-oriented projects for, f.e. the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, the United States Institute for Peace, the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium, the Swiss National Science Foundation and the Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility.

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About

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