



SOUTH SUDAN



Local Peacemaking in South Sudan: PeaceRep Workshop Report

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This research is supported by the Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform (PeaceRep), funded by UK International Development from the UK government. However, the views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies. Any use of this work should acknowledge the authors and the Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform.

About the author:

Robert Wilson is a Research Fellow with PeaceRep. His research explores local peace processes and how they are documented and understood in relation to shifting inter-group dynamics and the national-local relationship. This workshop report is part of the wider PeaceRep research in South Sudan, one of the programme's key research sites. The research set out here contributes to PeaceRep's Perceptions of Peace in South Sudan work and also to the programme's broader understanding of local peacebuilding in the country.

With thanks and special mention to Christopher Oringa for helping to support and facilitate the author's visit to Juba as part of this research, and to Dr Jan Pospisil, from the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations (CTPSR) at Coventry University, for supporting the research visit and co-facilitating the workshop. Thanks also to Tim Eppler, Allyson Doby and Jan Pospisil for reviewing this report.

Design: Smith Design Agency

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Executive Summary

This report sets out the discussion points and key insights from a workshop on Local Peacemaking in South Sudan, organised and co-hosted by PeaceRep and the South Sudan Ministry of Peace Building in Juba on 12 October 2023.

The workshop brought together 23 local peacebuilders, peace and conflict organisations and researchers working directly in conflict-affected places and on local peace processes in South Sudan. Participants reflected on ways of defining a local agreement, what local agreements should set out to do, and why local agreements matter in relation to the wider conflict context.

Discussion focused on themes including local ownership and views of peace processes, how national politics and national or international actors could undermine local peacebuilding efforts, local mediation approaches, inter-ethnic dimensions of local peacebuilding, and community autonomy and self-governance.

Several points recurred during the discussions. Many participants viewed the involvement of national or international actors in local processes as being driven by the wrong incentives. Local mediation efforts and the local peacebuilding mechanisms that are already effective were viewed as needing more reinforcement, with a lack of enforcement driving key local mediation figures such as chiefs and other traditional leaders to withdraw from local peacebuilding efforts. Importantly, in contrast to assumptions about the structure of local peace processes, there is an unseen practice of locally designed mechanisms being put in place long before the main process; often as informalised forms of pre-negotiation dialogue. Even with such strengths among local communities and within the practice of local peacebuilding, participants also expressed the need for continuous follow up on the outcomes of local processes. Importantly, given the relationship to the national political centre, there is a need for an awareness of the likely spoilers to the local agreement, such as the armed factions connected to the main political parties. In the context of ongoing inter-communal cycles of violence in South Sudan's rural communities, there is a timely need for improved inclusion of all people and groups in local processes, as a way of creating broader accountability to local processes and in doing so, providing a longer-term potential solution to inter-communal cycles of violence.

Within the issue of inter-ethnic tensions in local peace processes, a common language of communication between the many ethnic groups in South Sudan was also seen as a central part of the broader need for more inclusive processes.

Full insights and discussion highlights are set out in the following sections.

Key Insights

1. Involvement in local processes from national or international actors is often driven by the government's and donors' wishes or key political messages; national and international actors often only join processes selectively at key moments. This is also reflected in political practices in South Sudan, in which parties tend to cherry pick parts issues within the peace process that suit their narratives, such as power sharing.
2. Local actors who have led local processes are sometimes '*shamed*' or '*exposed*' by national elites for attempting to promote or bring a local agreement or the local process issues up to the national level. In such instances, it is the national agreement that tends to be prioritised over the local one, with the agreement being designed at the national level and dictated down to the local.
3. There is a need for improved local mediation efforts and more external support from international actors. More thinking is needed on which local peace process designs and types of approaches or techniques work best; this should help to address the current reality that local mediators are leaving and deserting negotiations to change side, depending on where the benefits are.
4. There is a need for more support from international partners in promoting, reinforcing and strengthening the local peacebuilding mechanisms that already work, such as local customs or traditional laws. As part of this, there is also a critical need for more support in helping facilitate disputes between competing local groups, as the lack of this is causing chiefs and local leaders to withdraw from local mediation and peacebuilding efforts.
5. Local communities are acutely aware of the need for reconciliation between the President and the other political leaders. People hear national actors talk about transition, but are aware of the delayed implementation and are likely to return to asking questions of the key stages of national implementation, for example regarding national dialogue attempts.
6. Local governors tend to base themselves in Juba due to money and resources being distributed in the political centre, meaning they become disconnected from their communities and less able to understand local challenges and realities.

7. Locally designed peace process mechanisms are often in place as informalised forms of pre-negotiation dialogues, long before the main local process addressing the central grievance or dispute begins. In some cases, these techniques involve mechanisms such as dialogue committees.
8. Local ownership of local processes is critical as the most sustainable approach to local peace processes, from inception regarding the local grievance and design, through to implementation. This should also include more community centred design, adopting more community specific analysis prior to the process in order to more effectively deal with the root cause of the local conflict.
9. Depending on the local area, spiritual and traditional approaches to local peace processes are equally as powerful as religious approaches. Both approaches are fundamental in the design of local peace processes and are critical in ensuring local processes hold.
10. There is a need for better and more consistent justice mechanisms for the crime of murder across all areas of the country. Biases and inconsistencies exist in how the rule of law regarding murder is enforced in different areas, namely centring around the area's affiliations to political leaders and the political centre.
11. Continuous follow up on the outcomes of local processes is needed, with commitment to implement and further strengthen the local relationships that helped secure the agreement. An awareness of the likely spoilers to the agreement, such as the armed factions connected to the main political parties, is also needed.
12. There is a need for improved inclusion of all people and groups in local processes, as a way of creating broader accountability to local processes across communities and providing a longer-term potential solution to inter-communal cycles of violence.
13. As part of navigating the identities and divisions between areas and ethnic groups in local peacebuilding, there is a need for a common language to help bridge some of the inter-ethnic divisions that can lead to further disputes.

14. Connecting to inter-ethnic dynamics and people moving into new areas, there is an assumption around cattle cycles and movements that people are safe in the areas they move into. Partly this assumption is due to the process being self-managed, however this way of thinking should be challenged, as a central issue within local peace processes in the country.

Workshop Overview

PeaceRep and the South Sudan Ministry of Peace Building co-hosted a workshop on Local Peacemaking in South Sudan, held on 12 October 2023 at the South Sudan Council of Churches.

Participants included 23 local peacebuilders, peace and conflict organisations and researchers working directly in conflict-affected places and on local peace processes in South Sudan, in a range of capacities. Many of the participants had been directly involved in ongoing inter-communal peace efforts and in local processes; with some of the participants having mediated local agreements and processes, and others having travelled across extensive rural spaces to monitor ongoing implementation. Collectively this wide range of experience among participants covered well over a decade of observing local peacebuilding in South Sudan. Some participants recalled having been involved in processes addressing the aftermath of both civil wars, going back to 2013, with a number of them having been involved in brokering local processes for even longer than this.

The workshop invited participants to consider the following guiding questions:

- ▶ How do you define a local agreement?
- ▶ What should it do?
- ▶ Why do local agreements matter in relation to the wider conflict picture?

Both morning and afternoon workshop sessions were structured to encourage discussion and reflections around these guiding questions. The questions were provided to participants prior to the workshop with an official invite and workshop agenda. The outline was flexible enough across both sessions to allow firstly for a full 'tour de table', encouraging all participants to share and reflect upon their experiences or their organisations' experiences, with time for follow up responses and reflections.

After each discussion, PeaceRep researchers Robert Wilson and Jan Pospisil offered an informal walk-through orientation of the PA-X Peace Agreements Database and Peace Perceptions Survey findings. Participants were invited to give their thoughts on the potential challenges and opportunities involved in collecting local peace agreement data, and on how they viewed the resources in the context of the workshop discussions. As sessions were not recorded, the reflections in this report are based on the notes recorded by PeaceRep researchers who were also participating in conversations, and therefore may not be a fully comprehensive account of all individual points made during the workshop.

Discussion

The key insights drawn from this report are shaped by the views of the participants. Their points were captured and grouped into key discussion themes for this report. Among a wide range of issues connected to local peacebuilding in South Sudan, these are the themes participants chose to focus on:

- ▶ Local ownership of processes
- ▶ Local view of the national process
- ▶ National politics and national or international actors undermining the local peacebuilding landscape
- ▶ Community autonomy and local self-governance dynamics
- ▶ Community memory of violence and trauma, justice and cycles of retribution
- ▶ Local mediation approaches
- ▶ Accountability and presence of local governors in the areas they represent
- ▶ Inter-ethnic dimensions in local peacebuilding

National politics and national or international actors undermining the local peacebuilding landscape

Participants opened the discussion by broadly exploring the position of local peacebuilding and local processes in relation to the actions of national and international actors. The current level of presence and support from international actors in facilitating some peace efforts was acknowledged, however this role was also recognised by participants as needing to be reinvigorated; namely through rethinking interventions and investing more efforts into supporting existing local peace efforts.

Participants agreed on the need to:

- Support locally trusted peace brokers such as chiefs and other traditional authorities to find better ways of dealing with reoccurring blocks to local peace such as youth crime;
 - Truly support peace structures that have already been proven to function, namely through increased financial support;
 - Support the presence of more advocacy voices from the local level up, to stop disruptive political interventions from the national level; and
 - Introduce more efforts to strengthen resilience and productivity at the grassroots level.
- Participants collectively returned to the overarching view that when it comes to implementation,
- 'Public relations is the only focus ... we should call it public relations not peacebuilding, it's about pleasing donors with tick box exercises.'*
- Religious figures in the workshop also noted from their experience that involvement in local processes is often about the government's and donors' wishes or key political messages;
- Participants expressed the collective opinion that national and international actors often only join processes at key moments to give speeches, while the local communities or actors who have been invested in the process at times do not get a chance to speak.
- Some participants described being part of peacebuilding workshops hosted by international actors in which there was a lack of receptiveness shown from the chair when participants attempted to make points about local realities.

- ▶ Reflecting on the context around these issues, one participant stated that in a country which is a similar size to France and has a population of approximately 10 million people, many still cannot access their own areas, and even villages. As focal points of bottom-up capacity, participants saw some villages as productive sites which in many ways function, however they expressed a critical need for improvements in the following areas:
 - Reforming financial flows and the amounts of revenue going into the executive and the national political structures from international actors; and
 - Improving community awareness around these issues, with focused efforts on community grassroots knowledge in order to build capacity.
- ▶ Participants viewed the above as being connected to the issue of the powerful individuals within government and the security apparatus extracting vast sums of oil and other revenues from resource-rich areas. They were concerned that there is often a lot of rhetoric about re-investment into local areas but in reality, most participants felt that a majority of these flows officially committed to public funds end up in elites' personal accounts.

It is worth noting that whilst discussing these themes, participants chose to raise the issue of cattle in the context of national politics and national or international actors undermining the local peacebuilding landscape. Importantly, one participant commented,

'Why time and again do we see cattle issues considered as an issue of national government?'

- ▶ Participants agreed that cattle issues should be a purely localised issue.
- ▶ A number of participants said peoples' lives were acutely impacted by national government decision making in a number of areas, but particularly so around the cattle issue.
- ▶ As an issue that impacts the function of villages and peoples' everyday lives, participants described the 'cattle issue' as continuing to give better salaries to governors even when they were not present in their areas or the countryside.

- ▶ Participants said that the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) give everything in terms of money and other resources to their people and their governors. The governors or community leaders who do not receive resources, will find that they cannot provide a service, making their jobs almost impossible.
- ▶ Importantly, participants stated that communities are worn out by these biases and cycles in which local governance is not effective.
- ▶ Participants agreed that there needed to be a way of identifying the owner of the cattle and the power dynamics in play; who is doing what and where? and, who do local people speak to?

At this point in the conversation, participants commented that the national elites are regionally allied, so when they have a conflict themselves, the issue causing the conflict gets pulled into the national level dialogue.

- ▶ A number of participants said that, 'national hands are involved', with one participant describing scenarios where local actors attempted to come up to national talks or bring an issue to be resolved but there was often a barrier from 'the hand of national elites' pushing local brokerage efforts back down.
- ▶ Participants described local actors being 'shamed' or 'exposed', and the local agreement they led being deemed not to stand, with the national agreement being the one that holds. Expanding on this point, a majority of participants felt that the terms of the agreement are often designed at the national level, around the issues that national-level actors want to prioritise, with the terms of the agreement and process then being dictated downwards to the local.
- ▶ In relation to this, one participant asked,

*'Was Wunlit¹ local or not?'*²

- Participants who had supported this process expanded on the importance of how these processes are discussed in terms of narratives and discussions around inclusion of issues and implementation. Participants who had been involved in mediation recalled that they had Wunlit communities asking them: 'What do we do as part of follow up and implementation?'

There was a sense in the discussion that for these processes to be sustained over so many years, there needed to be continuous follow up, commitment to implement and further strengthening of the local relationships that helped secure the agreement, as well as being aware of likely spoilers to the agreement such as armed factions connected to the main political parties.

- Participants collectively expressed that:
 - National politicians need to stop interfering in local relationships;
 - National politics is negatively impacting these relationships;
 - If local actors cannot in some ways stop the national level behaviours, then they cannot make progress at the local level.

In this sense, participants reflected that the local is rarely ever local and it is often connected to the national in some way. Whether as an indirect result of national policies stemming from the power struggle in Juba and affecting local communities, or as a more direct influence in a local agreement or process, this broader theme of the national defining the local peacebuilding landscape remained as a constant throughout the workshop.

Importantly, there was consensus that fallout from national politics being rolled down to the local level could also generate instances of criminality in the countryside.

- A number of workshop participants described instances where national orders for hard borders had been introduced between local areas or regions where they had not previously existed. With movement across borders and checkpoints restricted, participants described this as actually encouraging criminal activities such as banditry or inter-communal looting.

Local mediation approaches

- ▶ Connecting to this, participants also said that community leaders were the ones who invariably resolved these types of issues by working out ways to locally manage these hard borders with agreements.
- ▶ Participants said local leaders have the skill of persuading people that it is in the interests of their livelihoods to sign as part of the local process, and that on this basis people have signed up to these kinds of efforts in the past.

It was noted however, that this approach does not work in all areas. In Panyijiar county, for instance, crime still needs to be addressed by national and international actors, particularly in instances where bandits take advantage of the changing county or state borders that result from national politics.

- ▶ Longer term, the need for inclusion of all people to make them accountable to the local process and the community is important, the key to this is a bottom-up approach.
- ▶ In terms of further bolstering practices of *community autonomy and local self-governance dynamics*, participants said there is a need for improved local mediation efforts and measures, such as:
 - Cross learning and data exchanges more from grassroots up; and
 - More thinking on which designs and types of approaches or techniques work best; which should address the current reality that local mediators are leaving and dissenting negotiations to change side, depending on where the benefits are.

Community autonomy and local self-governance dynamics

As part of examining the range of ways that local communities remain self-subsistent, as well as discussing locally led approaches to peacebuilding, the discussion also considered how local areas maintain practices that tie neighbouring communities together socially.

- ▶ Participants said that when the political centre is so fragmented, the local takes over by sustaining movement between areas and relationships ensuring people's livelihoods.
- ▶ Participants did however express that there was little to no support from international partners or the government when it came to disputes between competing local groups and these local systems come under strain.
- ▶ One participant recalled that two months prior to the workshop they had been working in Bor on the long-standing tensions between Bor Dinka and the Murle from Pibor. Following a recommendation, local chiefs had made a rule between areas that there would be no crime across boundaries or any cross-border violations of the local agreement, but a youth group violated this by raiding across the boundary, undermining the chiefs' authority. According to this account, the youth would say they had never been part of the agreement, and therefore would not recognise the chiefs' orders, causing the withdrawal of some chiefs from mediation and local peacebuilding efforts.
- ▶ Participants said that eventually local leaders no longer want to be involved and that this is a reoccurring theme.
- ▶ One participant shared an important story, saying,

'I asked a governor out in a countryside area who was preparing to leave, "what happens to people when you leave?" and he said, "I am preparing everyone to leave".'

Another participant suggested that in these instances, governors would often resort to using religion, appealing to peoples' faith,

'They will say, listen, listen to the word of God, as they know that's the way you get through to people but they need to be there ... Let the governors who preach about peace process and resolution actually be there and attend the process'

- ▶ This story resonated with a number of participants who recognised that not everyone gets to leave and collectively asked what happens to the people left behind. While there was a recognition of community capacity for self-governance and subsistence, there was also consensus among participants of the need for more support. This began to introduce the theme of Accountability and presence of local governors in the areas they represent.
- ▶ Collectively participants viewed the need for more presence of local governors in the areas they represent, as well as more grassroots types of investment in local communities, encouraging, for example, the establishment of sites that will encourage local agency and access to knowledge about local processes.
- ▶ An example given by one participant was a suggestion for initiatives such as creating public libraries, which would show investment in people and support local communities to be better informed. They said communities should actively be surveyed and asked about what they want in this context.

At this stage in the workshop, the focus turned to participant's reflections on PeaceRep's ongoing research in South Sudan and the connected set of PA-X database agreements. As participants began viewing the PeaceRep resources, there was a clear convergence of these reflections and many of the themes and issues discussed up to this point.

PA-X DATA: SOUTH SUDAN



PeaceRep is a leading developer of PeaceTech data and tools. Our innovative datasets, tools, and visualisations support adaptive management of peace and transition processes. As the cornerstone of our PeaceTech work, the PA-X Peace Agreements Database contains more than 2,000 publicly available and formally signed peace agreements from peace processes between 1990 and 2024. PA-X includes three connected sub-databases: the Local Peace Agreements database; the Women, Girls, and Gender Provisions database; and the Amnesties, Conflict and Peace Agreement dataset.

PeaceRep's South Sudan Public Perceptions of Peace survey visualisations sit within the PA-X Tracker and are part of a set of analytical PeaceTech tools which attempt to monitor the progress and implementation of peace and transition processes using a combination of PA-X data, in-country data, global conflict data and implementation data.

During the workshop in Juba, PeaceRep researchers introduced the collection of peace agreements from South Sudan that are available on the PA-X main and local databases.³ They also showcased findings from the PeaceRep South Sudan Public Perceptions of Peace survey.⁴

As part of the ongoing workshop discussion, participants shared their views on the accuracy of the data, reflecting on implementation of specific peace agreements and the potential uses of the resources in their setting. Participants discussed how these tools can support local peacebuilding in their own contexts.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. These types of tools should be designed to support wider audiences, including local actors and peacebuilders. Part of this should include coupling the tools with informed local views on which areas of implementation need more focus.
2. Participants considered whether PA-X data and PeaceRep's PeaceTech tools could be used as a form of '*early warning system*' around where implementation was at, either on a national process issue or on local processes specifically.
3. Having seen PA-X and the PA-X Tracker, participants saw the need to find some way of showing the range of local techniques and level of preparations that go into informalised pre-negotiation talks, prior to the beginning of a local process.
4. If agreed dispute resolution mechanisms could be documented, along with any violations, participants asked if this data could be displayed on the PA-X Local database alongside the agreed resolutions, providing a '*matrix of accountability*'.
5. Participants saw the need for better accessibility to these tools for communities and researchers in South Sudan. Participants viewed the issue of accessibility as being centred around both internet access, and in some cases, access to a computer for local researchers, especially in remote areas. Accessibility was also defined by participants as the need for more trainings on using the resources.
6. Participants recognised the comparative value of PA-X and saw the potential in displaying example cases on the PA-X Local database that provided comparative learning from other contexts and processes, where mechanisms and local approaches had successfully addressed central issues in peace processes, such as displaced people and refugees.

Engaging with PA-X and the Perceptions of Peace in South Sudan survey dashboard encouraged participants to reflect on and discuss both historical and recent examples of local peace processes. Participants requested that the group open up and view data and coding for a number of processes that they knew of.

This supported the conversation to further explore the connected issues, such as sustainable implementation.

Local view of the national process

During the discussion, participants made specific reference to the Pieri peace agreements⁵ and *Jonglei phase two*⁶; raising the question about signalling around progress on follow ups and implementation from authorities and those who had facilitated. This aligned with earlier comments, that local communities in many cases will want to track developments around implementation whether in relation to the national or local process.

- ▶ Importantly, participants also asked the broader question of the PA-X and PA-X Tracker slides, of who the target audience is? Participants said:
 - Resources should not just be designed and implemented to support policy audiences and the narratives of national and international actors regarding which areas of peacebuilding require focus;
 - Parties in South Sudan tend to cherry pick parts of the process that suits them or their narratives, such as power sharing, and it should not just be about the needs of policy audiences; and
 - Peace tools need to be paired with informed local views on which areas of implementation need highlighting or more focus.
- ▶ One participant questioned whether national or international actors have adequately prepared the citizens for the next phase of implementation of the transition in 2024. They suggested that where people have not been informed, they need to know what is next. Most participants agreed that people can see the process in the centre but have little sense in terms of the signalling around the next stages, particularly in relation to them.
- ▶ Participants also recognised that international involvement is beneficial for funds and facilitation; carrying outcomes or messages from local processes further geographically, which supports access to processes given the remoteness of some areas with lack of road access and mobile networks.

- Participants also asked whether the PA-X database or PeaceRep resources could be used as an 'early warning system' to help understand what stage implementation was at. Many of the points at this stage of the discussion were framed around the need to know this in relation to progress of the national process. One participant said,

'I went to Rumbek and Western Equatoria and people are well informed, you ask them their thoughts and they say, "what is happening with the national dialogue? What are you or the politicians doing with the next steps and what is the way forward?"'

Participants were in consensus, suggesting that, in many cases communities are better informed than national politicians assume, and people expect the next steps of the process that were promised.

- Participants emphasised that people are also acutely aware of the need for reconciliation between the president and the other political leaders and when national actors talk about a transition, people are acutely aware of the delay in the implementation of the transition. Similarly, participants said people are likely to return to asking questions of implementation, for example with regard to, national political reconciliation attempts.

Accountability and presence of local governors in the areas they represent

- Importantly, there was consensus among participants that mostly all local governors tended to base themselves in Juba, 'disconnected from their communities' and 'rarely present', stating that as money is distributed in the political centre, local governors base themselves there. Participants said that in turn governors are not present to deal with issues such as floods and cattle conflicts. They then also do not have the tools or experience to address these local issues even when they do visit the area.
- When the issue of local governors leaving an area and taking their group with them was brought up, for participants this seemed to connect to the issue of access for all people in a community; to be informed on the stability of an area and truly brought in to any local process and included in the outcomes. One participant said,

'[after the governor and their group leave] what happens to the people who are left, who is going to read a database of agreements to them?'

- ▶ One participant describing their field work and research said that, Bor was now flooded more often, meaning there is more cattle movement. What then follows is more presence of local government and different ministries, such as the Ministry of Environment, or the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security. Bor is low flat land near the White Nile so it gets a lot of attention, but participants stressed that there needed to be local governor or official presence in more areas.
- ▶ Participants said these kinds of issues require a unitary government, saying that governors are sub-nationally mandated but are not effective. They viewed the remedy to this as:
 - Power needing to be better coordinated at the centre over issues such as Bor, in order to counteract the lack of action by governors at the local level over such issues;
 - This should also be combined with devolution of powers to the various sub-national and local levels, being designed in a way that strengthens and supports governors and local government to perform; and
 - Importantly does so in a way that incentivises governors to stay in their areas.
- ▶ There was also an acknowledgement by participants for the need to take state-specific dynamics into account. Participants agreed that while the governors of Jonglei and Lakes cannot be compared, fundamentally, as one participant summarised,

'It does not even matter so much what the issues are, it is about the presence'.
- ▶ Importantly, participants described the need for governors to be paid and incentivised properly by the national government to be present, rather than the government investing in other practices such as and fuelling de-securitisation of the countryside with weapons.

Local ownership of processes

- ▶ Local communities and peacebuilding actors are powerful and understand their problem or grievance best and the best approach for addressing the issue. It is critical to understand however, that if specific process issues or agendas are enforced upon them, implementation is likely to become a challenge.

- ▶ One participant expressed that, from action points agreed upon in community-led and sometimes undocumented local agreements, around 80% are being implemented. These processes are usually respected despite differences between communities, because there are real repercussions for communities, sometimes for generations, if these agreements are broken.
- ▶ Participants spoke of the Yirol and Payinjar agreement⁷ as an example of sustained successful implementation describing the measure of this as communities and youth integrating and coming together now, suggesting the agreement made marriage across both areas possible. Workshop participants also described a number of factors that determined the success of this model, suggesting that where such factors are not present as foundations, the local process will often not work:
 - The process was based on interfaith values and was self-managed;
 - This creates quick, '*instant buy-in*' from communities as they respect this model;
 - There was a designated congregation and the underpinnings of the process are '*facts from the holy book*'.
- ▶ Participants stated that when the idea of nation is included and appealed to in local processes, religious values also tend to be included.
- ▶ Other participants expanded on this, saying that oaths are often made in local processes on the basis of the bible in some areas, but are also made using traditional spiritual approaches in other areas. One participant said,

'Depending on the area, spiritual leaders still play a role in processes as well as Christianity and church leaders in processes...these approaches tend to hold.'
- ▶ Most participants shared the sentiment that these spiritual and religious approaches are recognised to work and that they connect people nationally and locally.

- ▶ Participants expanded on the range of locally designed mechanisms, with one participant describing a process in Pibor. They said there had been a carefully designed pre-process dialogue which had been longstanding prior to the actual agreement. One participant described,

'There was a dialogue committee, where people came from Bor to have discussions with the governor.'

Reflecting back, partly on the data participants had seen on the PA-X database, participants expressed a need to find a way to show the range of techniques and level of work that goes into the set up and preparation of local processes, long before an agreement happens.

- ▶ In this sense participants said external actors should look at:
 - What resolutions were there before the agreement, historically;
 - Understand that dialogues are sometimes happening a long time before the main process addressing the main grievance or dispute begins; they are a form of local pre-negotiation dialogue which even elders may not have been able to track or be aware of;
 - Connect this with an understanding of what people can actually do or are capable of at the grassroots level.

Continuing to engage with the set of South Sudan agreements on PA-X, one participant asked,

'How do you document constant ongoing processes on issues like cattle which are in permanent flow state type of negotiation?'

This prompted other questions from participants around the definitions and classifications of local processes on PA-X, with another participant asking how the peace process type on PA-X is defined and classified. PeaceRep researchers answered:

- Local agreements in PA-X are grouped within a wider local database system and where possible the PA-X database team at the University of Edinburgh locates them in the context of the broader conflict, but do so whilst also being aware that given comparative data and the wider local database system, these categorisations and collections are not comprehensive of all local peace agreements or local peacemaking practices and efforts;
- Local conflicts can often spill into new territories, or actors can present in a process as having one set of interests whilst also enacting another set of aims alongside this. It is not always easy to clearly see distinctions between the various parts that make up our definition⁸ but there is an importance in attempting to distinguish these agreements from national agreements which may address local elements, such as an area or group, but do so from the viewpoint or agenda of the national process talks.

Participants then responded to these questions and reflections. They said that local conflicts are always in some way inter-linked from the national level down:

- ▶ That people at the grassroots level can be naïve to the political interests of the national;
- ▶ Therefore, participants felt that for local agreements to hold, there is a strong need for the continued involvement of the traditional stakeholders who have been a constant; churches, communities and spiritual leaders. Participants felt that when these actors speak, they can command respect.
- ▶ When peacebuilding work is implemented by Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), some of which participants praised for their work, the effects are longer lasting. This is because it has more local ownership in how it is designed.

- ▶ Crucially, participants suggested these approaches also, '*avoid the national elites*'. Participants also expressed the sentiment that the nature of the local conflict, partly shapes elites' involvement. Where criminal activities, such as isolated cattle raids are concerned, ethnic group biases often come in to play, which in turn triggers elite involvement.
- ▶ These dynamics reasserted for all participants, the importance of *local ownership of local processes*, from inception around the particular local grievance all the way from design to implementation. They viewed this as the most sustainable approach.
- ▶ Participants stated that dispute resolution mechanisms needed to be documented so that in instances where these were breached, actors could be held to account. They asked whether it was possible for the PA-X local database to have checking of resolutions and a '*matrix of accountability*'.

These questions then began prompting participants to consider alternative mechanisms in local efforts where conventional oversights were lacking.

- ▶ One participant said there was a need to strengthen local customs and traditional laws, with others supporting this sentiment. Throughout the conversation there seemed to be consensus that these are the mechanisms that tend to work.
- ▶ Importantly, in relation to this another participant asked,
'What kind of conflicts are we ultimately talking about?'
- ▶ One participant then described having mediated one of the local agreements being shown on the PA-X Local Database; they gave a sense that the agreement had been an example of successful implementation, with peace holding a year on from signing. There had however been some remaining issues around ethnic group movements and raiding around border areas between the communities that had signed the agreement, causing further unrest within those communities.

- Expanding on this, participants who had been involved in mediating local processes reflected on their experiences and said there needs to be:
 - More consideration of community specific design that deals with the root cause of the local conflict;
 - More prior analysis specific to the community; and
 - Informed and considered decision making around whether the process should be underpinned by religious, spiritual, or community approaches.

Participants agreed that while these approaches are in part connected, in the context of implementation, they were also being described as quite distinctive, offering different approaches and mechanisms.

- One participant gave an example of localised traditional peacebuilding approach,

'In South Sudan as a type of traditional methodology, we talk about this South Sudanese term which means "unsharpening of the sword in the presence of the King"'

- Participants were clear that there is a system to these traditional mechanisms which hold accountability, and that appropriate localised methodologies or approaches were needed. They added that in places such as Yambio, there were also similar examples.

Returning to the PA-X database and Perceptions of Peace in South Sudan survey materials, participants made an important point that not everyone is knowledgeable about the issues set out in the local agreements database and in the discussion. They recommended more accessibility, seeing the need for South Sudan researchers to know about these issues, and asked how PA-X data is disseminated. This part of the conversation centred around two areas of access:

- Internet access for local researchers, particularly those in remote areas or those who did not independently have access to a computer;
- Accessibility was also defined by participants as more availability of training opportunities such as walk throughs or trainings of how to use the resources, perhaps at an office location of an organisation or community group with resources such as Community Empowerment for Progress Organization (CEPO).

Community memory of violence and trauma, justice and cycles of retribution

Discussion then shifted to people's sense of feeling secure in remote areas, in response to the activities of unchecked criminal and armed groups.

- Participants reflected on the findings of the peace perceptions visualisation (see figure 1) which showed a marked improvement in men feeling more secure in areas of Lake States in 2023, as opposed to 2021 when men felt unsafe or very unsafe in areas around Lake States. Participants felt that there was more to the issue in Lake States, suggesting that men still felt very unsafe, saying,

'There are men running away, they just leave and go into other states and even different countries, they just do not come back because of some of the levels of violence, and they know what the groups that are approaching their borders would do to them.'

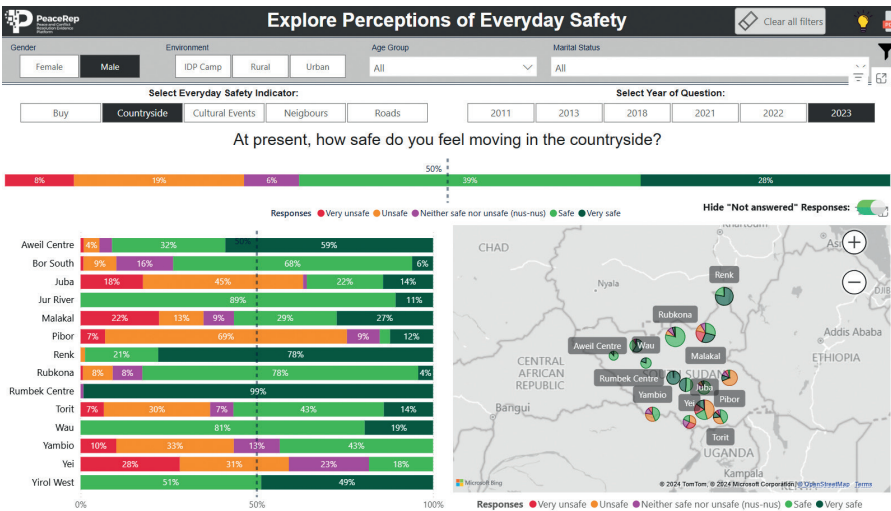


Figure 1

- Some participants agreed with this sentiment, blaming it on unchecked activities by criminal groups, adding to the point saying,

'In some places there are just women left.'

Participants reflected that this also opens up another set of complexities around the safety of women in these areas; participants felt more data was needed on this specific issue for Lake States.

On a number of occasions throughout the workshop, participants had also raised the issue of cycles of retribution and violence in communities. At this stage of the conversation, participants connected the issue to the need to have better and more consistent justice mechanisms for murder across all areas of the country.

- A number of participants said that at the moment, there simply is no consistency with what people can get away with. One participant said,

'In Juba or the areas affiliated to leaders, so also around Juba, if you murder, the government will come for you but elsewhere, nothing happens to you, there is no rule of law.'

These points brought discussion back towards the balance of communities finding ways to look after themselves, set against a lack of governance and certain local groups having better access to support or resources, based on group ties to officials and leaders in the political centre.

The issue of youth interference in local governance and peacebuilding efforts was also viewed by participants as relevant to this section of the workshop discussion, with connection between the theme of *community memory of violence and trauma, justice and cycles of retribution* to that of *community autonomy and local self-governance dynamics*.

- Participants reflected on the fact that 'these kind of cycles last generations and boys are idle', with one participant saying that when they reach their teens, you hear people saying to them,

"that family killed your uncle or grandfather", even if it was decades ago, and if the person is there, they go out and get him, and so it continues.'

- Other participants described instances where family members had left to work or study in other countries and had even been threatened upon their return years later.
- Most workshop participants saw the need for improved inclusion of all people and groups in local processes, more broadly across communities and society, as a longer-term solution to breaking these cycles of violence by creating accountability to local processes.

Inter-ethnic dimensions in local peacebuilding

These points connected to inter-ethnic dimensions, which participants brought into the discussion at this stage of the workshop, moving the conversation towards considering the implications of inter-ethnic dimensions for peacebuilding efforts. Participants agreed that given the identities and divisions between areas and ethnic groups are strong, there is a need for a way of communicating between groups; a common language was central in this part of the discussion.

- One participant said,

'We need English, as a language of communication, years ago we had the British Council supporting this, it was very welcomed and helpful for us, we need this again, English training and teaching. Otherwise, traditional languages end up taking over and, in the end, ethnicity takes over, this can cause dispute and it becomes very difficult for groups to communicate then.'

Another participant working on local processes across areas said,

'I am from Bor, but when I go to other communities around the region I am not welcome, they say, "you are a fake Dinka" but they do not know my heritage, they do not know that my grandmother was from the same place as them.'

- ▶ The collective response to this was mixed, in part participants agreed that there was a need for an inter-group language or common form of communication but many participants disagreed that this should be English.
- ▶ Reflecting on inter-ethnic group dynamics, participants posed the question, when it comes to places such as Bor with these kind of group dynamics, who makes the decisions on how to deal with the challenges relating to climate, cattle and flooding discussed earlier, and why does Bor get so much attention?
- ▶ Participants posed this question whilst recognising earlier points about government allocation of resources to certain groups and governors within the theme of National politics and national or international actors undermining the local peacebuilding landscape.
- ▶ Participants reiterated that national government clearly has a role to play where governance is concerned but returned to the issue that the capital city is an easy soft landing for new governors dropped in to positions but reiterated that ultimately, 'they do not know the issues.'
- ▶ Importantly, building on this point and connecting national governance with pressing country-wide challenges such as climate change, one participant said,

'Climate is a national disaster, we know it is already happening and the government need to help communities prepare for the inevitable influx of people into new areas and the consequent clashes this causes'

With another participant saying,

'Often, people do not know the origin of cattle migrants or where they have come from and no preparations are made such as negotiating moving communities to safer ground'

- ▶ Participants concluded by challenging the assumption that people are necessarily safe in the new areas they move to, this seemed to be a false assumption around the cattle cycles. Participants stated that this is partly due to the process also being mostly self-managed.
- ▶ Reflecting on these final stages of discussion, one participant tied this back to the PA-X database asking whether the mechanisms and local approaches addressing displaced people and refugees used in peace processes in contexts such as Rwanda and which were successful, could be applied to South Sudan. The participant suggested more comparative local approaches being shown or displayed on the database as comparative suggestions or learnings.

Endnotes

¹ This local peace agreement is available on the PA-X main database: <https://pax.peaceagreements.org/agreements/1813/> and on the local database: <https://pax.peaceagreements.org/agreements/local/1813/>

² The Wunlit conference of 1999 between the Nuer and Dinka is broadly cited as one of the most successful examples of a large-scale church-led inter-ethnic local agreement conference. It was centered around bottom-up peacebuilding, and to an extent required both a large amount of external logistical support and resources, as well as well-designed and connected dialogues across a range of communities, social and political groupings. See, Okech., F. & Kleinfeld., P. (2023). No quick fix: The challenge of local peacebuilding in South Sudan. Available at: <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2023/01/19/South-Sudan-peacebuilding-dialogue>

³ PA-X Main database available at: <https://pax.peaceagreements.org/agreements/search/> and PA-X Local available at: <https://pax.peaceagreements.org/agreements/lsearch>

⁴ PA-X Tracker of Peace Transition Processes; South Sudan: Perceptions of Peace Survey, available at: <https://pax.peaceagreements.org/tracker/south-sudan/local-case-study>

⁵ Similar examples of local processes with related issues can be found on the PA-X Local database: <https://pax.peaceagreements.org/agreements/2378/>

⁶ There have been initiatives over 24-month periods in these areas that attempt to align with the overall themes of the multi-partner, UNDP managed, South Sudan Reconciliation, Stabilisation and Resilience Trust Fund (RSRTF), see: <https://mptf.undp.org/fund/ssr00>. These approaches attempt to reduce inter-communal violence and generate sustained reconciliation through bottom-up approaches that help to support and strengthen existing community mechanisms in local peacebuilding. Example available at: https://mptf.undp.org/sites/default/files/documents/2023-05/rsrtf_js_gpaa_abp_phase_ii_prodoc_signed_redacted.pdf

⁷ This local peace agreement is available on the PA-X main database: <https://pax.peaceagreements.org/agreements/2287/> and on the local database: <https://pax.peaceagreements.org/agreements/local/2287/>

⁸ See PA-X Local codebook, available at: https://pax.peaceagreements.org/media/documents/PA_X_codebook_local_v8.pdf



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About Us

PeaceRep is a research consortium based at Edinburgh Law School. Our research is rethinking peace and transition processes in the light of changing conflict dynamics, changing demands of inclusion, and changes in patterns of global intervention in conflict and peace/mediation/transition management processes.

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