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POLICY BRIEF

Policy Brief on National Identity: National Survey on Perceptions of Peace in South Sudan

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The views in this report are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily represent the views of Detcro, USIP, AF/SSS, or FCDO.

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Key Findings

- South Sudanese retain a great deal of pride in their national identity and in South Sudan's independence despite the protracted civil war. Ninety-three percent of survey respondents agreed with the statement, 'I am proud to be South Sudanese', and 91 percent agreed with the statement, 'I am happy that South Sudan seceded from Sudan.'

- Respondents in Pibor and Yei were less likely than other locations to express pride in being South Sudanese and happiness with secession, indicating the impact that ongoing conflict in these locations is having on people's sense of national identity.

- Men and women showed important differences in how they prioritized their national and ethnic identities. Women were more likely than men to prioritize their ethnic identity above their national identity to a statistically significant degree. Women were also less proud of their South Sudanese identity than men.

- People who had been displaced 10 or more times in their lives were more than twice as likely to agree with the statement, 'My ethnic identity is more important than my South Sudanese identity,' than people who had just been displaced once.

- Understanding the different ways in which these layers of identity interact with one another, whether in terms of gender, ethnicity, geography, or experiences with conflict, is critical to the design of a nation-building program that resonates with the population in South Sudan.

- The Government of South Sudan and its international partners should make more of an effort to create inclusive spaces for people from different walks of life, including populations in more conflict-affected parts of the country, to discuss what it means to be South Sudanese.

Introduction

In a 2008 book on Identity, Diversity and Constitutionalism in Africa, Francis Deng compares the political identity of an African state to a three-tier edifice.[1] At the top is an overarching sense of continental identity shared by all Africans, who can say without hesitation, "We are Africans." At the base is a sense of ethnic identity that enables most Africans to proclaim with confidence, "We are Kikuyu" or "We are Yoruba" or "We are Baganda." As Deng explains, the crisis arises in the middle, at the national level:

> "[T]here is still lip service given to this inclusive national identity, but deep down, sentiments and actual practice betray a different reality, where allegiance is placed more commonly with the religious or ethnic identity group, tribe, or clan, and not with the nation-state." [2]

South Sudan's descent into civil war in December 2013 showed just how fragile its newfound nationhood was. The political establishment never managed to articulate a coherent nation-building program, and as a result, South Sudan's cultural and ethnic diversity has arguably become a source of conflict rather than a source of strength. As the country struggles to put the pieces back together again, fundamental questions remain as to how South Sudanese conceive of their national identity, how it coexists alongside the many other individual and group identities that are present in society, and what a more effective nation-building program might look like moving forward.

This policy brief aims to inform discussions about national identity and nation-building in the context of South Sudan's transitional process. It presents findings from a series of three opinion polls that Detcro, the Austrian Study Centre for Peace and Conflict Resolution (ASPR) and Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform (PeaceRep) conducted in 2021 and 2022. Survey data shows that people retain a great deal of pride still in their South Sudanese identity and in South Sudan's independence despite the protracted civil war. However, differences emerge across demographic groups and with exposure to conflict. The challenge for the Government of South Sudan and its international partners is to design a coherent nation-building program that accounts for the complex interaction among identities and ties into policy processes that can deliver meaningful change in people's lives.

Methodological Note

The three-wave survey recorded the views of 8,843 people from 12 counties across 9 states and special administrative areas, covering urban, rural and IDP camp environments.[3] Respondents were asked questions about their daily experiences of safety, based on indicators of everyday peace developed through focus groups.[4] They also shared their views on a wide range of governance topics, from power sharing to the implications of army unification.

Secession and National Pride

In January 2011, South Sudanese voted overwhelmingly in favor of independence with 98.83 percent of voters opting for secession. Ten years on, secession and people's identity as South Sudanese continue to evoke a nationalist sentiment. Ninety-one percent of survey respondents agreed with the statement, 'I am happy that South Sudan seceded from Sudan', and 93 percent agreed with the statement, 'I am proud to be South Sudanese'. Respondents in Pibor and Yei were less likely than other locations to express pride in being South Sudanese and happiness with secession, indicating the impact that ongoing conflict in these locations is having on people's sense of national identity. Interestingly, respondents in Juba also expressed relatively high levels of discontent, suggesting a certain level of dissatisfaction at the national level with how the Government of South Sudan has performed in the first 10 years of independence.

Figure 1: Do you agree or disagree? 'I am happy that South Sudan seceded from Sudan.' By Location

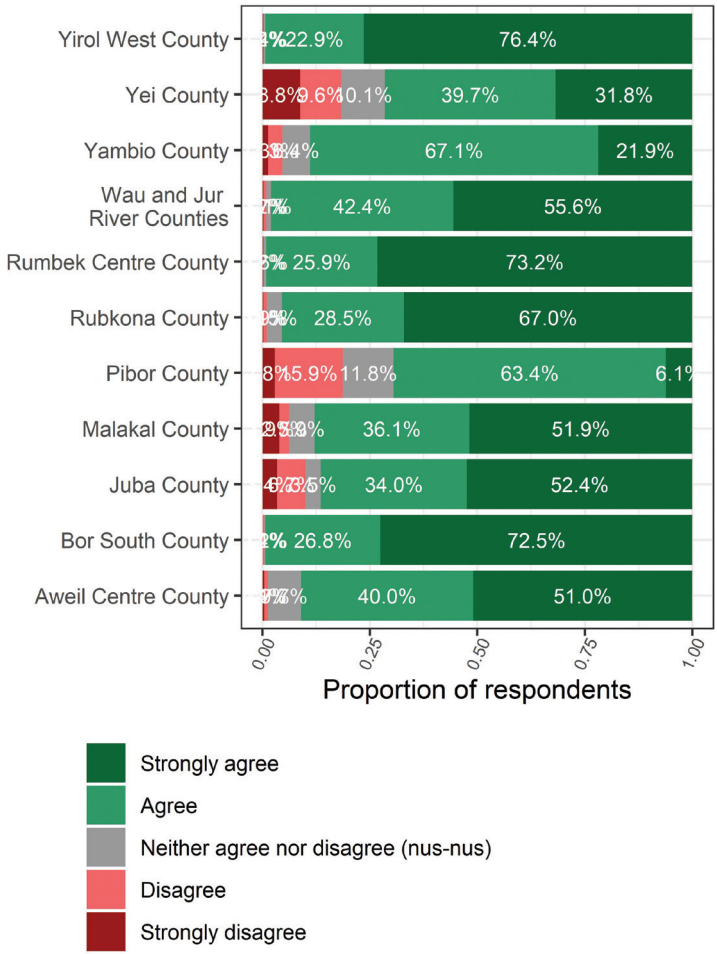
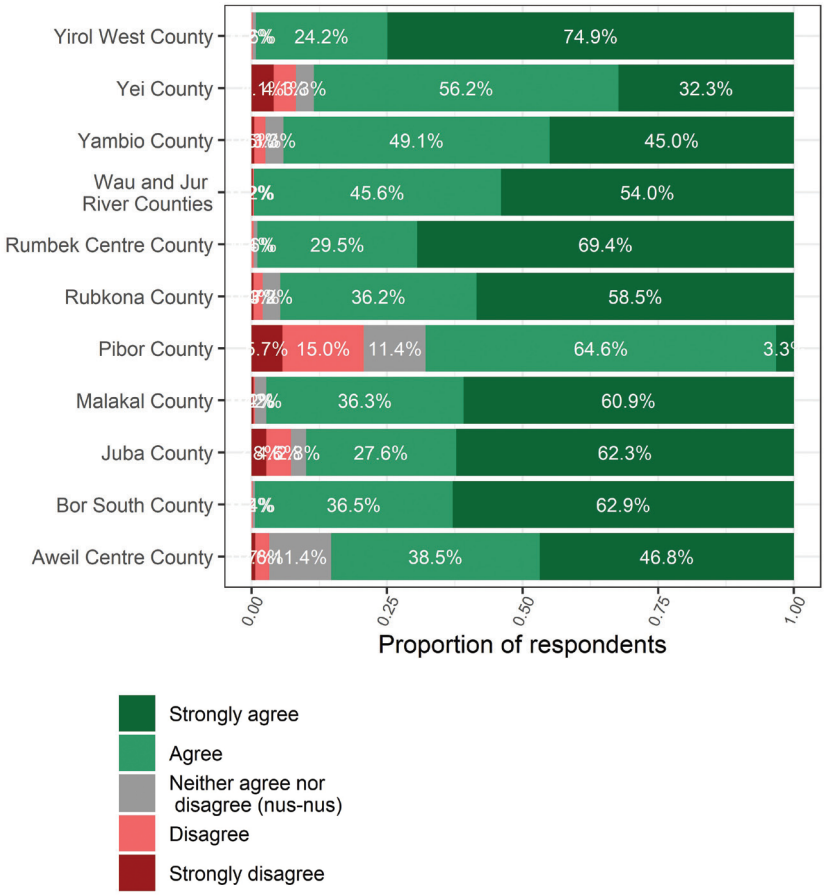


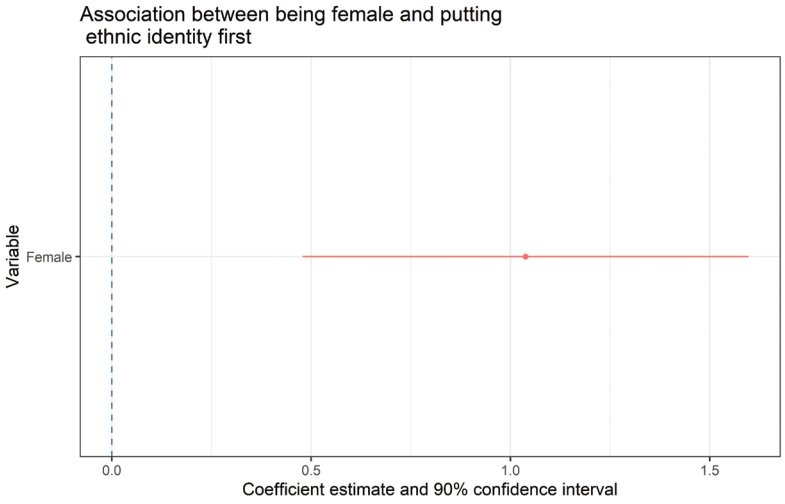
Figure 2: Do you agree or disagree? 'I am proud to be South Sudanese.' By Location



Gender and National Identity

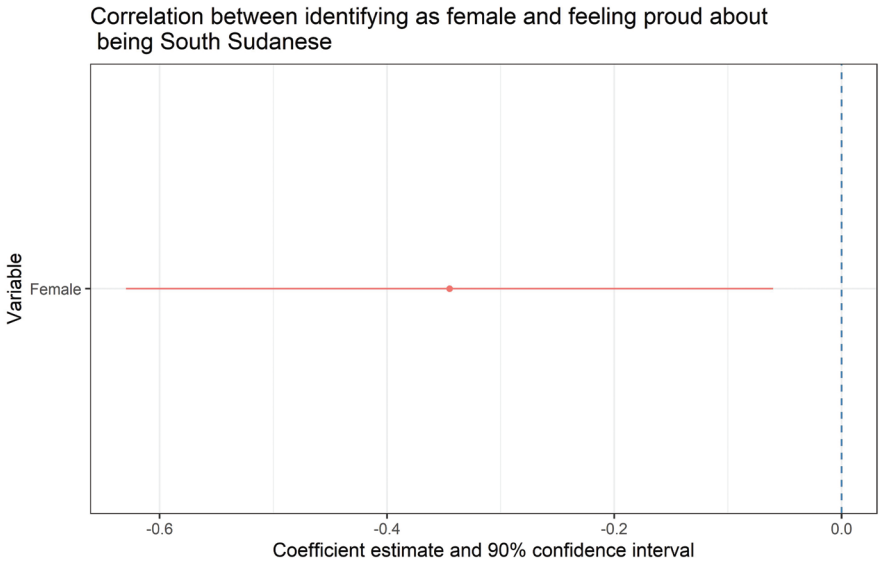
Men and women showed important differences in how they prioritized their national and ethnic identities. For example, women were more likely than men to prioritize their ethnic identity above their national identity to a statistically significant degree (Figure 3).[5] Fifty-six percent of women agreed with the statement, 'My ethnic identity is more important than my South Sudanese identity,' compared to just 25 percent of men. Women were also less proud of their South Sudanese identity than men (Figure 4), with just 91 percent of women agreeing with the statement, 'I am proud to be South Sudanese', compared to 96 percent of men.

Figure 3: Correlation between being female and putting ethnic identity first*



* The 'dot-whisker' graphs show a point for the coefficient estimate for the labelled variable on the y-axis (the independent variable). The line either side of each point is a 90 percent confidence interval. If this line does not cross the dotted line at zero, then there is a reasonable chance that a correlation exists between the independent (y-xis) variable and the variable named in the plot title.

Figure 4: Correlation between being female and putting ethnic identity first*

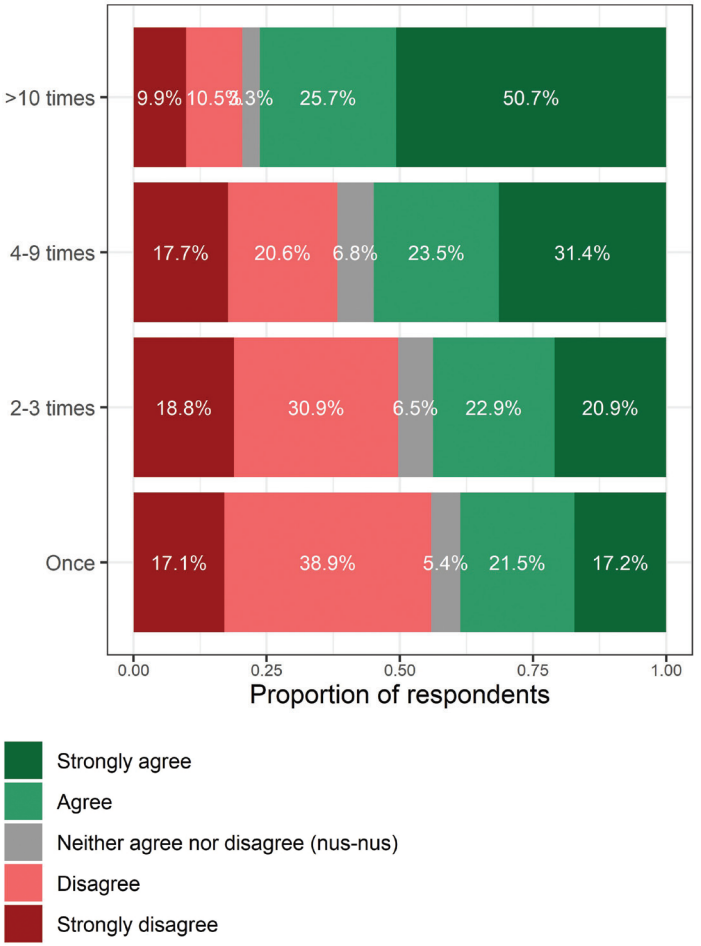


These findings illustrate the complex interactions between people's identities at various levels and how these identities are in turn influenced by their experiences with conflict. On the one hand, women tend to be portrayed as natural peacemakers because they often marry into other communities, thereby providing a set of kinship ties that counterbalance ethnolinguistic divisions. Yet, women also have an important social function as custodians of cultural values and norms which they pass on to the next generation through their roles as mothers. This may influence how women respond when they perceive their communities to be under threat. The way men and women relate to national identity may also be influenced by the different spaces in which they engage with these issues, with men more likely to engage in public spaces and women more likely to engage in the privacy of the home and in close social networks. Understanding differences such as these is critical to the design of a nation-building program that resonates with and is accessible to the population in South Sudan.

Conflict and National Identity

People's experiences with conflict also shape their conceptions of national identity. Survey data showed a statistically significant correlation between the number of times that a respondent was displaced and his or her likelihood to agree with the statement, 'My ethnic identity is more important than my South Sudanese identity.' People who had been displaced 10 or more times in their lives were more than twice as likely to agree with the statement than people who had just been displaced once (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Do you agree or disagree? 'My ethnic identity is more important than my South Sudanese identity.' By Number of times displaced



Conclusion

Nations are made, not born, or so Jok Madut Jok writes in a paper published shortly after South Sudan's independence in 2011.[6] Contrary to what some analysts have predicted, the civil war has not destroyed people's sense of national identity. If properly supported, nationalist sentiments associated with South Sudan's difficult path to nationhood could be leveraged to increase their participation in the transitional process. In framing a nation-building program, the Government of South Sudan and its international partners should be cognizant of the different ways in which these layers of identity interact with one another, whether in terms of gender, ethnicity, geography, or experiences with conflict. Additional effort should be made to reach out to people that appear more skeptical of the nation-building effort, including populations in more conflict-affected parts of the country, and to create inclusive spaces for people from different walks of life to discuss what it means to be South Sudanese.

References

1 Francis M. Deng, Identity, Diversity, and Constitutionalism in Africa, United States Institute of Peace (USIP) (2008), p. 31 (citing Olara Otunnu, former permanent representative of Uganda to the United Nations and Ugandan foreign minister).

2 Id.

3 A convenience sample of eleven counties was selected to represent the principal regions and conflict theatres in South Sudan. The research team used an approximately self-weighting stratified random sampling approach to select households, and then individuals within households. This method centred on a randomization strategy implemented using ArcGIS and the GRID3 South Sudan Settlement Extents, Version 01.01 dataset. For each work day, enumerators began at randomly-drawn map coordinates and followed a random walk guided by smartphone apps. Enumerators recorded responses using KoboToolbox smartphone software. Reference: Center for International Earth Science Information Network (CIESIN), Columbia University and Novel-T. 2021. GRID3 South Sudan Settlement Extents, Version 01. Palisades, NY: Geo-Referenced Infrastructure and Demographic Data for Development (GRID3). https://doi.org/10.7916/d8-khpa-pq09.

4 The study drew from the Everyday Peace Indicator (EPI) methodology to develop measures of everyday safety through interviews and focus groups across five of the survey locations in January and February 2020. This produced five questions which were asked in each survey. The questions were then translated into an aggregate index of daily safety. Reference: Pamina Firchow and Roger Mac Ginty, 'Measuring peace: Comparability, commensurability, and complementarity using bottom-up indicators,' International Studies Review (2017).

5 When the policy brief indicates a statistically significant correlation, it relates to a 90 percent confidence interval using an OLS regression with unit fixed effects for location and survey environment, and standard errors clustered at the location level.

6 Jok Madut Jok, Diversity, Unity and Nation Building in South Sudan, USIP (Oct. 2011), available at https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/Diversity,%20Unity,%20and%20Nation%20Building%20in%20South%20Sudan%20(Jok).pdf.

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Detcro, LLC is a US-based research and advisory company with international expertise. Our senior management team has more than 50 years of combined experience serving as intermediaries between communities and international development partners across Africa.

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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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