

## Lessons Learned #5

# Practising peacebuilding in South Sudan

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## Overview

The purpose of the paper is to reflect on peacebuilding approaches and methodologies adopted by the UK's Peacebuilding Opportunities Fund (POF) within conflict affected communities for the purpose of drawing relevant lessons for peacebuilding interventions in South Sudan. The paper identifies both learning that strengthens peacebuilding engagement and informs what can be done better when engaging conflict affected communities, and pitfalls and poor practice to be avoided.

This paper is written from a peacebuilding practitioner perspective and draws on the experience and perspectives of POF Area Advisers,<sup>1</sup> programme personnel who have extensive knowledge and understanding of peacebuilding practices in South Sudan, and experience of working within the POF programme itself. Advisers responded to a questionnaire and participated in a detailed interview as part of the development of the paper.

The paper is structured as follows: the first section sets out POF's approach as understood and internalised by Area Advisers, and then looks at adviser engagement with specific stakeholders that have been central to project delivery at the sub-national level. Finally, the paper concludes with advice from the advisers for peacebuilding practitioners.

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## About the Peacebuilding Opportunities Fund (POF)

FCDO's South Sudan Peacebuilding Opportunities Fund (POF) is a scalable, adaptable, and contextually-driven mechanism to pursue peacebuilding objectives in South Sudan.

The POF seeks to deliver outcomes which ensure that targeted communities are more harmonious and resilient to conflict, and that political, socio-economic, and cultural institutions key for handling conflict and establishing the conditions for sustained peace are strengthened and more inclusive.

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<sup>1</sup> The programme has implemented peacebuilding activities in Jonglei, Lakes, Unity and Eastern Equatoria states.

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## Setting out the POF Approach

Communities are the centre of the POF's approach. POF Advisers, drawn from target communities themselves are central to this, are key to the POF's ability to be locally grounded and relevant, delivering through local ownership and local leadership. Some POF Advisers describe this as a 'traditional community approach which works with existing structures and community decision makers to promote peace'.

Advisers see their core role as leveraging the role and influence of local actors in a specific context, to create a coalition or network of existing actors willing to engage on a particular issue. These 'existing actors' vary across project locations, including: state and county authorities; organised security forces; traditional and religious leaders; cultural leaders (such as spearmasters, landlords, Nuer prophets); traditional youth structures (including armed youth involved in community mobilisation and defence); women's organisations; and business leaders.

Advisers commented that this approach was initially challenging, requiring significant engagement in conflict and stakeholder mapping, before seeking relevant entry points for an appropriate implementation strategy. While local political economy analysis identified key issues affecting a community, and local actors partially addressed these issues in some locations, an inclusive approach was required to chart the way forward. As such, the programme set about 'strengthening local connections, linking actors in local context, harmonising the roles of key stakeholders on the ground' (Gale Emmanuel).

Resources were directed to conflict and stakeholder analysis, to linking individuals and agencies as part of designing an intervention. While advisers were required to perform some administrative functions for accountability purposes, programme management took on key functions of project design, results framework development, monitoring and evaluation, and reporting. For advisers with experience of delivering project objectives through logframes, or in large teams, the extent to which intervention design centred on their analysis, knowledge and understanding of a local context and local possibilities, was new and somewhat daunting. While the approach required working without a template, it emphasised flexibility and adaptation, placing a premium on going deeper and identifying the underlying drivers of violence and conflict within local systems. Invariably, these emerged and were identified through programmatic engagement and ongoing learning, which required Area Advisers to redirect the local intervention accordingly. Advisers described the approach as unique, something they had not engaged with previously as practitioners.

I have never engaged in a programme like this before, though I have worked on peacebuilding for many years. The way I have been supported and challenged has given me so much confidence, a new inner motivation. I now look at things differently because of what I have learned.

Gale Emmanuel, Kajo Keji Adviser

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## Practitioner engagement with ...

### State and local authorities

The need for engagement with state and local government authorities was clear from the outset of the programme. Advisers underlined the importance of securing approval for activities and working within an authorised environment. From a management perspective, POF trusted the ability of advisers to establish appropriate relationships right on the ground to enable programme implementation.

Wherever possible, implementation was undertaken in collaboration with state peace and reconciliation commission and local authorities. The formation of the Transitional Government of National Unity in February 2020, the return to ten states, and failure to establish state government and county structures for another year, removed many of the authorisations in place for activity implementation, and required advisers to reposition themselves with Executive Directors and other state personnel who ensured the continuation of administrative structures during this period. In parts of Jonglei and Unity states, and of Kajo Keji county, this required advisers to engage SPLM-IO officials to secure their consent and collaboration. In Rumbek, while the POF worked with the Secretary General, all activities were controlled by national security. POF built a relationship with the Director of National Security, who was supportive of the cattle camp engagement undertaken by POF.

The framing of conversations across the political divide emphasised that programme engagement was aimed at supporting communities resolve their own issues, and that this required the collaboration of all local stakeholders, irrespective of political persuasion. In the case of Kajo Keji, opposition forces responded positively and took the opportunity to reframe its relationship with the local community by removing checkpoints and permitting access to areas that had previously been closed off.

Advisers recognised that local government was under resourced, and could provide little by way of assistance, other than legitimacy for local engagement. Advisers also recognised that local authorities were themselves learning from their peace engagement, with some using the opportunity to rebuild relationships with the local community, and to issue apologies for what communities have suffered. Many Advisers were members of the local community, bringing a deep understanding of the issues but with limited material resources to offer. Communities were also engaging directly with local authorities, reminding them of their responsibilities to the community, to be there to serve their community, and trying to publicly reposition the organised forces under the authority of county commissioners.

## **Organised forces**

Any notion of implementing peacebuilding activities without involvement from the security forces is seen as unrealistic and counterproductive by Advisers, and inadvisable by state authorities. The Equatorias become highly militarised during the 2016-18 violence, and the continuation of military forces in civilian areas was a key obstacle to refugee return. Given that they were part of the problem, they also had to be part of the solution.

POF achievements in Pageri are a result of securing good communication between the security forces and local communities. Military commanders responded to invitations to participate in meetings with local communities, which included refugees who had fled their violence, and took part in radio broadcasts that provided assurances to refugee populations in Uganda that it was safe to return home. As the situation changed on the ground through community engagement with the security forces, soldiers returned to barracks, departing civilian areas.

## **The churches**

The churches play an important role in many South Sudanese communities, in others they are less significant. For example, within the Jonglei conflict system, the churches are of significance to the Bor Dinka community, though the church itself has not been central to local peace efforts. It is different among the Lou Nuer and Murle communities, for whom cultural and traditional leadership is of greater significance as an entry point for peace dialogue, a characteristic shared by the Dinka Agar of Lakes State and Nuer communities of Unity State. The Pieri Conference saw a significant cultural clash between the Bor Dinka and the other communities, as Bor refused to participate in the traditional rituals, considering them pagan and against their religion.

For the Equatorian communities engaged by the programme, local churches and cultural leadership were important, with both playing important roles. The churches played a key convening and facilitation role, while cultural leaders undertook cultural rituals to 'sign' local peace agreements. In locations such as Nimule, the churches engaged as an inter-church committee formed by the South Sudan Council of Churches, while in Torit and Kajo Keji, individual churches interfaced with the programme.

## Cultural leaders

'We recognise and work with relevant peacebuilding institutions and stakeholders such as spiritual leaders - this is something that has amazed the local community. These important spiritual leaders have been avoided for decades by peacebuilding partners. They have been thought to be 'evil'. They have been thought to be prophets of doom, among other names. However, POF has worked with them knowing their importance in the society'.

James Thudan Gai, Bentiu Area Adviser

The place of traditional personalities such as 'spiritual leaders' within cultural systems, other than chiefs and elders, has been an area of learning for the programme. For example, quoting Prendl (2018: 7-8), the Nuer prophets '*...form an important part of the moral and spiritual universe of the Nuer people and their continuing power and influence should not be underestimated. Acknowledging the influence of the prophets is important to those trying to understand the contemporary political reality of South Sudan.*' Political Economy Analysis in Bentiu and Jonglei underlined the importance of the Kuarmuon or Leopard skin chief, as key reference points within Nuer society. In Lakes State, the Spearmaster holds an important role in determining when it is safe for communities to migrate with their cattle. In Torit State, the place of the Rainmaker and the Landlord are central within the cultural system, who also play important roles in peacebuilding.

The place of these traditional personalities will be analysed further as implementation continues, to learn more about their potential to support peace making. It is important to note a real tension between spiritual leaders and the churches. While the spiritual leaders recognise and are willing to work with the churches, generally the churches do not recognise the place of spiritual leaders and are reluctant, or refuse, to work with them.

It is important to recognise that many of these traditional leaders also facilitate mobilisation processes that support groups preparing for violence. Understanding these processes more fully is important within POF engagement, to understand how mobilisation and demobilisation occur. Jonglei advisers have successfully identified the armed youth leadership across the Lou Nuer, Bor Dinka and Murle communities, and gained a deeper understanding of mobilisation processes across these communities, particularly by engaging youth leaders below the senior youth leadership structures. These lower levels gain little from the violence and Advisers have seen them as a key group to support by way of shifting the calculus of violence in these local contexts.<sup>2</sup>

## Civil society organisations

The POF inception report identified a limited possibility for civil society engagement in support of peacebuilding. While other donor funded programmes (SUCCESS, PACT, VISTAS) were implemented through local partnerships, the challenge for POF was to identify local partnerships aligned with the conflict analysis undertaken.

Organisations were identified that undertook Peacebuilding and Conflict Management; Natural Resource Governance; Rule of Law, Human Rights, Psycho-social Support; and Security Sector Reform – all of which Area Advisers were encouraged to engage with, based on their local relevance and ability to support programme implementation. It was clear to Advisers that national organisations were struggling with reduced donor funding, and that their focus did not match the activities that POF wished to undertake. Advisers also highlighted the lack of capacity within national organisations, and the need

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<sup>2</sup> See also Peacebuilding Opportunities Fund, *Cultural engagement for change: a case study of the Otuho people*, May 2021, available at <https://www.csrf-southsudan.org/repository/cultural-engagement-for-change-a-case-study-of-the-otuho-people/>.

for significant technical support and funding. The latter without the former often results in wasted investment.

## Women's organisations

Women have suffered the worst excesses of the South Sudanese conflict. Ensuring their voice and agency in the design of local interventions has been a priority for POF. While some women's organisations were represented in programme activities, it was invariably the voices of female chiefs, business women, police women, etc., that delivered key narratives on the suffering caused by violence and the need to find a new way of living together peacefully. In POF dialogues, women brought a strong element of truth telling. Advisers recalled the women who spoke with Liyliy, the Lou Nuer armed youth leader, prior to his visit to Pibor, leaving him speechless. They spoke with clarity, calling him a coward for how he failed to protect the community and pursued cattle theft. There was a clarity and power in how women spoke about the impact of violence that men had failed to present in a similar manner.

Across the four POF geographic areas, Advisers believe that the programme has enabled women to speak without fear. Progress in Jonglei has taken somewhat longer, as engagement focussed on armed actors – all of whom were men. However, the inclusion of women in the Jonglei peace dialogue is now seen as one of the key strengths of POF's intervention. In Rumbek, engagement with the women of the cattle camps was unique, perhaps transformational, where women accepted their enabling role in violence through the composition of songs lauding those who raided and carried out revenge killings, and recognised the need to change this. In Bentiu, the creation of Women Peace & Security committees in the IDP camp has reduced tension and supported the resolution of issues. In Torit, cultural conversations have resulted in changes to by-laws that offer new protection for women.

The extent to which these outcomes have been achieved has surprised advisers, who had not foreseen this level of women's engagement and leadership, and how this has strengthened local peace agreements.

Our engagement with women has been a particularly strong pathway; women have spoken openly and with bitterness. They said that if men continue to fight, they will stop having children, told the young boys that they will curse their children if they return to violence.

Peter Maze, Jonglei Adviser

How culture perceives women is different to how we have worked. We have placed women at the centre of the process. They spoke together with men; they spoke the truth in these dialogue meetings. They participated fully, often more than men.

Wilson Okech, Lohuyoro Peter, Paride Hakim, Torit Advisers

Progress however remains limited, and the challenge moving forward is to build on these incremental shifts. Whilst the POF experience supports the 35% female representation advocacy position of national government as a minimum standard, it is a blunt tool to address a complex problem. In Jonglei and GPAA, a Pieri Action for Peace resolution focused on the creation of an inter-communal women's structure to give voice to the particular interests of women, which has remained unsupported by other programmes. This could be a powerful tool in balancing prevailing male-dominated structures. It could be more powerful than a 35% representation in some of these other structures – which is unrealistic in some cases (e.g. traditional chief structures) and also of limited influence.

## The diaspora

The need for engagement with the diaspora, which was not foreseen during the inception phase, has emerged as an important characteristic for a number of POF interventions. Adviser experience of engagement with diaspora influence in Jonglei, Torit and Kajo Keji has largely been negative, seeing it as undermining POF engagement. The positive influence of diaspora influence, such as remittances as a source of revenue for local families and development, was not strong in Adviser reflections.

During the Hujang-Mayya intervention, it was clear that the community was subject to external influences which were fuelling misunderstanding. Advisers found that agreed positions and approaches would be overturned by the community in a matter of days, and identified three diaspora members in Canada, Australia and France. One hosted his own TV show on a Facebook channel and eventually invited one of the Advisers to be interviewed on the show. This was after extensive engagement that resulted in a clearer understanding in the diaspora of the community processes POF was promoting, where the focus was on finding workable solutions at the local level.

## **Social media**

Advisers are active on social media and report having engaged to influence discussions taking place on Facebook and other platforms. They view social media as important for disseminating peace messaging, sharing information on specific activities, and challenging rumour and misinformation. The latter has been a significant concern, often driven by members of the diaspora who are in frequent contact with family members at home, then posting news they hear. Such news is generally not triangulated and can be problematic if referencing other communities. As stated above, POF advisers have engaged with key diaspora figures to share information about POF interventions for onward communication, particularly in relation to Pieri engagement.

While supportive of engagement with social media, advisers were critical of those who start rumours that destabilise local communities. Reference was made to recent rumours of 8,000 Murle youth mobilising against the Gawaar, where old photos of youth mobilisation were used.

A communications strategy for social media engagement should be considered in future programming. The channels for spreading bad news in South Sudan are strong and active and need to be challenged through some programmatic engagement.

## **Juba elites**

Advisers highlight the challenge in disentangling the role of the Juba elites, whose internal dynamics can be complex and contradictory. Juba elites refers to those from a particular community living in Juba, who claim to speak on behalf of their community, or represent themselves as leaders of those communities. The irony is that the local community may not recognise this leadership, may vocally reject it, and on occasions has actively counselled POF to avoid engagement with Juba elites because of their destructive influence on the peace and security of local communities, instrumentalising these communities for perceived political gain.

A key characteristic of the Jonglei engagement is its local ownership. Spiritual and traditional leaders from the Lou Nuer community have advised POF to keep away from Juba politics and personalities surrounding Jonglei, stating that these do not represent the interests of the community, which needs to be negotiated and advanced locally. Juba interference with the Jonglei intervention caused serious issues in December 2020, temporarily derailing the process and deferring planned activities.

POF Advisers elsewhere have seen their work undone by Juba dynamics in Magwi. A dialogue in Magwi, the first of its kind between local community and cattle herders from Jonglei, which enjoyed the consent and support of local leadership, was rejected by Acholi leadership in Juba, with Hon David Otim MP giving interviews to the media rejecting the resolutions from the dialogue. As a result, the resolutions were not implemented. POF learned from the experience by paying greater attention to national dynamics within the sub-national conflict context. POF also considers this to have saved the Kajo Keji engagement, where the local adviser stated that learning from Magwi pushed him to engage Juba stakeholders, particularly a Presidential Adviser, which was pivotal in ensuring Juba leadership acceptance.

## **International Actors**

Advisers were critical on approaches to peacebuilding which focus on meetings and one-off events, the resolutions of which are not actioned or accompanied in a meaningful way. They stated that

communities were tired of going to meetings organised by international actors, which achieved little, and yet are reported as examples of success.

There is little evidence of effort to identify the correct community leadership and to engage in a sustained and meaningful manner with this leadership. In Jonglei, communities report that requests by international actors for representation from chiefs, women and youth are supported by sending those who may have other business at the meeting location. The overriding sense is that the focus is on information gathering, rather than constructively doing something with information shared.

Advisers recognise that international agencies work with a limited operational budget, often restricted to funding meetings. Funds are not provided for working with communities on sustained processes that support the incremental resolution of problems. The inability to engage in sustained manner was identified as a weakness of many peace agencies, which prioritise meetings in urban areas over community engagement processes that can be messy and complex, often taking international agencies outside their comfort zone.

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## Recommendations

By way of conclusion, the consultation identified recommendations to strengthen peacebuilding engagement by peace partners in South Sudan:

1. On recruitment, advisers noted **the importance of hiring the right people to speak to the right constituencies**. It is important to hire people mature and respected within their community, as this opens avenues that otherwise prove problematic for the outsider. The contracting of female Advisers was recognised as having made a positive contribution, and has strengthened POF's access to local communities. **For future programming, area teams should comprise female and male Advisers from the outset, through appropriate recruitment processes.**
2. Transport has been a challenge for many Advisers. The POF budget has not permitted the purchase of vehicles for area teams, who instead hire vehicles for activities, use motorcycles, or coordinate with other organisations. In the context of the budget envelope and an 18-month delivery period, it has been difficult to justify vehicle purchase as value for money. However, the costs of vehicle hire are significant and rapidly accumulate over time. **For locally-grounded and community-based projects like the POF to be effective, teams need to be provided with transport or provided sufficient budget to rent local vehicles for more reliable periods of time.**
3. While POF activities have reached well beyond urban areas to quite remote parts of the country, **in Jonglei more distant and remote areas need to be accessed as part of the programme**. This would engage the youth of the cattle camps – in particular, the Murle youth who live in the border lands with neighbouring communities and are blamed for criminality and raiding.
4. Advisers felt that greater effort needed to be made to **engage influential leaders in urban areas**, especially those with significant voice and authority within local communities. Though distant from their communities, many are sensitive regarding their role as leaders, and have the potential to become spoilers if bypassed from engagement with their community. Their engagement requires careful consideration, finding a balance between their views and the needs of local communities.
5. Advisers felt that their **engagement with youth leadership, or 'armed youth'**, was unique and a real strength of the programme. This needs to be developed. POF management recognised that Advisers have been courageous with their own communities in engaging leadership at all levels, exploring peace opportunities.
6. Finally, Advisers felt that a **focus on specific issues and solutions created energy within communities**, generated a clear sense of direction around which momentum could build, and determined where programme investments should be directed. This was a type of issue-based

programming that made it easier to understand what the programme was trying to achieve in a particular location.