Community Engagement and Inter-Agency Collaboration across the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) Nexus in South Sudan

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This paper presents five lessons on community engagement in the context of the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) Nexus in South Sudan. More coordinated and collaborative approaches to community engagement have potential to address weaknesses in current approaches that prioritise the short-term information needs of the aid system at the expense of community priorities.

The lessons focus on: (1) designing community engagement processes that respond to community priorities, capacities, and preferences, (2) ensuring less fragmented approaches to community engagement across humanitarian, development and peace initiatives, (3) ensuring that communities have the time, resources and information that are needed to meaningfully engage with the aid sector, (4) promoting more robust, yet contextualised, participation of local government in community engagement efforts, and (5) creating incentives for implementing partners to better respond to community priorities and to coordinate their community engagement efforts with other agencies.

Together, these lessons frame an approach to community engagement that goes beyond stand-alone projects, informs ongoing thinking about how to create platforms for collaboration, and strengthens capacities of communities, local government actors, and aid agencies to coordinate among each other in ways that more effectively and sustainably address drivers of humanitarian need and conflict in South Sudan. If taken forward with a wider shift in mindsets, this has potential to contribute towards a more meaningful change in the relationship between aid and the communities it is meant to serve.

Introduction

Strengthening inter-agency collaboration around community engagement is an important means of addressing the complex challenges affecting people's well-being and development in South Sudan. As the parallel trends of increasing humanitarian needs and decreasing aid budgets place pressure on existing response models, there is a growing recognition that humanitarian, development and peace actors must realise their comparative advantages to enable a more coherent and efficient collective response to achieve shared outcomes. The successful implementation of this so-called Humanitarian, Development, and Peace (HDP) Nexus will require more coordinated community engagement approaches both for their

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intrinsic value as a means of strengthening community voice and agency, as well as for their *instrumental* value in improving programme effectiveness and sustainability.

The nearly four decades of conflict and subsequent humanitarian response since the outbreak of the Second Sudanese Civil War in 1983 have created a complex context where current approaches to community engagement face major challenges. Even prior to this, the particular nature of many South Sudanese communities – with multiple centres of political, social and spiritual power among customary authorities – have presented dilemmas for international engagement for generations. While customary authorities in some areas can date their lineage back multiple centuries and are often seen as legitimate, interference by colonial authorities and successive post-colonial governments[2] in other areas has weakened these institutions or created new sources of authority. Such authorities are not always representative of a wide cross-section of community interests, yet are reinforced, for better or worse, through the engagement of aid actors. While donors and UN agencies invested significant resources in building the capacity of state authorities following the signature of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005, multi-donor evaluations found these to be top-down, insufficiently supportive of local stakeholders and with limited consideration for what drives conflict at a sub-national level. The outbreak of civil war in 2013 largely curtailed these efforts at institutional strengthening and has led to the continued proliferation of parallel engagement of communities through short-term, humanitarian response. In the meantime, the movement of many South Sudanese communities – whether due to changing seasonal migration routes or forced displacement from violence and climate-related crises – have raised fundamental questions around identity, land and authority that further complicate efforts to engage communities.

For all these reasons, community engagement in South Sudan presents not only opportunities but also conflict sensitivity risks – for example, by excluding marginalised voices, endorsing contested claims, or undermining existing structures. While pockets of 'better practices' have continued to emerge, in most cases these tend to be overly projectised, dependent on the entrepreneurship of a few committed individuals, and leave the fundamental structures of the aid system untouched. The examples shared in this paper are therefore not necessarily intended as endorsements by CSRF or Detcro, but rather as potentially fruitful opportunities for learning across the aid sector in South Sudan. Overcoming these more systemic challenges will require more concerted leadership, dialogue and action that leverages the expertise and experience of each pillar of the HDP Nexus.

This paper presents five lessons from desk research, interviews, a workshop, and a roundtable, all aimed at framing, synthesising, and enriching the ongoing discussion around inter-agency collaboration on community engagement. The lessons centre on: (1) structuring design processes that respond to community priorities, capacities, and preferences, (2) ensuring less fragmented community engagement efforts, (3) investing in community and aid agency capacity for community engagement, (4) contextualising local government participation, (5) and creating incentives for implementing partners. These lessons frame an approach to community engagement based on understanding platforms for collaboration, developing capacities for community engagement, and facilitating collective participatory design processes. This framework ensures that HDP initiatives are relevant, effective, and sustainable, promoting the well-being and development of communities. While not framed explicitly in terms of conflict sensitivity, these lessons and recommendations will help aid agencies to develop more

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[2] Throughout this paper the term 'government' is used to refer to the *South Sudanese* government rather than *foreign* governments. The latter are referred to as 'donors' given their role as funders and in exercising oversight, whereas UN agencies, international NGOs and national NGOs are collectively referred to as 'aid agencies'.

contextualised approaches that mitigate conflict sensitivity risks and strengthen relationships with communities and longer-term contributions to peace. These lessons and recommendations may also be relevant to a wider range of private sector and civil society organisations working alongside aid agencies on issues relating to longer term development and peace.

Lessons on Community Engagement

Lesson #1 - The design of community engagement processes often ignores how communities themselves want to be engaged and their existing capacities for engagement with the aid sector.

Aid actors in South Sudan often claim that they have placed communities at the centre of programme design and implementation, but communities rarely feel this is achieved in practice. Instead, approaches to aid tend to prioritise donor compliance and operational concerns and relegate community input on programme design to perfunctory, tick-box exercises. To ensure that community engagement processes take full advantage of existing capacities, communities should not only be involved in programme delivery, but also in programme design and in discussions about the modalities of engagement themselves.

One reason for this is that the characteristics of engagement – such as the mandate, structures, frequency and participants – are often determined at the donor tender development, fundraising or proposal stage of the programme cycle before communities are even consulted. Fixed, pre-defined models of engagement are too often imported and imposed in the form of committee structures, grievance mechanisms and so on. As a result, the focus of community engagement tends to skip deliberation about the appropriate processes through which this engagement should take place and instead revolve around the 'content' of what aid should be delivered. If there is going to be a decision on how humanitarian, development and peacebuilding actors can better align their approaches to community engagement, then representatives from communities themselves need to be involved in these decisions about when, where, how and with whom to engage. The resulting approach might look different in each area to reflect variation in conflict and gender dynamics, levels of social division or cohesion, and the existing structures that could be built on. For example, in areas recently affected by violence, the 'starting' point for collective community engagement may involve bilateral consultations, shuttle diplomacy or intra-/inter-communal dialogues to build trust before bringing together communities around decision-making processes.

Anchoring this decision-making in community feedback may help to overcome the significant polarisation in aid actors' perceptions of the effectiveness of existing community engagement approaches that was identified during consultations for this paper. In particular, humanitarians express concern about the impact of more collective approaches on their neutrality, impartiality and independence. The co-design of community engagement processes may therefore benefit from the agreement of engagement principles with communities against which 'success' or otherwise can be monitored and evaluated. These collective principles may incorporate elements of humanitarian principles but also others, such as respect for customary norms, inclusion of marginalised voices (especially women), or alignment with existing community structures. Agreement among HDP actors and communities at the level of shared principles will help to generate indicators (e.g., perceived alignment of practice with principles) to evaluate performance in ways that facilitate peer-to-peer and downwards accountability.

There will be inevitable tensions between these principles of engagement that require careful deliberation and negotiation with communities. In particular, the imperative to build on local capacities and structures should not negate the need for more inclusive forms of community engagement in two important respects. First, it is important that community engagement processes identify opportunities to amplify the voices of women and girls, who are frequently excluded from customary leadership or existing structures in South Sudan. Women and girls often have different priorities, perspectives and relationships that need to be factored into community engagement processes in ways that may require adjustments to – though not replacement of – existing structures. Second, aid actors must remain astute to the possibility that community engagement processes can be hijacked by self-imposed individuals or networks handpicked by those in positions of authority. This is more prevalent in communities affected by conflict where the leadership of the existing 'community-led' structures is dictated by those in positions of power. For example, in one administrative area, the lead government official has one close relative as the head of the women union, another as the head of the government agency responsible for oversight of aid, and another as the head of the youth union.

In such scenarios, it is critical that aid consider the tensions between the principle of building on existing structures and the principles of inclusion and representation. However, these tensions should not be seen as 'either/or' where one principle must override another, but instead as opportunities to model approaches to nonviolent dispute resolution that explore potential tensions, embrace 'both/and' principles, and inform longer term processes of attitudinal and organisational change across HDP actors and communities. In many cases South Sudanese communities are already adapting and re-organising existing structures to incorporate more diverse perspectives from youth groups, women's groups and others. Such processes require respect – and sometimes support – in order to avoid undermining them through parallel aid initiatives.

One fundamental challenge to a more community-centred and conflict-sensitive approach to community engagement is that it would shift the highly centralised and top-down decision-making towards a greater distribution of agency and responsibility among stakeholders at various levels. The Partnership for Recovery and Resilience (PfRR) – a collective of donors, UN agencies and NGOs working together to reduce vulnerability and increase resilience through four area-based programmes from 2018-2022 – has tried to do this through its joint activity planning activities with mixed success. The Policy LINK programme, funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), has applied many of the community engagement practices developed under the PfRR in some of the 13 counties of USAID's Resilience Focus Zone (RFZ). A recent impact assessment suggests that the approach has helped to catalyse local ownership and agency, but it remains to be seen if it will be sustained now that the Policy LINK programme has concluded. Waning donor commitment was a challenge for the PfRR and highlights the need for stronger participation, ownership, and political will on all sides to see strategies for community engagement through to their conclusion in forthcoming initiatives such as the revitalised Partnership for Peace, Recovery and Resilience (PfPRR).

Recommendations:
- **Aid agencies should ask community leaders and members what they think effective community engagement looks like** and consider piloting shared principles and metrics of success to promote learning and accountability to guide collaboration across HDP actors. This process of agreeing principles needs to be inclusive of marginalised groups, including not only

> women, youth and people living with disabilities, but also other potentially overlooked groups such as IDPs, seasonal pastoralists, or neighbouring communities affected by conflict.
> - **Aid agencies should invest in building a strong understanding of local organisations and relationships** to identify potential tensions between agreed principles and ensure a conflict-sensitive approach to the design and implementation of community engagement processes.
> - **Aid agencies should build on existing local structures, systems, and resources when developing community engagement processes** to promote greater ownership by communities and continuity of programmes. Where there are tensions or risks identified, aid agencies should work with the community to complement or adapt these existing structures rather than side-line them completely.

Lesson #2 - Fragmented approaches to community engagement by humanitarian, development and peace initiatives have led to inefficiencies and incoherence that distort community perspectives and undermine the collective impact of aid programmes across South Sudan.

Aid actors in South Sudan typically engage communities through short-term and sector-specific projects that do not provide an accurate or legitimate representation of community views. Decades of this sector-based engagement have also led many community representatives to share input based on what they are *told* is possible or what they *believe* aid actors want to hear, rather than speaking openly about and negotiating around their *real* interests, needs and priorities. Multiple organisations engage the same community members in different, sector-specific discussions that often leave out key individuals and groups in an approach that is duplicative, inefficient and unsustainable. For example, water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) committees, protection committees and peace committees are often all established with the support of aid organisations in the same community and may discuss issues around safe access to water, but they do not present communities with a common space to develop a coherent response that targets their own priorities. The limited visibility of these different community engagement processes and poor communication of what has been discussed further complicate efforts to coordinate between them. Fragmented approaches such as these alienate communities and weaken relationships both within communities and between communities and the aid sector, for example, by creating multiple centres of power that compete with each other and existing structures for legitimacy, authority and resources. In doing so, they risk driving conflict and undermining the effectiveness of community engagement.

Overall, the aid sector needs to adopt a more unified approach based on a better understanding of how communities function as systems. One way to achieve this is through collaboration infrastructure, or a 'platform', that brings together representatives from across the HDP Nexus to share information and adapt plans to improve collective impact. The Area Reference Groups (ARGs) established under the United Nations Multi-Partner Trust Fund for Reconciliation, Stabilisation and Resilience (RSRTF) and the PfRR demonstrate the potential for a more harmonised approach to community engagement. While the ARGs do not always include community representatives as participants themselves, they have helped to coordinate community engagement activities among different development and peacebuilding activities in some areas, such as the RSRTF area-based programmes in Jonglei and Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA) and southern Central Equatoria State. In Jonglei/GPAA, the ARG has helped to coordinate community engagement designed to mitigate mobilisation of youth and escalation of violence and build a shared understanding of how to respond to community priorities in a more coherent way. However, in other areas, the ARGs have also faced challenges integrating with existing humanitarian coordination mechanisms, and in coordinating between parallel ARGs in places where both the PfRR and RSRTF were

operating. This highlights the risk that such platforms could become overly projectised, reflecting the immediate priorities associated with a specific project and its implementing partners, rather than a more sustained, public good for the wider aid community. Aid agencies should build on the success of these initiatives and continue to harvest lessons from the challenges they have encountered to ensure a more coordinated and effective approach to community engagement.

In some contexts, efforts to integrate community engagement across sectoral silos in the aid sector have been enhanced through the creation or strengthening of a platform or structure within the community itself. For example, Payam and Boma Development Committees (PDCs and BDCs) have been established in many parts of South Sudan as a means of coordinating legislative and executive functions of Payam Councils and Boma authorities in accordance with the provisions of the Local Government Act 2009.[3] These provide another potential anchor for collaboration platforms across the HDP Nexus. The World Bank has supported PDCs and BDCs through its Local Governance and Service Delivery Project (LOGOSEED, 2014-18) and Enhancing Community Resilience and Local Governance Project (ECRP, since 2020). If properly supported to ensure inclusion and representation, these and other similar structures could provide an institutional infrastructure for stakeholder engagement that complements the more ad hoc, project-based approaches currently dominating the aid sector. One challenge for more community-oriented platforms, such as the PDCs and BDCs, again concerns their weak linkages with the humanitarian (and to a lesser extent, peacebuilding) architecture. For example, existing humanitarian funding practices tend to require that a new, independent needs assessment (often an inter-agency Initial Rapid Needs Assessment or 'IRNA') be completed in response to shocks to inform scale-up decisions, rather than work through existing mechanisms like PDCs or BDCs to engage communities in co-designing responses. These institutions could be better integrated into the aid sector if humanitarian agencies harmonised their needs assessments by implementing them through PDCs and BDCs rather than conducting them in parallel, as is the current practice. This may be more realistic in contexts with a standing humanitarian response rather than a temporary, mobile response in areas affected by ongoing violent conflict.

Community engagement through institutions such as the PDCs and BDCs would still have to overcome challenges that aid agencies face in helping such community and government institutions to become self-sufficient so that they can effectively support community engagement efforts over longer time periods. As with the ARGs, the dependence of such structures on project-based funding – such as LOGOSEED and ECRP – has left them vulnerable to gaps between projects and loss of momentum. Such longer-term institutional support may conflict with the need for fast turn-arounds in humanitarian aid delivery, but it could also help anchor collaboration efforts to better align with humanitarian priorities. For example, a recent UN study on food security and nutrition in South Sudan highlighted the community's appreciation for food for assets (FFA) activities but also pointed out the need to systematically align these activities with the type of recovery programmes envisioned for inter-agency collaboration. In this case, community engagement through standing structures could have helped to identify convergence points for collaboration across the HDP Nexus that all actors recognise as legitimate. Regardless of the entry point, aid agencies must ensure communities are involved in decision-making not only around design and implementation, but also the exit strategy. The centring of communities in this process may help to identify new ways to leverage funding and capacities across the HDP Nexus – especially of development initiatives to build on humanitarian activities – to promote more sustainable institutions and impact.

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[3] 'Payams' and 'bomas' represent the second-lowest and lowest level of formal administrative division in South Sudan. At these more local levels, the distinction between government and customary authority is often blurred, and resourcing and organisational capacity tends to be much more limited relative to state and county authorities.

Both of these approaches – whether focused on aid coordination like the ARGs or a more embedded community institution like the PDCs/BDCs – could leverage both digital and social components. With the limited digital infrastructure in South Sudan, face-to-face meetings, and other convenings could build on existing community structures to ensure local ownership and sustainability. The digital component of the platform development should be incremental, starting with basic mobile data collection and sharing tools, and gradually building additional features as the available technologies and communities' ability to use these technologies advance. This is not a new concept in South Sudan. The 2004 Strategic Framework for War-to-Peace Transition, authored by the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) Economic Commission, envisioned information communication technology (ICT) infrastructure as a central means for South Sudan to leapfrog into rapid recovery. More recently, the response to the Covid-19 pandemic has renewed interest in online communication platforms as a means of overcoming communication challenges in South Sudan.

Recommendations:
- **Aid agencies should undertake a systematic review of lessons learned from existing pilots and programmes** to inform decisions on rolling out models, investing in decentralisation, or using new technologies.
- **Humanitarian and peace actors should avoid perpetuating the proliferation of committees by investing in more institutionalised approaches to community engagement**, such as PDCs and BDCs, that complement project-specific approaches and connect community-driven engagement efforts to existing humanitarian coordination infrastructure in order to promote shared ownership, accountability, and sustainability.
- **Aid agencies and communities should develop integrated, area-based platforms for information-sharing and collaboration that are accessible to all stakeholders across the HDP Nexus**. The platforms should use digital, human, and organisational infrastructures, grow incrementally, and adapt over time based on ongoing feedback from its members.
- **Donors should ensure investments in aid collaboration platforms do not become seen as a time-bound project delivery modality**, but are instead sustainable over the longer-term and inclusive of and responsive to a wider network of HDP actors.

Lesson #3 - Communities are often not provided sufficient time, information, and resources required to organise themselves, deal with the legacies of conflict, and develop shared positions to engage aid agencies in a meaningful and sustainable way.

Aid actors in South Sudan operate through many separate projects with little accountability to communities and programme participants. While aid agencies have begun devoting more attention to accountability to affected populations (AAP) processes in recent years, more meaningful accountability that goes beyond simple validation exercises and pro forma grievance mechanisms is still lacking. The extractive orientation of the prevailing approach in which communities are mobilised at short notice and mined for information to inform sector-specific programming without considering community information needs or wider priorities is ineffective and provokes resentment towards the aid sector. This is a source of frustration and embarrassment for communities and undermines their ability to consult, plan, and make decisions effectively. The side-lining of communities in decision-making also hinders their ability to respond to shocks and promotes dependency by shifting the responsibility for such responses to aid agencies. More needs to be done to reinforce and strengthen community capacity for engagement,

both in terms of organisational capacity and in terms of information flows. For example, as revealed in the recent Policy LINK impact assessment, where community resilience action planning took place, communities acted independently upon their agreed priorities, and implementing partners ultimately provided support to those same priorities.

The success of community-led planning initiatives highlights the importance of providing communities with adequate space and resources to plan for themselves. However, the impact of generations of conflict in South Sudan means that communities are often fragmented and grappling with fundamental socio-economic changes. Communities that are internally divided may require more time, resources, and information to agree priorities and approaches than highly cohesive communities. For example, aid agencies engaging in parts of Jonglei State and GPAA must consider communities that have been displaced into neighbouring states as a result of flooding, churches riven by internal disputes, and tensions between people who have resided in Jonglei State throughout successive wars and those who are recently returning from the diaspora. The models and timelines for community engagement need to be flexible to emerging conflict dynamics, for example, increasing fragmentation among community leaders from Bor, Twic East, and Duk who feel alienated from development initiatives and contest the label 'Dinka Bor', or in escalating conflict between Murle age-sets that inhibits intra-communal decision-making. Aid agencies should not penalise communities for such internal conflicts that surface during engagement efforts, but instead use these as opportunities to support conflict transformation processes.

However, the timelines that aid agencies allow themselves to broker inter-agency agreement in the design and procurement of HDP initiatives – usually spanning many months – often stand in sharp contrast with the hours, days or weeks afforded to communities to undertake their own consultation and negotiation across diverse stakeholders. Such time-constrained engagement can limit the scope for inclusive and conflict-sensitive approaches required to tackle drivers of conflict over the longer-term. Allowing time for a conflict- and gender-sensitive lens and peacebuilding activities at the start of HDP initiatives – rather than rushing into redesigning humanitarian or development responses – can help to address these challenges and thereby create a more conducive environment for community engagement.

The increased investment of time in communities – seeing community engagement as a process rather than one-off events – also needs to be matched with improved information-sharing and investments in resources of both agency staff and community representatives expected to participate in these processes. Such efforts need to be adjusted to provide support that is tailored to the different existing capacities, especially to ensure meaningful participation of frequently marginalised groups such as women. The PfRR's attempt to strengthen capacities of its ARGs, Inclusive Champions Groups (ICGs), and Community Development Committees (CDCs) provide one example of inter-agency collaboration to strengthen staff and community capacities. While largely aspirational in most areas, these structures were key mechanisms in the PfRR's approach to community engagement.

Learning processes within the PfRR revealed that implementing partners' staff were loosely assigned to community engagement activities, required significant coordination, saw this as an add-on to their job descriptions without commensurate support, and tended to participate out of personal commitments rather than as a recognised requirement of their positions. This finding applied equally to other inter-agency collaborations examined in this study and suggests that aid agencies and donors have not sufficiently conveyed to their staff the importance of community engagement, or not sufficiently empowered national staff and partners to challenge international staff to conduct more meaningful and consistent community engagement. While HDP initiatives provide an opportunity for improved

information-sharing across different sectors, there needs to be clear accountability for which agencies are responsible for communicating what information to which community members.

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Recommendations:

- **Aid agencies should develop a nuanced understanding of the heterogeneous nature of communities** to avoid contributing to tensions or conflict, and to ensure an inclusive approach to community engagement and better alignment of interventions with their diverse needs and priorities. These should consider how specific priorities vary across gender, age, ethnicity, disability, displacement status, ethnicity and livelihood groups.
- **Aid agencies should factor in a robust role and enough time for peacebuilding or social cohesion initiatives** early in HDP programming to build trust, strengthen relationships and create a more conducive environment for community engagement around activity design, area and beneficiary selection, and other potentially sensitive issues.
- **Aid agencies should develop context-specific approaches that prioritise community information needs and invest in strengthening community capacities**. These should include mechanisms for sustainability planning, and transferring knowledge and skills to local stakeholders so that community leaders and members can take an active role.
- **Aid agencies should prioritise community engagement by conveying its importance to staff** at all levels and by developing mechanisms to ensure they see it as a requirement of their positions. This could include integration into job descriptions, performance agreements and budget allocations.

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Lesson #4 - *Poorly planned efforts to engage – or not to engage – local government as part of community engagement have fuelled suspicion, generated political interference, and undermined negotiation on sensitive issues.*

Aid actors in South Sudan often use weak government capacity and legitimacy concerns to justify the side-lining of public authorities in the community engagement process. Issues such as human rights, corruption, political instability, and administrative flux have prevented aid actors from building strong relationships with different levels of government. Concerns about manipulation and interference in staff recruitment, area selection, beneficiary selection, and other aspects of aid programmes are admittedly major problems that aid actors contend with on a daily basis. Nonetheless, local government actors form part of the community and their limited participation in coordination platforms has major implications for the quality and effectiveness of community engagement processes.

The formation of the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity in 2020 and tentative steps forward in the implementation of the revised roadmap towards elections in 2024 provide space to revisit assumptions around whether and how to involve government actors through HDP programming with longer-term objectives. This is important for at least three reasons. First, when national or local government actors are denied information about aid activities, it can generate suspicion and political interference in access to communities, operations, and programme delivery. Second, more coordinated engagement with government by aid actors can help to ensure more synchronised messaging and a strengthened negotiating position when it comes to the contentious issues above, whereas more fragmented engagement leaves agencies more vulnerable to manipulation and harassment. Finally, despite the challenges that local government institutions face in the current context, they are less

transient than most aid organisations where international personnel are rotated on a regular basis and the ebb and flow of donor financing does not allow for longer-term commitments to organisational and systems change. Aid programmes that exclude local government actors are therefore less likely to be sustainable and risk missing opportunities to strengthen longer-term governance and reform processes.

At the same time, aid actors must not assume that all government counterparts have consulted communities or are seen as legitimate representatives of local priorities and views by community members. In such cases, rather than avoid engaging government altogether, it is particularly important that aid actors explore ways to involve government in community engagement activities that can strengthen the social contract between government and citizens. While it would have to be approached carefully, more coherent approaches to engaging government could present advantages across the HDP Nexus. For example, closer collaboration between humanitarians and peacebuilders can help to support humanitarians to understand conflict dynamics and their ability to apply the humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality in a given context. Better leveraging of peacebuilding approaches and development investments could also benefit humanitarians by addressing access constraints imposed by the government. Government participation in some humanitarian initiatives is unavoidable, such as the transitioning of UN-administered protection of civilian (POC) sites into IDP settlements under government control or the pursuit of 'durable solutions' for displaced populations where the government has clear areas of responsibility. If done strategically and incrementally, government participation in community engagement efforts can build trust, promote shared ownership and accountability, and leverage resources to achieve common goals.

One example of where more intentional engagement of government counterparts has yielded benefits across the HDP Nexus derives from the RSRTF programme in Jonglei/GPAA. In August 2022, development and peacebuilding partners collaborated to arrange for a government delegation including the Deputy Governor to travel to Akobo. This was reported to be the first time for a Jonglei State government official to visit Akobo since the start of the civil war in 2013. The delegation was welcomed with dancing and celebrations and the symbolic impact of the visit helped to reduce tensions and begin normalizing relations to the extent where Dinka humanitarian workers were able to begin working again in the county following a period of increased tension. The fact that the Deputy Governor had previously worked in the humanitarian sector helped to build trust between the different parties involved in the collaboration. This is just one example among many of how more active inclusion of certain government counterparts in aid activities can help to promote reconciliation, strengthen the social contract between government and communities, and address humanitarian access constraints.

Recommendations:
- **Aid actors engaging in HDP initiatives should conduct a joint political economy and conflict analysis** to help build not only a clear understanding of the context, but also a mutual understanding of what each other's principles and potential red lines mean in practice. These can inform decisions about when and how to involve government in community engagement and programme design and delivery on a case-by-case basis.
- **Aid actors should use this analysis to develop contextualised strategies to secure more meaningful government participation in community engagement efforts**. These should consider not only the risks arising from engagement, but also the opportunities for well-designed community engagement initiatives to strengthen social contract and accountability, and address concerns about human rights, corruption and administrative flux.

- **Aid agencies should consider which discussions are suitable for government involvement and which need to be held in a closed, safer space before involving the government**, given the need both for HDP actors to continue to have open, honest conversations on potentially sensitive topics (such as principles, risks and organisational change required to facilitate closer collaboration) and for trust to be built incrementally between government and civil society actors for productive conversations to take place.
- **Aid agencies should identify and leverage relationships across the HDP Nexus** – including partnerships with government officials, civil society organisations, private sector actors, traditional and religious leaders, and community representatives – to foster effective collaboration.

Lesson #5 - Aid agencies are not sufficiently enabled and incentivised to respond flexibly to community priorities or to coordinate their community engagement efforts with other agencies.

One major obstacle to applying the lessons in this paper is that the structural conditions of the aid sector do not afford implementing partners the flexibility to engage communities in a more meaningful manner. Donors routinely emphasise the need for adaptive management, but they rarely create contractual incentives or flexibility that allow for it. Instead, contracts prioritise compliance and meeting project targets rather than community-driven priorities, leading to a lack of responsiveness to community needs, duplication, and potentially unsustainable interventions. It is particularly important that HDP initiatives address this challenge given that the longer timeframes make it more likely that the context will change and new priorities will emerge, and that the need for inter-agency negotiation over roles and responsibilities can inadvertently constrain flexibility.

The lack of flexibility is reflected in the programme management and reporting tools. For example, linear theories of change, rigid logframe targets, and pre-agreed budget allocations to specific activities all limit the scope for community perspectives to shape programme design. There are some early signs that donors are recognising this constraint and looking for ways to build more flexibility into their funding mechanisms. The RSRTF, for example, has recently introduced budget modifiers into its area-based programmes to enable implementing partners to better adapt their activities to respond to emerging opportunities, including with respect to community engagement. However, much more needs to be done to streamline flexibility into accountability and funding mechanisms for inter-agency collaborations.

Even where the potential for greater flexibility exists, agencies are often insufficiently incentivised to coordinate with other agencies, leading to duplication of efforts and potentially conflicting approaches to community engagement. The norm-setting power of ARGs in promoting non-project-specific, inter-agency strategies shows potential for a more coordinated approach, but such shifts in culture of the aid system can only go so far. For example, institutional tensions recently arose between a multi-agency community engagement effort that was organised through the ARG to address a deteriorating security situation in Jonglei and the GPAA and a new, parallel initiative undertaken by parts of UNMISS. The initial reluctance of UNMISS to share information and coordinate with wider HDP initiatives through the established ARG highlights the way changes in organisational culture need to be combined with proper incentives for coordination.

Donors and funding agencies have an important role to play in incentivising inter-agency coordination for community engagement by promoting flexible contracting arrangements and holding operational

agencies accountable for coordination efforts. The closer participation of donor staff in inter-agency coordination initiatives – such as the ARG example referenced above – has enabled them to identify emerging tensions, correct misunderstandings of donor willingness to facilitate adaptive approaches, and encourage partners to engage more collaboratively. Other ways of promoting stronger incentives for collaboration include investments in monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) systems that promote stronger peer-to-peer and downwards accountability to communities. For example, HDP initiatives could pilot the use of community scorecards completed by both community members and collaborating aid agencies to identify opportunities for stronger collaboration. These could complement the suggestion under the first lesson above to involve communities in developing indicators that monitor alignment with shared principles in order to facilitate mutual accountability. Creating such incentives for collaboration – whether through informal interaction or formal systems – can help to align HDP initiatives with community needs, reduce duplication, and improve accountability of community engagement.

Recommendations:

- **Donors should promote more flexible contracting and project management arrangements that incentivise adaptive management and community-driven outcomes**. These should invest in HDP *processes* rather than specific *outputs*, and allow enough flexibility, time and space for HDP actors and communities to further refine activities during inception periods and beyond.

- **Donors and aid agencies should come together to agree principles of collaboration that can guide more adaptive approaches across the HDP Nexus and explore how to translate these principles into practice**. These could involve piloting alternative project management modalities such as adaptive results frameworks, search frames, unallocated reserved pools for budgets, and phased programming approaches.

- **Donors should play a more proactive role in incentivising inter-agency coordination and holding implementing partners accountable for their engagement efforts**. This could include more direct involvement of donor staff in inter-agency planning processes around community engagement – both as a means to encourage more collaborative approaches, but also to identify areas where more donor intervention is needed to address potential barriers to such collaboration arising from donors' own requirements and approaches.

- **Donors and aid agencies should include community engagement as a key performance indicator in HDP funding agreements and experiment with ways to adapt MEL systems** to promote stronger downwards accountability to communities or shared principles, rather than limit flexibility by focusing MEL systems solely on accountability for pre-determined outputs.

Conclusion

The widespread uptake of the recommendations set out above has potential to realise a radically different relationship between aid organisations and communities that is more accountable, conflict-sensitive and transformative across the HDP Nexus. However, these project-based and organisational changes must be underpinned by a shift in mindsets. This must involve a move away from a neo-colonial mentality that sees the role of aid as solving problems all-too-often defined in silos by outsiders (whether 'humanitarian need', 'poverty' or 'conflict'), towards one that takes the priorities, capacities and ideas of communities as the starting point for thinking about how aid can most effectively add value.

Such a change will not happen overnight. It requires consistent leadership, a willingness to embrace change, give up power and accept risk that are scarce in an aid sector beset by political and financial

pressures. This journey towards more inter-agency collaboration around community engagement will be an iterative process – with both successes and failures – as organisations explore and learn how to translate the theory of the HDP Nexus into practice. A declaration of shared principles involving relevant stakeholders in South Sudan would help to anchor and guide such experimentation, adaptation and facilitate greater peer-to-peer accountability along the way.

This shift must go hand-in-hand with the localisation agenda. Localisation cannot just be about provision of more direct funding to South Sudanese non-governmental and civil society organisations. While such funding is important, such a narrow-minded conception of localisation risks simply replicating the systems of power and upwards accountability of aid towards donors, and undermining the deep relationships that many South Sudanese organisations – especially community-based organisations – have developed with the communities where they work.

The process of considering, adapting and implementing these recommendations to promote more inter-agency collaboration and shape how the HDP Nexus is operationalised in South Sudan must therefore be led by South Sudanese voices who are valued and compensated for their participation in such strategic processes. It is their experience, understanding and commitment that will make the difference between the HDP Nexus becoming just another policy fad or a more meaningful change in the relationship between aid and the people it is meant to serve.