

# Opportunities for peace in South Sudan

## Introduction

In December 2013, South Sudan was plunged into civil conflict that began in Juba and quickly engulfed most parts of the country. A temporary truce was reached in 2015, but another wave of violence erupted in July 2016, ravaging the entire country. In 2018, a Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) was signed, paving the way for the formation of the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity in February 2020, whose lifespan was to end with national elections in December 2022. Due to unfinished peace agreement provisions including security arrangements, the election period was extended to December 2024, and then again to 2026. Further peace negotiations are ongoing between the government and the opposition holdout group in Nairobi, Kenya through the Tumaini Peace Initiative, and there is hope that these talks (despite their protracted nature) will result in an agreement.

This briefing brings together findings from roundtables focused on perspectives on the ongoing challenges and opportunities for peace. The roundtables were held from May to July 2024 in three states – Central Equatoria,<sup>1</sup> Eastern Equatoria<sup>2</sup> and Jonglei<sup>3</sup> – and brought

together state government officials, civil society organisations (CSOs), traditional authorities and community members, including representation from women and young people. It presents recommendations to state and national governments, as well as to civil society, donors, and international and national NGOs.

It covers the ways weak governance and ineffective justice are creating the conditions for violence and intimidation; how conflict over cattle manifests as cycles of raids and counter-raids; the pervasive threat of gender-based violence and the devastating abduction of women and children; disputes over land borders – between communities – and how unprecedented flooding is exacerbating competition over strained resources; the lack of opportunities for young people and how this leads them to violence; and finally the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW), which make all the forms of violence discussed more dangerous.

*This briefing reflects the views of the participants and does not necessarily represent the views of Saferworld and partners.*



Women in a displacement camp in Juba, South Sudan © Isaac Billy/UNMISS (13 September 2024)

# Weak governance, ineffective justice, intimidation

## Present in all areas

The second civil war in Sudan (1983–2005) that led to the independence of South Sudan in July 2011, and the outbreak of civil war in South Sudan in December 2013 and its escalation in July 2016, led to a weakened governance system at local and state levels.

Participants across all locations reported that the absence of effective laws and mechanisms to provide security and justice perpetuates impunity, and fuels insecurity and violent conflict. This is particularly the case when it comes to covering SALW control, the movement and raiding of cattle, sexual and gender-based violence, preventing and resolving cross-border conflict, management of environmental challenges and the resolution of land disputes.

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Many citizens see the judicial system as being compromised, with judges and law enforcement personnel and institutions seen to be controlled by powerful individuals – this is barring the average citizen (without the resources to smooth their way) from access to justice. Where justice provision is inefficient and slow, citizens are more likely to take the law into their own hands to achieve justice for the loss of loved ones or property. This can perpetuate cycles of revenge killing.

Poor infrastructure is hampering law enforcement and justice efforts, with badly maintained roads meaning that police unable to respond to incidents of violence in remote areas. Judges too are prevented from travelling to some villages to try cases. In Eastern Equatoria, the lines between statutory and customary justice mechanisms are very blurred, leading to confusion over which cases should be handled by each court.

Participants argued that the absence of proper governance and accountability has left open space for local authorities and armed groups to intimidate citizens. Unlawful arrests and arbitrary detentions are being used to suppress dissent or control local disputes, with detainees enduring harsh conditions and abuse. Activists seen as opponents of the dominant powers are particularly vulnerable to such tactics.

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## Recommendations

### National and state governments

- State and national governments should ensure strict adherence to the laws of the country enshrined in the constitution.
- All political forces should agree to finalise a permanent constitution to replace the existing interim constitution, taking into consideration the views of South Sudanese citizens.
- State and national governments should improve and support law enforcement agencies to effectively discharge their duties without intimidation from the executive branch of the government.
- State and national governments should build the capacity of law enforcement and justice institutions through tailored trainings, and facilitate timely administration of justice at local levels as a remedy to tackle the weak application of law in the state.
- State and national governments should invest in road construction in the state by repairing key roads linking the state capital to counties, and should construct more all-season roads linking rural areas to county headquarters for easy accessibility and timely movement of goods to markets.

# Cattle raiding and cattle-related conflicts

## Present in Eastern Equatoria and Jonglei States

The cycle of cattle raiding within states, across state borders, and with neighbouring communities in Kenya and Uganda, continues to drive conflict in South Sudan. In April 2024, armed youth from the Murle community stole over six thousand cattle from Kapoeta North; the raid claimed the lives of many on both sides. Toposa youth from Kapoeta North managed to retrieve some of the stolen cattle, but many were never recovered, and county and state governments met with little success in their engagement with their counterparts in the Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA). Many fear that, unless the government takes urgent action, young people from Kapoeta North county might conduct counter-raids on Murle villages to retrieve their cattle or rescue abducted children – something that could trigger a vicious cycle of revenge attacks. Similarly, cattle rustling along the Kenya–South Sudan and Uganda–South Sudan borders is another conflict driver which the state and county leaderships in bordering counties are concerned about.

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Roundtable participants singled out perpetual cattle raiding with the neighbouring GPAA and other forms of theft within the state as a key conflict driver. Armed youth from the GPAA are accused of frequent raids into Jonglei counties, particularly by the Lou Nuer areas in Akobo, Uror and Nyirol, as well as in Bor South, Twic East and Duk counties. Purported counter raids and attacks are also carried out by young people from Jonglei in the GPAA. This has resulted in deaths and distress among communities on both sides, particularly women and girls who experience sexual harassment, abduction and rape across the Greater Jonglei area. To complicate matters, cattle raiding has become more frequent in recent years due to poverty, thriving cattle businesses and young people’s desire to acquire more cows – which are needed to pay increasingly steep bride prices. Perpetrators of cattle raiding and theft rarely face punishment or consequences for their actions due to weaknesses in the justice system and the inability of law enforcement agencies to pursue and apprehend them. As such, victims of cattle raids and theft do not receive justice, which in turn leads to cycles of revenge attacks. The civilian population often takes the law into their own hands to avenge the loss of lives and property.

## Recommendations

### National and state governments

- County and state governments, with financial and political support from the national Ministry of Interior should establish police posts in conflict hotspots and deploy police officers to curb inter-communal conflict and cattle raiding within the state and with neighbouring communities in South Sudan and across the borders with Kenya and Uganda.
- Jonglei State government and GPAA authorities, with support from the national government (particularly the Ministries of Interior and Justice), should establish joint police units and mobile border courts to settle conflicts related to cattle raiding and child abduction along the Dinka-Murle-Lou Nuer borders.
- To curb cattle raiding and the practice of child abduction, the Jonglei State government and GPAA authorities should formulate bylaws with clearer punitive measures for perpetrators of child abduction, and ensure the law is enforced.

# Gender-based violence, discrimination, and the abduction of women and children

## Present in all locations

Gender-based violence continues to be a major factor in conflict dynamics at the community and family levels. Deeply rooted patriarchal cultural norms among agro-pastoral communities like the Toposa, Buya and Didinga fuel violence against women and girls, including husbands beating their wives, giving girls as compensation for killings, and early and forced marriages.

Participants stressed that the exclusion of women and girls in decision-making processes and forums at community, county, subnational and national levels of government is a major barrier to women and girls enjoying their full rights, as provided for under the transitional constitution of South Sudan. (The constitution commits to 35 per cent participation of women in public affairs and key decision-making roles in the state and across the country – but this has not been achieved.) At the family and community levels, discriminatory cultural norms deny women and girls the right to own land and cattle, and to have a share in their parents' estate or other family assets.

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Women leaders, chiefs and government officials alike expressed their deep concern with the rampant abduction of women and children. In April 2024, authorities in Kapoeta North, Eastern Equatoria, reported the abduction of about 90 children, which participants attributed to criminal gangs from the Murle ethnic group in Jonglei State and the GPAA – this has also been a cause of deep concern in Jonglei State. At a roundtable event, participants expressed bitterness at the lack of intervention by both state and national governments to address this inhumane practice, which continues, they said, because of a lack of punishment for abductors. Participants believed that, unless government at state and national levels prioritise addressing the abduction of women and children, people will continue to fear for their safety.

## Recommendations

### National and state governments

- State and national governments should immediately implement the 35 percent quota outlined in the R-ARCSS on women in key decision-making roles.
- Jonglei State government and GPAA authorities, with support from the national government, should establish joint police units and mobile border courts to settle conflicts related to cattle raiding and child abduction along the Dinka-Murle-Lou Nuer borders.
- To curb cattle raiding and the practice of child abduction, the Jonglei State government and GPAA authorities should formulate bylaws with clearer punitive measures for perpetrators of child abduction, and ensure the law is enforced.
- Eastern Equatoria State parliament should enact state-specific laws criminalising child abduction, with concrete provision for the punishment of perpetrators.
- State governments and governments at the county and payam level organize town-hall events to hear concerns from women and girls and community leaders on the impact of gender-based violence and child abduction.

### Civil society

- CSOs, INGOs and United Nations (UN) agencies, with support from donors, should facilitate women-to-women dialogues in Eastern Equatoria State, Jonglei State and the GPAA on the issue of women and child abduction
- Participants also underlined the need to combat gender inequality and challenge the harmful gender norms that perpetuate violence against women.
- CSOs, with support from INGOs, UN agencies and the donor community, should advocate for an end to gender inequality and promote respect for the rights of women and girls at county and state levels.
- CSOs should advocate with state and county authorities for the implementation of the requirement that 35 per cent of positions in decision-making and political spaces should be occupied by women, as stipulated in the R-ARCSS.

# Environmental issues and land disputes

## Present in all locations

South Sudan has experienced almost unprecedented levels of flooding in recent years. Already massively disruptive to people's lives and livelihoods, environmental issues like these can also be a major driver of conflict. With pressure put on already strained resources – such as water and land for farming or pasture – people are more likely to venture outside their own communities, causing tensions and sometimes violent conflict with others.

Communities, government officials and civil society representatives at the roundtable events were dismayed by the effects of a nearly four-year period of flooding. Due to this climatic impact, many communities have been uprooted from their homes and displaced into neighbouring counties, especially within and around Bor town in Bor South County, and into neighbouring Central Equatoria, Eastern Equatoria and Lakes states. This has led to an increase in land-related conflicts linked to the movement of people with their herds from Jonglei State into these states.

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As predominantly cattle-keeping communities, people displaced by climate impacts in the north of the country bring large herds of cattle into Equatoria, a region where the local population primarily practices agriculture. This clash of livelihoods – agriculture versus pastoralism – has led to the destruction of crops and farms in Equatoria, exacerbating tensions between the communities.

The destruction of farms not only affects food security but also fuels animosity between the different communities. Farmers see their hard work destroyed, leading to economic hardship and increased vulnerability. On the other hand, pastoralists, desperate to find grazing lands for their cattle, view migration as a necessity for their survival. This has become a serious conflict issue in Central Equatoria. Participants in discussions highlighted the need for laws to be enacted to create appropriate channels for seeking justice for crop destruction. They also noted the lack of designated areas for keeping cattle away from farms. Even when such places are allocated, cattle keepers are reluctant to use them, citing the distance from settlements, insecurity and fear of cattle raiding.

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Communities, state and local authorities, and CSO representatives at the roundtable meeting stressed that competition over land in towns and disputes in rural areas over ownership of land have triggered deadly confrontation among communities in the state in recent years. Many disputes are ongoing in parts of the state, particularly over the use of the Biothagany wetland area (*toch*) by the communities of Twic East and Duk counties. These disputes have led to the loss of lives and rising tensions between the two counties. If this conflict is not handled in a timely manner by state and local governments, it is likely to spread into places such as Bor town. Unaddressed land disputes and the re-naming of some locations by people who have been displaced there by flooding are also sources of conflict that could worsen in the future.

Participants also expressed concerns about the presence of small arms in the hands of cattle keepers. Armed to defend their animals from rustling, cattle keepers pose a significant challenge for communities attempting to negotiate compensation when their crops are destroyed. Host communities reported that armed cattle keepers walk away without agreeing to pay fines or make reparations.

## Recommendations

### National and state governments

- National and state governments should enforce land laws, which participants believed would discourage land grabbing.
- They should undertake campaigns to increase public awareness of land laws through radio, rallies, seminars and workshops.
- State and national governments should implement the cattle relocation order issued by the President in April 2015, which calls for herders and their cattle to return their home states, but which has not been respected. Participants also wanted the national government to disarm cattle keepers.
- The state government should provide management and oversight of the temporary relocation of communities affected by natural disasters to high grounds, to minimise conflicts over land and resources such as fishing areas.

### Civil society

- Together with international NGOs and United Nations (UN) agencies, CSOs should provide early warning messages about natural disasters – particularly flooding in flood-prone areas.
- With international NGOs and UN agencies, support cross-border communal dialogues in the Jonglei-Central and Eastern Equatoria conflict cluster to resolve land and border disputes and create a conducive environment for peaceful resolution of conflict.
- In collaboration with international NGOs and UN agencies, CSOs should conduct awareness-raising campaigns on peaceful sharing of resources – such as fishing grounds in the hotly contested Biothagany *toch* (swamp) area – to reduce violent conflict stemming from such contestations.
- Civil society, international NGOs and UN agencies should scale up provision of humanitarian assistance to flood-affected populations in the state, including provision of mosquito nets and medicine.

# Youth unemployment and people's mental health

## Present in all areas

Participants lamented the alarmingly high rate of unemployment among young people in the state. Due to limited employment opportunities, coupled with economic hardship across the country, huge number of youths in Jonglei are without jobs – leading to an increase in anti-social behaviour like alcohol abuse and gang-related violence. State and national governments are not in a position to create employment opportunities across the country and in Jonglei State in particular, due to political conflict and limited resources.

As is the case in other parts of the country, youth unemployment presents a threat to peace and security within communities in Jonglei State – young people are vulnerable to engaging in illegal activities such as looting or road ambushes to make ends meet. At the roundtable, a lack of government investment in youth-focused income-generating projects like micro finance or youth entrepreneurship funds was seen as one of the causes of high youth unemployment in Jonglei and in South Sudan in general.

## Recommendations

- State and national governments should prioritise creating jobs for young people, for example by supporting small-scale businesses, to provide alternatives to violent cattle raiding and theft.
- Lastly, participants also recognised the high level of trauma that communities have experienced as a result of the conflict and insecurity they have experienced, encouraging CSOs, INGOs and UN agencies to support training on mental health and psychosocial support for communities.

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# Cross-border disputes

## Present in Eastern Equatoria

In early June 2024, people in Budi and Magwi counties reported encroachment by Ugandan soldiers, whom they accused of harassment, intimidation and displacement of communities from their homes.<sup>4</sup> Another incident of border encroachment by Ugandan wildlife authorities and the Ugandan army was reported in July 2024 in Budi's Lotukei payam and in Ikwotos county; during this operation, Ugandan soldiers are alleged to have established a military post and installed Global Positioning System (GPS) equipment in the area.

Communities from Budi and Ikwotos counties, which contain the Kidepo Game Reserve, have also reported attacks by the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) when they are out hunting. In June 2024, according to a civil society activist, thirteen young men from Budi county were allegedly killed by Ugandan game rangers, who accused the victims of straying into Uganda's side of the Kidepo Valley. Such incidents are increasingly commonplace, due to the ongoing food shortages in parts of Eastern Equatoria.

Although state and county authorities stressed that border disputes with neighbouring countries are not within their remit, communities want state and county leaderships to engage with Ugandan authorities to stop the harassment and displacement of people from their farmlands. Similarly, communities and CSOs in the state urged the state government to press the national government to develop a solution to the ongoing border dispute with the Ugandan government.

## Recommendations

- County and state governments, with support from the national Ministry of Interior should establish police posts in conflict hotspots and deploy police officers to curb inter-communal conflict and cattle raiding within the state and with neighbouring communities in South Sudan and across the borders with Kenya and Uganda.
- State and national governments should address cross-border issues with Ugandan authorities based on the 1956 border between Uganda and Sudan.

# Small arms and light weapons

## Present in all areas

The proliferation of SALW is one of the most pervasive threats to peace in South Sudan. Guns in the hands of civilians immediately escalate both the chances and the consequences of violence, making the issues discussed above much more dangerous.

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Participants in the roundtable dialogue identified the following issues regarding small arms and light weapons in Central Equatoria state:

- **Proliferation and destabilisation:** The widespread availability of SALW has deeply destabilised Central Equatoria, intensifying conflicts and disputes over land. The unchecked spread of weapons has facilitated land grabbing, with armed groups and individuals forcibly taking land from communities – areas like Yei and Juba, for example, have experienced violent confrontations over land, largely due to the presence of SALW. The lack of robust legal frameworks and enforcement has allowed these weapons to proliferate through illicit trafficking.
- **Impact of SALW on communities:** The proliferation of arms among civilians, a legacy of prolonged conflict, has led to increased violence. The failure of the government to provide adequate protection to its citizens has impelled many communities and individuals to arm themselves to protect their assets. In some cases, weapons are used for intimidation, extortion or harassment, resulting in violent conflicts, loss of lives and displacement. Women and children, being the most vulnerable during conflicts, suffer disproportionately.
- **Ineffective disarmament:** Conflicts have also arisen from disarmament exercises that lacked consideration of local dynamics and were poorly coordinated. In 2018 and 2019, disarmament efforts caused tensions between the South Sudanese government and armed communities, such as the Kuku and Madi. These exercises, intended to curb armed violence, sometimes led to forced weapon surrenders, provoking resistance and clashes, especially when perceived issues of fairness and security concerns were not addressed. The presence of various armed factions and sensitive local power dynamics further exacerbated these conflicts.

Civilians and authorities in Eastern Equatoria State are concerned by the proliferation of SALW in the hands of unauthorised individuals, particularly young people – who often arm themselves to protect their communities and livelihoods. The presence of SALW in the hands of civilians in Eastern Equatoria State has increased in recent years due to political instability and the security vacuum in rural areas. Participants at the roundtable stressed that both state and national governments need to provide security and safety guarantees to communities before any meaningful civilian disarmament is conducted in the state and across the country. Participants also noted that the proliferation of SALW in the state is associated with increased criminality along main roads, robberies, widespread poaching in game reserves, violent communal conflicts and cattle raiding.

The legacy of the 1983–2005 civil war, the outbreak of conflict in Jonglei State after the 2010 elections, and the violent conflict that erupted in the country in December 2013 and reignited in July 2016 all resulted in a massive increase in illegal firearms in the hands of young people in the state, particularly cattle camp youth. Young people began to acquire weapons to protect themselves, their communities and their herds, while others joined armed opposition groups especially in the Greater Akobo and Pibor areas. Encouraged by the easy access to weapons, attacks by armed youth on each other’s communities escalated significantly. Violent conflict among communities also increased as a result of the proliferation of firearms in Jonglei, which then led to women and girls suffering abuses like rape and abduction. The number of small arms in the hands of civilians in the state has also appeared to increase, as have violent confrontations between communities in Jonglei – particularly between the Murle and Lou Nuer as well as the Murle and Dinka, with many lives lost and property destroyed or looted.

At the roundtable, communities, civil society representatives and government officials alike described the ineffective and limited security provision by the state, especially at county, payam and boma levels, and how this is a significant reason behind youth and other civilians acquiring firearms. People feel vulnerable to attacks from their neighbours given the inadequate responses from the state – a situation that has fuelled a desire for armament by communities. Successive failures by state and national governments in the past to disarm civil populations across Jonglei and neighbouring Eastern Equatoria State are also seen as another factor behind the increase in the acquisition of firearms. The disarmament process has also been violent and confrontational, which has resulted in communities not being willing to hand over their guns for fear of attacks by neighbours who have not been disarmed. This perceived partisanship has undermined trust in authorities, damaging chances for peace.

Insufficient weapon storage facilities and management have led to guns and ammunition ending up in the hands of civilian youth in the state and across the country. Until proper storage and management of weapons and ammunition is attained, the illicit acquisition of firearms will go unchecked.

## Recommendations

- State government and security forces should ensure proper marking and record-keeping of guns in their possession to avoid weapons being illegally transferred to the civilian population and to ensure greater accountability.
- Governments should ensure that police and justice systems are credible and accountable, enhancing public trust in these institutions and dampening the feeling that people should take justice into their own hands.
- Eastern Equatoria State government, in coordination with the national Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Defence and other national government institutions, should conduct peaceful, comprehensive and uniform disarmament across the state and in the neighbouring Jonglei State to mitigate violent cattle raiding and child abduction.
- The national government should carry out uniform and peaceful civilian disarmament within Central Equatoria and neighbouring states to reduce violent conflicts. Arms that are collected should be publicly destroyed. The government should also ensure maximum security and protection of people's lives and property. This would assure the people of their safety and security and, as such, discourage them from acquiring arms for self-protection.
- Simultaneous peaceful disarmament campaigns involving Jonglei State and the GPAA should be conducted in consultation with communities to address the insecurities that are driving them to take up arms. Weapons collected from civil populations should be safely and publicly disposed of or properly stored by national government security agencies.
- Government forces based in the state and the GPAA should tighten their management of weapons and ensure adequate accountability within the security forces to prevent ammunitions and the illicit transfer of weapons to civilians.
- Raise awareness among communities about the dangers of illicit firearms in the hands of civilians.
- Civil society should engage state and national government on the need to conduct a comprehensive, uniform and peaceful disarmament process in consultation with communities, in order to reduce weapons in the hands of young people.

## Notes

- 1 Saferworld (2024), 'Conflict drivers and priorities for peace among communities in Central Equatoria State, South Sudan', November (<https://www.saferworld-global.org/resources/publications/1452-conflict-drivers-and-priorities-for-peace-among-communities-in-central-equatoria-state-south-sudan>)
- 2 Saferworld (2024), "'Creating harmony is our collective responsibility": Tackling conflict drivers in Eastern Equatoria State', November (<https://www.saferworld-global.org/resources/publications/1451--creating-harmony-is-our-collective-responsibility-tackling-conflict-drivers-in-eastern-equatoria-state>)
- 3 Saferworld (2024), "'Together, we can bring peace to our communities": Addressing conflict drivers in Jonglei State', August (<https://www.saferworld-global.org/resources/publications/1449-together-we-can-bring-peace-to-our-communities-addressing-conflict-drivers-in-jonglei-state->)
- 4 Johnson B (2024), 'MP demands clarity on UPDF encroachments in South Sudan', Eye Radio, 2 September (<https://www.africa-press.net/south-sudan/all-news/mp-demands-clarity-on-updf-encroachments-in-south-sudan>)

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