

BRIEFING | JANUARY 2024

Wunlit peace meeting

A shared vision for peace

The Wunlit Triangle, the shared border area of Lakes, Warrap and Unity states, is known for the successful people-to-people peace processes, held in 1999, that laid the foundation for an end to the second Sudanese civil war in 2005. From that time, communities in the area lived peacefully until the 2013 conflict reignited mistrust and ethnic divisions – mainly between the Nuer and the Dinka tribes. Ethnic polarisation and fragmentation sparked wider inter- and intra-communal violence, along with violent cattle raiding, revenge killings, and violence against women and girls of all ethnic groups and ages – leading to individual and collective trauma across the Wunlit Triangle. Yet the Wunlit Peace Conference of 1999 stands as an example of the potential of people-to-people peace initiatives for addressing the various conflict issues that continue to plague South Sudan.

Inspired by the Wunlit Peace Conference, Saferworld and partners Women Development Group (WDG), Women Initiative for Development Organisation (WIDO), Hope Restoration and Voice for Change organised a peace meeting held between 28 February and 4 March 2023 in Rumbek, the capital of Lakes State. Bringing together chiefs, government administrators, civil society representatives, women and youth leaders, and aid and development partners from Warrap, Lakes and Unity states, the meeting aimed to build a collective understanding of how conflict is playing out in the Wunlit Triangle, and to articulate a vision for peace across administrative boundaries in the area. It also builds on previous inter-county dialogues conducted by Saferworld in Lakes and Warrap States in November 2022.¹ This short briefing aims to summarise the main recommendations from the discussions so that they might be taken forward as part of ongoing peace efforts in the region. This policy briefing reflects the views of participants and may not represent those of Saferworld or its partners.

Over the five days of the meeting, participants identified, analysed and made recommendations on what they considered to be the main conflict issues, focusing on: cattle rustling, revenge killing, girl ‘elopement’ and abductions, land disputes, arms in the hands of civilians, misinformation, and hate speech. Based on the discussions, the participants agreed on a series of resolutions, focusing on the following:

1. Cattle raiding:

- Participants, particularly government representatives, highlighted the need for civilian disarmament and proper storage of collected weapons to address violent cattle raiding.²
- The resolutions highlighted the need to provide livelihood alternatives to young people engaged in cattle keeping; the combination of poverty and access to weapons is a dangerous one.
- Participants recommended strengthening cross-border information sharing and reporting on violent incidents; increasing the capacity of police to respond; and establishing cross-border courts to deal with disputes, including those related to cattle theft. They had ideas about restorative justice, such as the return of three cows for every one stolen.
- Participants believed that there should be a greater role for community leaders and mothers in discouraging young people from cattle raiding, and called for young people’s inclusion in peace meetings.
- Participants also called for the end of the use of the Dinka word ‘*gel-weng*’, meaning ‘cattle protectors’, to refer to the armed young men who work in the cattle camps,³ and instead proposed calling them ‘*gel-raan*’, which means ‘protectors of the people’, to reinforce the idea that their role is to protect their communities, not their cattle.

2. Revenge killing:

- Participants noted the high levels of violence and recognised the continued need for public campaigns against revenge killings, including raising awareness around the laws that prohibit and penalise the practice.
- The resolutions also pointed to the need for better access to justice, such as through traditional or state-run courts; an increase in the number of judges; and the establishment of police posts in each *payam*⁴ where incidents can be reported.

3. Girl ‘elopement’ and abduction:

- Participants were concerned about girls and women being abducted and raped, highlighting that, although the term ‘elopement’ is often used, the reality is that these are forced marriages.
- Given that young men struggle to raise the high numbers of cows needed for marriage, participants recommended a reduction in the bride price from 50 to 30 cows, alongside greater livelihood opportunities to make marriage more accessible.
- Participants also warned against early marriage and the commercialisation of girls. One participant raised concerns about parents falsifying birth certificates so that girls may marry before the age of 18, and said the government needs to discourage these practices through better legal enforcement.
- Participants expressed concerns about the very high levels of sexual violence, and highlighted not only the impact on survivors, but the risk of conflict this generates in the community.

4. Land disputes:

- Participants recommended that state governments and the national government work to set up special courts to settle land disputes between and among communities, and include elders in public consultations to settle land disputes.

- The meeting highlighted the need for the government to clearly demarcate borders between states, counties and *payams*.
- Participants raised the emerging impacts of displacement and resettlement, including the renaming of places by internally displaced people and cattle herders, which they highlighted was leading to conflict.
- Participants recommended that pastoralist communities and host communities come together to reach agreements on the use of grazing and water resources in contested areas.
- The group recommended that cattle camps should select leaders to represent them in dispute resolution mechanisms and peace dialogues with communities.

5. Small arms in the hands of civilians:

- Registering weapons was seen as an important tool for the safer management of small arms in the hands of civilians, with participants recommending establishing committees in each *boma*,⁵ *payam* and county to register weapons.
- Participants also recommended education on the safe use and storage of weapons.
- Disarmament was a clear theme in discussions, with participants recommending vocational training and employment opportunities for disarmed young people and soldiers, as well as government publicly destroying stockpiles from any disarmament exercise.

6. Misinformation and hate speech:

- Those at the meeting were concerned about the rise in hate speech, including through ethnic songs.
- Participants linked hate speech to violence against whole communities and discouraged inflammatory actions such as naming stolen cows after people.

While in the absence of effective governance the Wunlit Triangle continues to experience community tensions, participants valued the meeting and promised to implement its resolutions. They noted the need to disseminate the resolutions from the conference more widely, and to bring others into the conversation. For example, some chiefs at the meeting pointed out that many other chiefs who had been invited did not attend, and stressed that getting their participation and buy-in to a vision for peace should be a priority. Those present collectively agreed on the value of these people-to-people conferences, and believed that they should be revisited to help move communities towards more peaceful resolution of disputes across administrative boundaries.

Notes

¹ Saferworld (2023), 'Tackling conflict drivers for peace and security in Warrap state, South Sudan', August (<https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1429-tackling-conflict-drivers-for-peace-and-security-in-warrap-state-south-sudan>) and Saferworld (2023), 'Conflict, gender-based violence and mental health in Lakes State: Perspectives from South Sudan', April (<https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1423-conflict-gender-based-violence-and-mental-health-in-lakes-state-perspectives-from-south-sudan>)

² While some participants suggested that this could be done with force if peaceful methods were not successful, previous attempts at forcible disarmament in South Sudan and elsewhere have been counter-productive and generated more violence.

³ Communal locations where people keep their cows.

⁴ A division of local government.

⁵ The lowest level of local government.



About Saferworld

Saferworld is an international organisation dedicated to conflict prevention and peacebuilding programming, policy and practice. We collaborate with institutions and work directly with partners across Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Europe to tackle diverse factors that drive violent conflict, injustice and insecurity. We participate in major global policy debates on peace, justice and security to influence change.

Saferworld has been working in South Sudan since 2008. We work with communities, civil society organisations, authorities, traditional leaders and other international and national non-governmental organisations to prevent conflict and build peace. We prioritise working with women, young people and others who are excluded from decisions that affect them. Over the past five years, we have worked in partnership with over 20 CSOs including nine women's rights organisations across ten states to establish and support over 100 community peacebuilding groups to identify, mitigate and resolve conflicts and security concerns. We help our CSO partners to strengthen their resources, provide core and flexible funding, programme accompaniment and peer-peer learning support. We support development of regional and national CSO platforms, and connect people to our advocacy networks so that national and international organisations put the voices of South Sudanese civil society at the heart of what they do. Saferworld South Sudan also hosts the Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility (CSRF), which provide advice to donors, policy makers and the aid community and help those working across the aid sector to integrate conflict sensitivity throughout their programmes, operations and policy decisions in South Sudan.

Cover photo: Warrap state officials visit and visit the east to review the security situation and appeal for a dialogue-based, peaceful resolution to escalating tensions in the area.

© Zejin Yin/UNMISS

SAFERWORLD

Saferworld


Brick Yard, 28 Charles Square
London N1 6HT, UK

Phone: +44 (0)20 7324 4646

Email: general@saferworld-global.org

Web: www.saferworld-global.org

 www.facebook.com/Saferworld

 [@Saferworld](https://twitter.com/Saferworld)

 [Saferworld](https://www.linkedin.com/company/saferworld)

Registered charity no. 1043843

A company limited by guarantee no. 3015948