

PERCEIVING PEACE IN A FRAGMENT STATE: THE CASE OF SOUTH SUDAN

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First published February 2024 by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung

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This briefing is published as part of the PEACEptions project by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) and its offices in Cameroon, Colombia, the Philippines, South Sudan and Tunisia in partnership with the German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA). PEACEptions provides a conceptual framework in which different ideas of peace can be highlighted and their differences analyzed in order to be able to formulate concrete proposals for peacebuilding is at the heart of this project. The project combines qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis, with the aim of understanding, appraising and promoting peace. The PEACEptions concept is based on three elements whose meaning crosses historical and cultural boundaries: physical integrity, individual and collective human rights, and constructive conflict transformation.

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What peace is

The question of what peace is, as most definitory questions about fundamental societal concepts, can be approached from two angles: a normative and an empirical one. Since peace is, without doubt, an ideologically loaded concept, there is no shortage of normative approaches. This briefing, based on findings from the South Sudan Public Perceptions of Peace survey¹ and qualitative insights from the PEACEption project² that aims to compare the empirical meaning of peace internationally, will focus on empirical insights: what is peace to people living in the difficult surroundings of a *fragment* state – a state that has not fragmented but has only ever existed in fragments – such as South Sudan, where armed violence is a regular occurrence in many of its parts?

Through a nationwide survey conducted in fifteen counties in all ten states and one special administrative area (Greater Pibor) of South Sudan and thorough qualitative research in four locations (Malakal, Rumbek, Yambio, and Yei), the study captures the multifaceted perceptions of peace among South Sudanese people. The quantitative data from 4,482 respondents across diverse environments, coupled with in-depth qualitative insights from areas heavily affected by the civil war, provide a rich tapestry of the expectations and experiences of, as well as trust in institutions related to peace. Furthermore, the briefing draws on historical insights on historical research into the peculiarities of South Sudan's conflictscapes, which soon are to be published as a monograph.³

The report's findings offer a nuanced understanding of the complexities of peace in socially, culturally, economically, and politically highly diverse conflictscapes, highlighting the essential elements of peace as envisioned by the affected communities and the critical role of inclusive, informed policymaking in fostering sustainable peace. The analysis presented here not only contributes significantly to the discourse on peace and conflict resolution but also emphasises the importance of localised peace-building efforts in the lived experiences of those at the heart of conflict zones.

Contextual Background

South Sudan, with an estimated population of about fourteen million inside the country (and millions more displaced in neighbouring countries and abroad) and a youth majority, often facing high unemployment and dire life circumstances, is a diverse nation comprising 64 ethno-linguistic groups and a predominantly Christian population. Despite its middle-income status prior to the civil war, mainly due to oil revenue, the economy has declined. The country is still heavily reliant on the extraction of natural resources controlled by a few, leaving over three-quarters of its population in need of humanitarian aid. The discourse surrounding South Sudan often romanticises its potential, encapsulated in the phrase "this land has it all", which points to the country's natural wealth, cultural diversity, and linguistic richness. This diversity, often – rightfully – seen as a strength, contrasts with the sometimes-violent politicisation of ethno-linguistic diversity.

South Sudan's diversity does not automatically translate into peaceful coexistence. However, the appreciation of diversity as a common good, especially in a context of prolonged conflict, hints at the potential for institutionalised coexistence beyond the model of an ethnopolitically homogenised national identity. The political landscape in South Sudan, characterised by strategic ambivalence and a lack of ideological polarisation, reflects a pragmatic approach to governance and conflict management, where flexibility and adaptability are critical values. Understanding South Sudan as a fragment state captures the hybrid realities of its citizens, who navigate between traditional lifestyles and modernity, local identities and global connections.

South Sudan is not only a young state. It is a conflictive landscape where colonialism, be it from the Turks, the Egyptians, the British or, since 1956, from the newly independent Sudanese state, always met fierce resistance. Nonetheless, South Sudan has experienced decades after decades of unending violence and war, putting it in a unique situation when discussing meanings and perceptions of peace. Politically, the independent South Sudan has been dominated by its main liberation organisation, the South Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM). The political dominance of the SPLM is so far-reaching that even the main opposition movement, engaged in a bloody civil war with the ruling fraction from 2013 to 2018, uses its name: the South Sudanese People's Liberation Movement in Opposition (SPLM-IO).

1. <https://peacerep.org/perceptions-peace-south-sudan/>

2. <https://www.giga-hamburg.de/en/research-and-transfer/projects/peaceptions>

3. Jan Pospisil, 2013. *Konfliktlandschaften des Südsudan: Fragmente eines Staates*. Bielefeld: transcript. English translation forthcoming.

Conflicts in South Sudan are characterised by their complex and ever-evolving nature, where shifting allegiances among local commanders and intertwining national and subnational tensions are commonplace. Factors like climate change and conflicts in neighbouring countries, most recently in Sudan, have further complicated the situation. The historical backdrop of violence in South Sudan has set a precedent for ongoing strife, despite intermittent peace agreements signed. The power struggles at the national level, primarily between elite factions vying for control over resources and political influence, have regularly resulted in armed conflict, as, for instance, the outbreak of violence following the 2010 elections and the more devastating civil war that began in December 2013. These conflicts at the national level often are interlinked with inter-communal fault lines, exacerbating existing tensions over borders and land, resources, and ethnopolitical divisions.

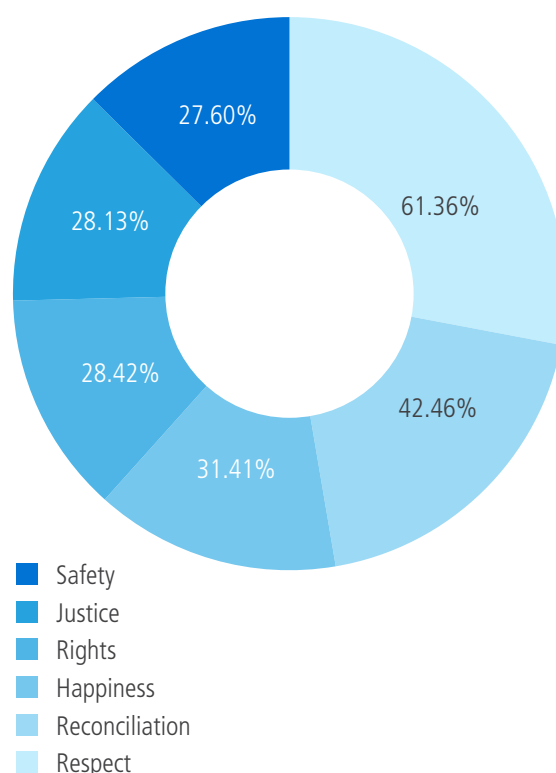
Subnational conflicts, while sometimes stemming from local grievances, are frequently manipulated by national political dynamics, resulting in widespread violence and suffering among civilians. Issues such as land disputes, cattle raiding, and revenge killings highlight the often-localised nature of conflict that feeds into the broader national narrative of power and resource competition. Transnational conflicts and border disputes add another layer of complexity to South Sudan's conflict landscape, with the war in Sudan and disputes over areas like Abyei contributing to regional instability and humanitarian crises. The involvement of South Sudanese militias in foreign conflicts – reportedly, Nuer militias are currently actively engaged in the war in Sudan – and the influx of refugees from neighbouring wars further strain an already precarious situation.

Insights into the main Pillars of Peace

In the context of South Sudan's tumultuous history and ongoing transition from war to peace, a public perception survey is conducted annually to explore what peace means to its citizens. The 2023 edition put a specific focus on the public views of peace. As the main insight, the survey revealed that safety and justice are perceived as the most valued pillars of peace. This insight indicates that, despite a power-sharing arrangement aimed at political accommodation among elites, the broader population's aspirations for peace have largely been overlooked in the formal peace negotiations.

Graph 1

Main pillars of peace: top six mentions (n=4,482)

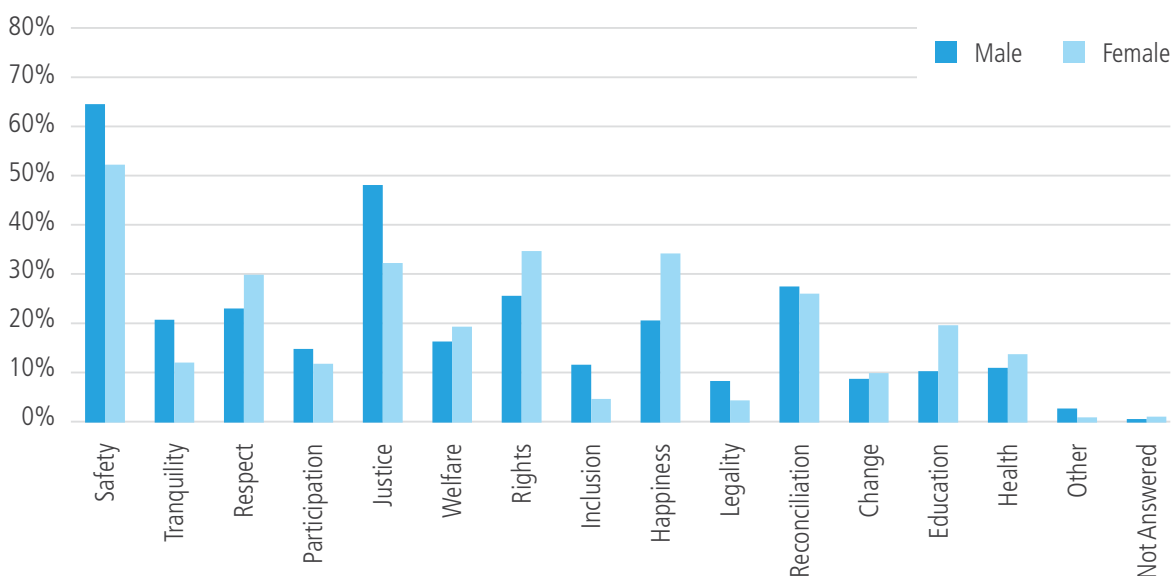


The survey highlighted that while safety was paramount for 61.4%, justice was crucial for 42.5%, with rights following as the third most important aspect (see Graph 1). Interestingly, “softer” components signalling a positive peace, like happiness, reconciliation, and respect were also emphasised, suggesting a desire for a peace that transcends the mere absence of violence. Notably, aspects such as legality, inclusion, and change were less prioritised, reflecting the still immanent experiences of violence and war in South Sudan.

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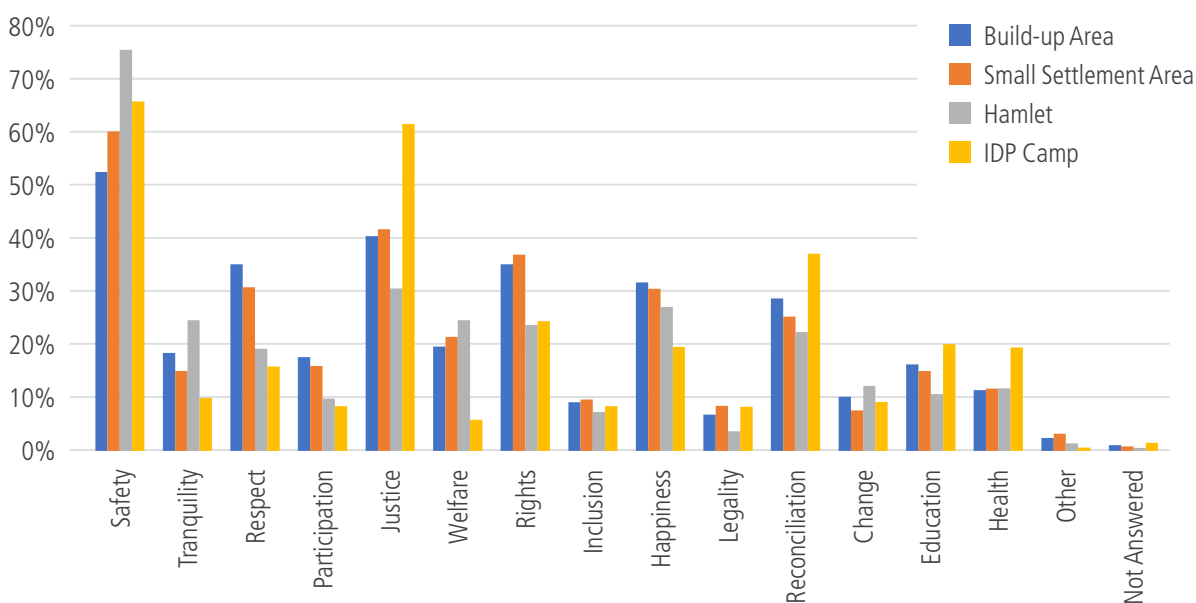
Graph 2:

Pillars of peace, by gender (n=4,482)

The findings also underscored significant gender differences in perceptions of peace (see Graph 2). Women's views of peace were broader and more positive, valuing aspects like rights, happiness, and reconciliation more than men, who focused more on safety and justice. Furthermore, people's environments influenced their peace conceptions, with those in camps for internally displaced people (IDPs) favouring justice and reconciliation more, indicating their specific experiences of displacement and ethno-political

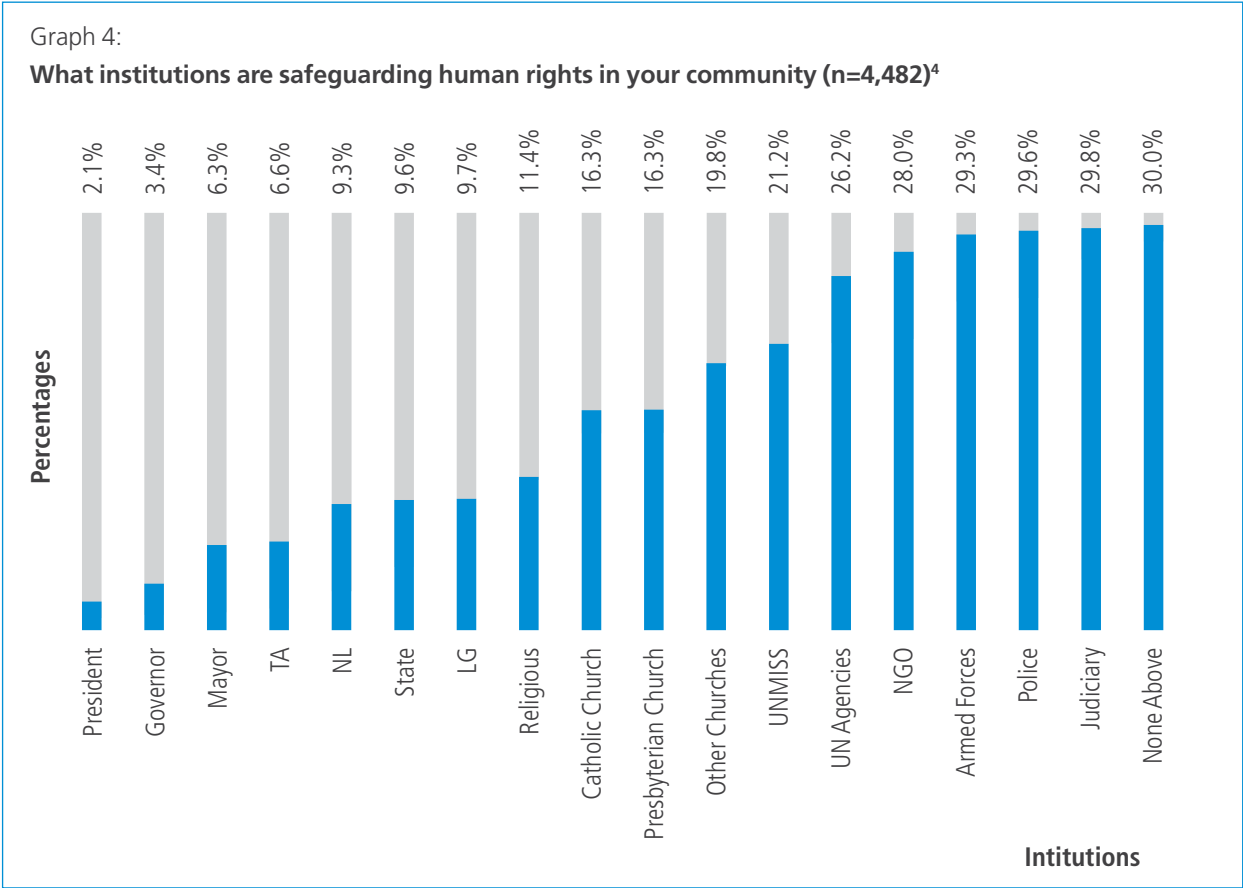
violence. Despite the high value placed on safety and justice, the survey revealed a complex relationship between these pillars and the actual peace process. The majority felt South Sudan was at peace during the survey period (67.4%), but this view was closely tied to their everyday security perceptions. Yet, this did not significantly alter their fundamental conceptions of peace, which seemed more influenced by gender, community-level experiences, and long-term insights.

Graph 3:

Pillars of peace, by surroundings (n=4,482)

A deeper look at the concepts of safety, rights, and justice, reveals nuanced views (see Graph 3). Safety was a concern especially in rural areas and IDP camps, reflecting long-term and collective experiences of violence. Rights and justice were seen as crucial for peace, yet there was a clear distinction between the two, with justice possibly seen as a response to historical injustices and rights associated with institutional guarantees. There appears to be a deep-

seated scepticism regarding the enforcement of laws and human rights, with a significant portion lacking confidence in institutions safeguarding their rights (see Graph 4). Surprisingly, while the judiciary, police, and armed forces were somewhat trusted to uphold human rights, there was a notable distrust in political figures and a low expectation of traditional authorities in this role.



Overall, the quantitative research component suggests that South Sudanese conceptions of peace are deeply influenced by their collective, long-term experiences and the current context. Safety, justice, and rights emerge as key pillars. Interestingly, these conceptions are not significantly

influenced by recent experiences of everyday security. These findings suggest that peacebuilding efforts in South Sudan must consider these broader conceptions of peace, beyond elite political accommodations, to truly resonate with citizen's aspirations.

4. TA: traditional authorities; NL: National Legislative Assembly; LG: local government.

Regional differences: Insights from the Case Studies

Peace and the transformation of armed violence are deeply influenced by the unique experiences and contexts of different regions in South Sudan. The qualitative insights from Malakal, Rumbek, Yambio, and Yei counties reveal diverse understandings of peace, shaped by local histories of conflict, community needs, and the actions of peacebuilders.

In Malakal County, where ethnopoliticised conflict involving Shilluk, Dinka, Nuer, and Maban communities is prevalent, justice emerges as a critical component of peace. The inter-communal tensions, often reflective of national political contestations, underscore the need for mechanisms that address rights-related issues for sustainable conflict transformation. Despite chronic instability, there is a notable trust in UNMISS and local religious institutions, which have been instrumental in peace dialogues and showcasing impartiality.

Rumbek Centre County presents a different picture, where a “security-first” approach under Governor Rin Tueny has led to a significant reduction in violence in recent years. The emphasis in Rumbek is on safety, tranquillity, and welfare. Traditional authorities and non-state actors are playing key roles in conflict resolution. The authoritarian approach of the governor, while effective in reducing conflict, raises questions about its sustainability and the broader implications for rights and reconciliation.

Yambio County’s peace narrative is shaped by its status as a regional hub and the presence of diverse communities, including refugees. The county has experienced intense conflict, particularly after 2016, with local grievances being exacerbated by national-level disputes. Peace in Yambio is associated with everyday security, freedom of movement, and development. Given the unpopularity of the national government and the national army, trust is placed in civil society organisations, UNMISS, and religious groups, reflecting a reliance on non-governmental actors for peacebuilding efforts.

Yei County’s recent experience is marked by severe human rights violations and a dynamic conflict history. For its inhabitants, peace is predominantly conceptualised in terms of safety, justice, freedom of expression, and development. The presence of both the national army and armed forces of the SPLM-IO, and the ongoing activities of an armed militia that has not signed a peace agreement with the government, the National Salvation Front (NAS), add complexity to the peace process. Despite – or because of – these difficult surroundings, there is an awareness of the importance of implementing security-related provisions of the peace agreement, focusing on the unification of the armed forces and disarmament and demobilisation.

Across these four counties, the conceptions of peace reflect a combination of immediate security needs with deeper structural issues such as justice, rights, and development. The reliance on traditional authorities, religious institutions, and non-governmental organisations highlights the importance of community-based and inclusive approaches to peacebuilding. The diverse experiences underscore the need for tailored strategies that address the specific contexts and histories of each region, ensuring that peacebuilding efforts are grounded in the realities of the communities they aim to serve.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The PEACEption study in South Sudan has unveiled noteworthy insights into the complex fabric of peace perceptions within the country, shaped by its troubled history and diverse societal landscape. This research underscores three critical findings: the deep impact of war and violence on peace perceptions, the necessity for a diverse array of peace actors to address multifaceted challenges and expectations, and the inherent fragility of national peace processes in a fragmented context.

First, the study reveals that individual expectations of peace are profoundly influenced by exposure to violent conflict, however less so in a direct way but more reflecting long-standing experiences at the community level. The more intense and prolonged the exposure to violence, the higher the prioritisation of personal safety. Communities that perceive themselves as victims of unresolved root causes of conflict express a stronger demand for justice, while those weary of continued violence emphasise reconciliation. Interestingly, the study finds discrepancies between people's conceptualisation of peace and their evaluation of peace processes and actors, finding that the latter is predominantly influenced by immediate personal security experiences, whereas the former is shaped by longer-term collective experiences.

Second, the study highlights the varied trust levels in different peace actors and institutions across South Sudan. While the church, UN peacekeeping missions, and civil society organisations generally enjoy a fair degree of trust, their acceptance is not universal. Trust in state institutions, particularly the armed forces, varies significantly based on regional experiences. Traditional authorities and their mechanisms, such as traditional courts, emerge as the most

universally trusted institutions, emphasising the importance of local initiatives in peacebuilding. This finding aligns with core insights of the so-called “local turn” in peace and conflict studies, which advocates for prioritising local peace infrastructures and seeking external support only when necessary.

Finally, the study points to the fragile nature of national peace projects in highly diverse and fragmented contexts like South Sudan. It suggests that national efforts should primarily focus on ensuring everyday security through a non-partisan security sector and addressing justice claims through credible conflict resolution and transitional justice mechanisms. This approach underscores the importance of concentrating on elements that directly impact citizen's everyday lives and expectations during the transitional period.

In conclusion, the PEACEption study offers valuable insights into the complex dynamics of peace perceptions in South Sudan, highlighting the need for a nuanced and locally informed approach to peacemaking and peacebuilding. It calls for modesty from international actors, recognising that their role may often be more supportive and logistical than interventionist. There is a need to accept the diversity of peace as a concept and the importance of negotiating a variety of expectations that reflect the collective experiences.

South Sudan's fragmented statehood and ambivalent history of statebuilding offer a unique perspective on the ideas of nationhood and state formation. Rather than viewing the lack of an ethnopolitically unified national identity as a deficiency, South Sudan's diversity and adaptability could be its greatest assets. The inability to pursue a conventional nation-state model that approaches peace as a contextualised value offers potentially offers a starting point to explore alternative forms of governance and social cohesion that embrace pluralism and localised identities.

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This research has been also supported by the Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform (PeaceRep), funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) for the benefit of developing countries. The information and views set out in this publication are those of the authors. Nothing herein constitutes the views of the Friedrich-Ebert- Stiftung or FCDO.