

PEACE IN TRANSITION: THE CASE OF SOUTH SUDAN

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

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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, Tunisia and Venezuela 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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Introduction

What people whose lives have been severely affected by armed violence actually think about peace and what peace means has been a vastly underrated area of research. The PEACEptions project addresses this research gap by conducting a series of mixed methods investigations in a number of countries. One of case studies under investigation is South Sudan, a country that has seen armed violence almost throughout its existence, dating back to the Sudanese independence in 1956 and the colonial period before. In an investigation throughout the year 2023, South Sudanese perceptions of what peace is and how it may look like have been collected, quantitatively, through a nationwide perception survey, and qualitatively, through narrowed data gatherings in the four locations Malakal, Rumbek, Yambio, and Yei.

This report presents the findings of this research and, as the first endeavour of its kind, paints a comprehensive picture of how peace looks like for those directly affected by armed violence. It unpacks the main pillars people expect from peace and which institutions they trust in pursuing it. It also explores the elements of peace, what the participants think constitute everyday peace in their communities, focusing on the three pillars as defined in the PEACEptions project: physical integrity, human rights, and institutions for conflict transformation. For its quantitative component, the report draws on responses from a perception survey conducted in 2023 by Detcro and the Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform (PeaceRep). The survey captured the views of 4,482 people from fifteen counties across all ten states and one special administrative area, encompassing urban, rural and IDP camp environments.¹ Besides questions on their views on peace, respondents were asked questions about their daily experiences of safety based on indicators of everyday peace developed through qualitative research during the project's inception phase.² They also shared their views on a wide range of governance and security topics.

Qualitatively, the research team conducted interviews and focus group discussions in four counties: Rumbek in Lakes State, Malakal in Upper Nile State, Yambio in Western Equatoria State and Yei in Central Equatoria State. The latter three counties have been epicentres of armed violence during the South Sudanese civil war, which started in 2013 while the former has seen protracted inter- and intra-communal violence since the country's independence until the appointment of General Rin Tueny as the Governor in mid-2021. These empirical findings are embedded in the context of the complex violent conflict landscape in South Sudan.

The report is divided into three main parts.

The **first part** analyses the prevailing conflicts at the national as well as a variety of subnational/local levels: central causes and dynamics of conflict and their transformation, whether in the process of social change, during war, the end of war or other forms of violence; forms of social cohesion and identity and their compatibility in terms of non-violent coexistence; relevant players, power relations and interests.

The **second part** is the survey of the prevailing understanding of peace: on the national level a representative survey stands at the core (similar questionnaire as in the local case studies). It is where the pillar³ (physical integrity, human rights, formal and informal institutions for conflict transformation) and elements of peace are discussed in detail. At the same time, analysis of the documents and discourses of different players have been made.

The **third empirical part** tackles the peace perceptions of people based on the four qualitative case studies, with a particular focus on peace actors.

1 A convenience sample of fifteen counties was selected to represent the principal regions and conflict theatres in South Sudan. The research team used an approximately self-weighting stratified random sampling approach to select households, and then individuals within households. This method centred on a randomization strategy implemented using ArcGIS and the GRID3 South Sudan Settlement Extents, Version 01.01 dataset. For each workday, enumerators began at randomly drawn map coordinates and followed a random walk guided by smartphone apps. Enumerators recorded responses using Kobo Toolbox smartphone software. See Center for International Earth Science Information Network (CIESIN), Columbia University and Novel-T. 2021, GRID3 South Sudan Settlement Extents, Version 01, Geo-Referenced Infrastructure and Demographic Data for Development (GRID3), available at <https://doi.org/10.7916/d8-khpa-pq09>.

2 The study drew from the Everyday Peace Indicator (EPI) methodology to develop measures of everyday safety through interviews and focus groups across five of the survey locations in January and February 2020. This produced five questions which were asked in each survey. The responses were then translated into an aggregate index of daily safety. See Firchow and Mac Ginty (2017).

3 For the conceptualisations of pillars of peace, see Birke and Kurtenbach (2021): The entanglements of peace, p.345



15 million people
estimated population (IMF 2023)



three-quarters
of the population live in
rural areas



Youth
form the biggest chunk
of the population



60.5%
of South Sudanese
are of Christian faith
(majority)

40%
remaining

32.9%
made up of believers in
indigenous religions

6.2%
Islamic faith.

Politically, the South Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM) is the dominant political party. The SPLM is headed by the current President Salva Kiir Mayardit, who has led the government since the independence of the country. The Sudan People’s Liberation Movement in Opposition (SPLM-IO) is the main opponent. The SPLM-IO, led by the current First Vice President Riek Machar Teny, broke away from the SPLM at the start of the civil war in December 2013. The South Sudan Opposition Alliance (SSOA), an umbrella of the forces opposed to the government, is also represented in the Revitalized Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU) alongside the Former Detainees (FDs), a group of mostly SPLM high-ranking cadres who were arrested immediately after start of the civil war, accused of plotting the coup against the government (D’Agoot 2020), and a grouping of so-called Other Political Parties (OPP).

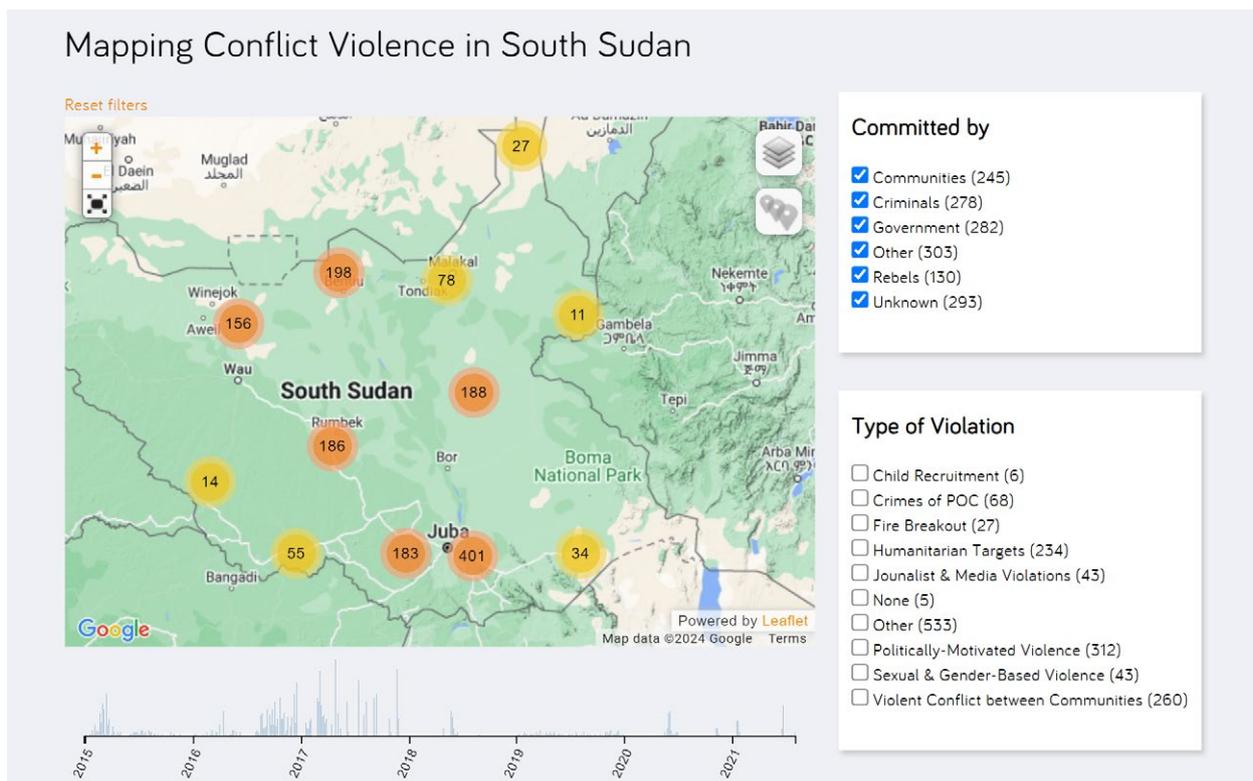
The political space has remained narrow since South Sudan’s independence with SPLM and SPLM-IO dominating the arena. There is only limited room for other political parties in existence to manoeuvre. Power is concentrated in the hands of the president at the national level along with the state resources. All important public post-holders are appointed by the president, and the resources are also directed to the sectors of his choice (Craze 2023a). This therefore creates the incentive for all others to want to take this power and have access to the state coffers, usually through force, as political and civic spaces have become very limited or non-existent.

A case in point was the People’s Coalition for Civic Action (PCCA) which had called for a protest against the government in 2021 (Amnesty International 2021). When the day came, a huge number of security forces and their assets were deployed across Juba and the government warned people of severe repercussions should they take part. Internet access was restricted. All the leaders of the PCCA, bar ex-governor of the Northern Bahr El-Ghazal State, Kuel Aguer, fled the country. Kuel was subsequently arrested in Blue House, the National Security Prison, for over about two years without access to justice (Daniel 2022).

Physical violence is common across the country. Although the major wars in South Sudan started in Juba, the highest levels of violence are felt more in the remote towns and rural areas. National conflicts pitting the government forces against rebels are commonplace. These wars start with squabbles over power and resources with the elites calling the shots (D’Agoot 2020; Koos and Gutschke 2014). Civilians and their livelihoods always bear the brunt of these violent conflicts emanating from the national actors. They are either caught up in crossfire or deliberately targeted by forces of the war protagonists. In the same manner, localised conflicts happen in the villages and cattle camps where communities fight each other over scarce resources such as cattle and land.

Livestock in South Sudan acts as a source of livelihoods and social capital among pastoral communities in South Sudan and it is therefore a vital asset (Cullis 2021). States

FIGURE 2: Map showing violence conflicts in South Sudan (2015 – 2021): © Cepo



like Lakes, Warrap and Jonglei are characterised by a vicious cycle of cattle-related raids and revenge killings. Land disputes are common as well and are often linked to border issues between counties, since most territories are community-owned, hence land disputes, including violent ones, usually drag in whole communities (Justin and van Dijk 2017).

Another form of violence is that of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) meted mostly against women and girls. South Sudan is a patriarchal society where issues of SGBV are not taken seriously by the local and national authorities. In many conflict places, conflict-related SGBV has been used as a weapon of war especially by the national security apparatuses against local civilians (OHCHR 2019). This is common in areas of active rebellions such as Unity, Central Equatoria, Western Equatoria, and Upper Nile States. Although the government and Sudan People's Liberation Army in Opposition (SPLA-IO) have signed an action plan to end SGBV this after pressure from the international community, but it has not completely gone away (Amnesty International 2022).

Initiatives to reduce the level of violence have produced mixed results. Overall, the level of violence in most parts of the country has reduced since the Revitalized Agreement on Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) was signed in 2018. The Public Perceptions of Peace survey shows significant improvements in the perceived everyday security of citizens since 2021 (Dawkins et al. 2023). Still, there are rebel movements still operate in Central Equatoria State and Greater Upper Nile region. Many South Sudanese remain displaced (2.3 million IDPs and 2.4 million refugees, as of July 2023), mainly because of prevailing insecurity in their places of origin (UNHCR 2023).

Although the R-ARCSS, especially the power-sharing arrangement, was designed to reward the feuding elites in a bid to reduce hostilities, the delay in the implementation, especially of the security-related provisions, has resulted in further tensions. The unification of armed forces, the enactment of the new constitution, and the conduct of free and fair elections are a few of the contentious issues that have not been done within the initially stipulated timetable. To provide more room for implementing the agreement, the transitional arrangements were extended by a Roadmap agreement in August 2022 until February 2025, which provides for the elections to be held in December 2024.

Peacebuilding efforts have not been in short supply throughout the troubled history of South Sudan. Although national institutions such as the Ministry of Peacebuilding and the Peace and Reconciliation Commission have been established after the signing of the R-ARCSS, the work of these institutions is hampered by constant politicking at national and subnational levels. The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), which mediated the

R-ARCSS, has remained the peace guarantor and tries to reign on the parties to the agreement whenever there are misunderstandings (R-ARCSS 2018). In addition, the Ceasefire and Transitional Security Monitoring and Verification Mechanism (CTSAMVM) is tasked to monitor and verify the possible breaches of the permanent ceasefire agreed upon by the parties (ibid.). The role of the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (R-JMEC) is to oversee the implementation of all aspects of R-ARCSS (ibid.). The ebbs and flows of subnational violence provide a constant challenge to these institutions.

Across the country, the church has remained close to the local people and have stepped in to mediate local conflicts between the communities as well as between the rebels and the government. At the national level, the Community of Sant' Egidio mediates peace talks between the government and NAS and SSUF/A. These negotiations are challenging and often interrupted (also at the time of writing, cf. Riquier 2003), yet they are a positive step in bringing the two holdout groups to agree to a peaceful settlement of the conflicts. In various locations, bishops play an important role in negotiating local peace agreements. The South Sudan Council of Churches is also heavily engaged in local peacemaking. Local peacebuilding initiatives at the community levels are also pursued by the traditional authorities, often using established legal mechanisms such as local courts to resolve disputes involving individuals or communities and prevent these from escalating further.

The United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) is critical for pursuing peacebuilding in South Sudan, especially through its Civil Affairs Division. Civil Affairs supports and conducts peace dialogues and conferences to try and mend the local rifts in the communities. With field offices in all states, the mission also conducts patrols among communities as a deterrent measure against conflicts.

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Conflict Analysis of South Sudan

Conflicts in South Sudan are dynamic and multidimensional. Actor constellations keep constantly changing, with defections by local commanders from the main armed actors being a regular occurrence. It is worthy to note that national conflicts fuse into subnational conflicts and vice versa. Although there are constants (actors and causes) of the unending cycle of violence, emerging challenges such as climate change and the war in neighbouring Sudan have exacerbated the existing tensions (Muurwel et al. 2023).

The history of South(ern) Sudan has been a violent one although the intensity of the conflicts has differed over time. Before Sudan's independence from Britain in 1956, a war had broken out in 1955 by the Anya-Nya, a southern Sudanese guerrilla outlet which demanded more autonomy in the southern region (Malwal 2015). This war continued until 1972, when the so-called Addis Ababa Agreement was signed between the Sudan government and the Anya-Nya, granting the southern region a federal status. But an uneasy relationship between the national government and the federal body in the southern region ensured that the agreement did not hold for long. The war resurrected, first driven by a recurrence of the Anya-Nya as Anya-Nya Two, and then the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) headed by John Garang De Mabior, which turned into the major resistance force (Rolandsen and Kindersley 2019).

The SPLM/A's guerrilla warfare waged in 1983 lasted for over 21 years. It had brought untold suffering on Southern Sudanese with an estimated two million lives lost (Wilson Center 2002). The war has been considered to be the longest armed conflict on the African continent. In 2005, the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed between the SPLM/A and the government of Sudan. Backed by the so-called 'Troika' of the United States, United Kingdom and Norway, and mediated by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the agreement put an end to the war between the SPLM/A and the Government of Sudan and provided for a number of stipulations including the semi-autonomy status for Southern Sudan, elections to be conducted after three years after the signing of the agreement, and an independence referendum to be held after a transition period of six years.

After an overwhelming vote to separate from Sudan, South Sudan declared its independence on 9 July 2011.

Nonetheless, the cycle of violence never went away as one has been fed by the other fuelled by divisions along ethno-political lines. President Salva Kiir, a Dinka, and his longtime nemesis Riek Machar, a Nuer, have largely relied on tribal loyalties and brokerage to advance their agendas to the detriment of the ordinary citizens. Corruption in the government became endemic and national institutions remained weak, resulting in public coffers running dry with no accountability (Craze 2023a). Public services deteriorated with civil servants not getting paid for months. All these issues have acted as ingredients for the previous and ongoing conflicts.

National Conflicts: Controlling Power and Resources

The national conflicts have pitted the elites against each other. Their main motives have been competition for the power and national resources. With little to no accountability, having the power gives one the license the expropriate the national resources to family members and close allies (Craze 2023a). It is tentacles of this competition for power that manifests itself in many ways as dissected below.

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The first wave of national violence in South Sudan started in the aftermath of the Sudanese elections conducted in 2010. As a provision in the CPA, elections were to be conducted five years after the signing of the agreement. These were very complex elections. In addition to choosing the President of Sudan (a seat the SPLM party did not contest), Southern Sudan was also conducting elections for members of the national parliament, the President of Southern Sudan, and members of the Southern Sudan Legislative Assembly. Each state was also to elect the governor and members of the state legislative assembly. Those electoral contests triggered violence as the candidates who lost felt that it was not free and fair (Brosche and Höglund 2016).

The dominance of the SPLM party in the south was the precursor to these tensions. Being on the SPLM ticket for these elections in the southern region meant a near certain victory for any candidate. The SPLM conducted primary elections for their members. Some former cadres who lost out in this process went on to contest the elections as independents. Apart from Joseph Bakasoro in Western Equatoria State, all others who contested as independents predictably lost. It set off the first wave of rebellions across the country. General Dau Aturjong of Northern Bahr El-Ghazal State (Reliefweb 2012), General George Athor and David Yau Yau in Jonglei State took up arms against the government (BBC News 2012). Athor was subsequently killed by the government forces, Aturjong later joined the government while Yau Yau waged a bloody war against the government between 2010 and early 2014 before a peace deal was signed between his Cobra Faction and the government (Tanza 2014).

The fighting over power by the elites became glaring in December 2013. Two years after the country celebrated its independence, war broke out in Juba that rapidly spread, mainly to Greater Upper Nile. The newly independent country's first general elections were slated for 2014 and the chairman of the SPLM was always guaranteed to be the next president of the country given the popularity of the liberation movement-turned ruling party which had brought South Sudan's independence. Machar, the former vice president relieved a few months prior, along with other senior figures in the party who were believed to harbour their own ambitions of contesting the chair of the SPLM party, sized up with the president trying to dislodge him. An SPLM Convention was planned for December 2013, where representatives from all the ten states were supposed to converge in Juba for the election of the SPLM chairperson to lead the party in the next general elections.

Politicking within the party had reached fever pitch during the year (Githigaro 2016). In July 2013, the president dismissed the entire cabinet including the vice president

Riek Machar without giving any reasons (DW 2013). The president also went on to suspend the SPLM Secretary General, Pagan Amum, and ordered an investigation against him (ibid.). The cabinet was filled with Kiir's loyalists and most of his former comrades in the SPLM whom he thought as either challenging him directly for the top SPLM seat or conniving with others to oust him were left out (D'Agoot 2020; Nyaba 2019).

As a result, tensions within the party remained high throughout the latter half of 2013. By mid-December, the SPLM Convention embarked on electing the party chief. Not satisfied with the state nominations for the state representatives of the national convention, some SPLM cadres, including the former vice president who was also the deputy chair of the SPLM, boycotted the gathering, held a rally on 14 December 2013, and denounced the convention. On the following day, 15 December 2013, fighting broke out in the evening among presidential guards between Riek and Kiir's loyalists in the Giada Military barracks. In the subsequent days, the violence spread like wildfire.

Fighting continued for days in Juba and the vice president was driven out of South Sudan into the Democratic Republic of Congo where he was picked up by the UN Mission (MONUSCO) there (The Guardian 2016). Over the next days, armed fighting not only engulfed the Upper Nile region. While the southern Equatoria regions was safeguarded by the Ugandan army, which entered the country soon after the war broke out, in the first phase of the civil war in 2014 and 2015, fighting was widespread in the whole country from 2016 onwards. All warring parties have been accused of gross human rights violations including rapes and torture against local civilians (Zarocostas 2023).

A first peace agreement was signed in 2015 – the Agreement for the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS) – but broke down after a few months, after new violent incidents hit Juba. Soon thereafter, fighting re-erupted in the whole country. After considerable pressure by neighbouring states, in particular Ethiopia, Uganda, and Sudan, the main armed actors (R-ARCSS) signed a revitalised version of the agreement. This agreement has been able to curb the fighting at the national level, while incidents of armed violence remain prevalent in many parts of the country.

In the course of the civil war, there have been other rebellions, albeit on smaller scales, against the government. For example, Joseph Bakasoro formed the South Sudan National Movement for Change (SSNMC) after being sacked by the President from the post of the Western Equatoria State governor.

Thomas Cirilo also defected from the South Sudan People's Defence Forces (SSPDF), citing tribal domination, and advocated for a federal system of governance and formed the National Salvation Front (NAS). Johnson Olony of the Shilluk Agwelek militia has also fought against the government forces before joining them again on grounds of protecting the Shilluk land. General Paul Malong, a former close ally of the president who led the Northern Bahr El-Ghazal State as the governor for about nine years before being appointed as the Chief of General Staff of the SSPDF, formed the South Sudan United Front/Army (SSUF/A) after being sacked from his position. Both Malong and Cirilo refused to become part of the R-ARCSS framework.

Localised/Subnational Conflicts

In addition to the armed violence that has beset South Sudan orchestrated by national issues, subnational conflicts have claimed more lives alongside the civil wars. These localised and subnational conflicts are sometimes ignited or fanned by the national politics in what Alex de Waal has called 'political marketplace' (de Waal 2015). Often tribal sentiments have been amplified by the elites at the national level to inflame conflicts in the communities for their selfish gains. In the following section, different conflicts, their nature, actors, dynamics, and impact will be discussed under each region.

Greater Upper Nile Region

Land disputes, cattle raids, revenge killings, and people's abductions continue to be the main conflict issues in Greater Upper Nile region. These issues commonly evolve along ethnopolitical lines and are influenced by the elite politics from the national level.

Among the major conflict drivers in Greater Upper Nile region is land. With a diverse ethnic makeup, the Upper Nile region is the most restive in the country. Land dispute is the

major cause of conflict between Dinka Padang and Shilluk tribes in Upper Nile State (Caragounis 2021). Although the local communities may have genuine reasons about their opposition for other ethnic communities to claim their lands, these sentiments have been exploited for personal gains by the elites. For example, Johnson Olony, a Shilluk renegade general of Agwelek militia, rebelled before the outbreak of the civil war in 2013 claiming to be fighting for the recovery of Shilluk land. To rally support from his Shilluk kinsmen, he accused the government of giving land to Dinka, especially in Malakal, the state capital of Upper Nile State (Grant 2018). He allegedly enlisted the support of the Chollo King, who commands a lot of respect from his Shilluk subjects (Radio Tamazuj 2017a).

When the war broke out in 2013, Riek Machar convinced Olony that he would return the ownership of Malakal to the Shilluk if they helped him to overthrow the government of President Kiir. After the R-ARCSS, Riek nominated General Olony on the SPLM-IO ticket as the governor of Upper Nile State, but Kiir refused to endorse his appointment leading to an impasse. After an alternative governor was named, Olony defected with the former SPLA-IO Chief of Staff, General Simon Gatwech Dual, and formed the SPLM-IO Kitgwang Faction (Craze 2023b). The two later split up and are now sworn enemies after Olony pledged allegiance to President Kiir. The Shilluk king, as well, is back in the government's fold. But their feud with the Dinka Padang, who are ardent supporters of President Kiir, over the land problem has been a thorny issue there for years.

There is another land dispute between Maban and Dinka from Melut County in Upper Nile State. At the beginning of November 2022, deadly clashes broke out between the Maban and Dinka from Melut when the Dinka were forced by flooding from their homeland and tried to migrate to areas considered to be Maban land. The Maban people thought that the Dinka had come to occupy their land and attacked them, killing some Dinka internally displaced persons. Previously, there had been clashes between the two communities over ownership of Kilo Asharra (Kilo 10) between Melut and Adar oil fields (Radio Tamazuj 2017b). Although the South Sudan Constitution mandates the Council of States to deal with communities' land disputes, the land issues have remained an Achilles heel of peacebuilding efforts in this region (Justin and van Dijk 2017).

Cattle raids and revenge killings are another cause of instability. They have become protracted over the years. Most inhabitants in the Upper Nile region are pastoralists. Long-standing practices among the herders have become militarised and politicised (Wild et al. 2018), and with that comes the high death toll. The Nuer raid the Dinka for cattle and revenge and vice versa. The Dinka and Nuer raid the Murle and so do the Murle against the Nuer and Dinka.

Among the major conflict drivers in Greater Upper Nile region is land.



The difference now with that century old practice is that it has become more deadly because of the use of modern weapons and the politicization of the issue (da Costa 2023).

Another abhorrent practice is the abduction of children and women which has become a considerable challenge for the authorities in Jonglei State and Greater Pibor Administrative Area. This has been a long-standing practice in Jonglei and the Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA), it has not reduced despite attention by the national government in recent years (Mango 2021). The most recent incident was in January 2023, where 88 women and children were abducted from Greater Pibor Administrative Area after months of intercommunal violence between some youth from Jonglei State and those from Pibor Administrative area. Fortunately, the abductees were rescued by Jonglei State authorities and handed over to Pibor Administrative Area authorities (Doki 2023).

Greater Equatoria Region

Land disputes, tribal politics, civil wars, and tensions between farmers and cattle keepers are the main conflict issues in Equatoria region. Like in the other regions, these tensions remain unresolved, with issues exacerbated by return movements from the refugee camps in Uganda, where conditions have become untenable for many due to cuts in humanitarian assistance.

Although the Equatoria region had remained largely peaceful in the initial years of South Sudan's independence and was barely touched by the first phase of the civil war due to an intervention by the Ugandan army, the re-occurrence of the war in 2016 dragged the region into armed violence. Even after the SPLM-IO and other rebel groups that operated in the region signed the R-ARCSS, the National Salvation Front (NAS) of Thomas Cirilo, a former high-ranking general of the SPLA who split, has remained active there. It has been accused of staging attacks on government soldiers and travellers along the Yei-Juba and Nimule-Juba roads, curtailing free movement of people and goods along these roads (Radio Tamazuj 2021). NAS claims to be fighting for federal system of governance and against tribal marginalization, especially the Equatoria region.

Land disputes, tribal politics, civil wars, and tensions between farmers and cattle keepers are the main conflict issues in Equatoria region.



Land disputes have plagued the Equatoria region already before the outbreak of the civil war (Justin and van Dijk 2017). However, violent episodes become more and more regular since the outbreak of the war's second phase in 2016. In Western Equatoria, there have been long-standing issues between the Zande and the Balanda. In 2021, intense fighting broke out between militias of both groups, each claiming Tambura as their own. Although these feuds were alleged to have been influenced by the SPLM and SPLM-IO politics, the trigger was a land dispute (Mednick 2022).

The current governor of Western Equatoria, Alfred Futuyo Karaba, is of Balanda decent, the first to hold the post in the state. He represents the SPLM-IO party and led an SPLA-IO-affiliated militia, the so-called Arrow Boys, with major support from the Balanda tribe before the signing of the R-ARCSS (Small Arms Survey 2016). Most Zande, in turn, sided with the government after the former governor, Joseph Bakasoro, a Zande himself, had joined the government. Bakasoro has recently been appointed as Minister of Presidential Affairs, a position very close to the locus of political power. The Zande are alleged to have been armed by the government, while the Balanda tend to side with the SPLM-IO (Mednick 2022). As seen in the other regions, it is hard to pinpoint on conflict trigger without discussing other layers of the causes of the same issue.

In Central Equatoria State, Mundari and Bari dispute over ownership of the area around Mangala (Deng 2020). In the same vein, the Dinka Bor pastoralists allegedly fleeing flooding in Jonglei State have clashed with local communities in the Equatoria region over grazing lands. These movements also fuelled fears among communities living in the region of land grabbing by the Dinka. Cattle destroying farms and crops are cited as further reasons for treating the herders as unwelcome (Muorwel et al. 2023). These land issues can always escalate to influence national conflict dynamics. The NAS rebellion, which has its main base around Yei in Central Equatoria, is a typical example of how local land disputes can support political-military ambitions by local elites (Oluoch 2019).

Greater Bahr El-Ghazal Region

Even though the two civil wars after South Sudan seceded from Sudan did not affect the region as hard as Greater Upper Nile, Greater Bahr El-Ghazal has still endured sustained localised conflicts. The most common occurrences have been the cattle raids and revenge killings. Prevalent especially in Lakes State and Warrap State, the revenge killings and cattle raids have devastated this region and claimed many lives. Even the national security personnel sent to quell the violence have been made to become part of this conflict (Mabor 2022). In Lakes State, the violence has been curbed in recent years by a concerted effort of applying measures of hard security by the Governor Rin Tueny Mabor (Pospisil 2023).

These efforts have, however, come at the cost of serious human rights violations.

Violent clashes over grazing lands have been common as well. Relying on the colonial boundaries left behind by the British, most boundaries separating communities remain contested. This was worsened when the president split the country in 2015 from ten states to 32. Determining the new states boundaries had caused inter-communal clashes, for instance, between Dinka Gok and Belle of Lakes State over the Bahr El-Ghel/Ngap area (CSRF 2021).

Some of these disputes occur between pastoralist communities themselves. Others are related to disputes between farmers and herders over the lands of the farmers. Competition over scarce resources has been one of the key drivers of conflict in the Greater Bahr El-Ghazal region. Conflicts such as between the Belle agriculturalists and Dinka Agar and Gok herders of Lakes State or the farming communities of Luo (Jurcol) of Western Bahr El-Ghazal State and the Dinka pastoralists from Warrap State exemplify this pattern.

Another such land dispute involves the Twic of Warrap State and Dinka Ngok of Abyei Administrative Area over Aneet. The land is claimed by both (Wudu 2022). What makes this conflict quite complicated to resolve, despite the many deadly skirmishes, is technical complications as it partly concerns areas also claimed by neighbouring Sudan. While it concerns two Dinka communities, South Sudan cannot intervene with its law enforcement agencies as the area has been formally demilitarised (Small Arms Survey 2023). The deployed United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA) has only limited means available since its mandate does not apply to communities outside Abyei Administrative Area.

Subnational conflicts in South Sudan are mainly influenced by national actors, mostly to settle their scores with the national government, often resulting in severe suffering of the local population. It leads up to the adage that says: when the elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers. Nonetheless, subnational conflicts also reflect communities' grievances, which are, however, utilised for and exacerbated by the power wrangling between the elites at the national level.

Competition over scarce resources has been one of the key drivers of conflict in the Greater Bahr El-Ghazal region.



Transnational Conflict: Border Disputes and Regional Instability

In addition to subnational and national conflicts, South Sudan is faced with transnational challenges. The cross-border problems appear complex and difficult to resolve, as these conflicts are also highly politicised. Apart from Kenya, all other South Sudan's neighbours, Ethiopia, Sudan, Central Africa Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Uganda also face civil wars and/or political instability of varying magnitudes and dynamics. These wars also affect South Sudan in many ways.

In Sudan, even before the outbreak of the current civil war, various rebel groups operating in southern and south-western parts have had bases in South Sudan, from where they launch attacks against the Sudanese Armed Forces. At the same time, Sudan had always supported Southern Sudanese rebel outfits as their proxies against the SPLA. The refugee situation contributes to these challenges. While many South Sudanese fled the wars in the South to Northern Sudan, the outbreak of the war in Sudan in April 2023 between Rapid Support Forces (RSF) of General Hemedti Dagalo and the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) headed by Abdul Fattah al-Burhan, did not only force them to return, but also triggered substantial refugee movements of Sudanese to South Sudan. The Sudanese war negatively impacted and already dire humanitarian situation and added to existing tensions over limited resources such as land (REACH 2023). The integration of South Sudanese fighters, predominantly Nuer militias from Unity State, in the ranks of the RSF has the potential for trigger further political tensions.

Other notable disputes relate to contest of border areas between South Sudan and its neighbours. The main one is the issue of Abyei Administrative Area which has strained relations and direct military confrontations between Sudan and South Sudan. Armed incidents also occurred about Heglig (Sudan) or Panthou (South Sudan) on the Upper Nile region border, which made the two countries go into a brief but catastrophic war in 2012 (Johnson 2012), and Kaffia Kingi on the border between Western Bahr El-Ghazal State and Southern Darfur in Sudan. These events have contributed to the long-standing instability across the borders of the two countries, although the dynamics have changed since 2019, after the bilateral relations changed after the ousting of the Sudanese Bashir regime (Craze 2023a).

The border areas between South Sudan and Uganda are also contested. Deadly incidents have occurred over

poorly marked borders, but also in response to Ugandan encroachment of South Sudanese territory in Kajo Keji and neighbouring areas. There are also unresolved border issues with Kenya, especially over the Illemi Triangle. Faced with continuous challenges of encroachment, the South Sudanese government is attempting to engage its neighbours in formal discussions to diffuse these tensions (Africa Defense Forum 2023).

In addition to border-related issues, the lack of stable governments in the Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Sudan has contributed to insecurities. Especially along the border to the Central African Republic, cross-border movements of armed militias are common, ranging back to the times of the Ugandan Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), which used this area as their last refuge after being pushed back by the Ugandan army. Even in recent years, there have been episodes of violence involving remnants of the LRA in Western Equatoria and Western Bahr El-Ghazal (Arieff et al. 2015).

In sum, the conflict dynamics in South Sudan are fluid and interconnected. Some start at the national level and then dissolve into subnational conflicts with unspeakable

consequences. Other violent conflicts start at the local level and but sometimes get fanned by the elites at the national level. For personal gains by the political and military strongmen, the existing ethnic differences have been used to divide the South Sudan society further. Land, cattle raids and revenge killings, and cross border conflicts are the major sources of conflict across the country.

Faced with continuous challenges of encroachment, the South Sudanese government is attempting to engage its neighbours in formal discussions to diffuse these tensions (Africa Defense Forum 2023).



The Main Elements of Peace: Safety, Justice, and Beyond

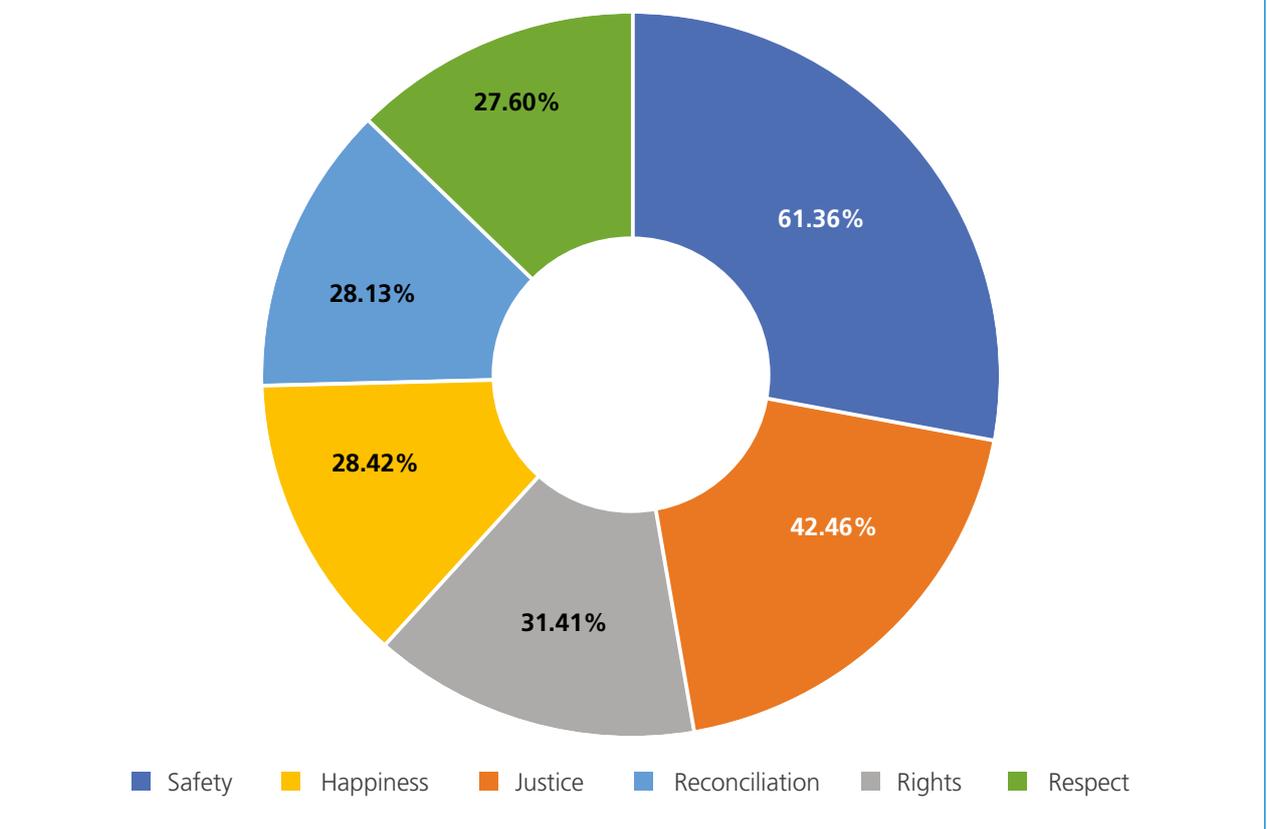
Against the background of this complex and violent history of armed conflict in South Sudan, it remains to explore what people expect from peace. The country is currently undergoing a transition period out of war that is designed to provide a pathway towards peace. This project, however, is based on elite assumptions and rests on the principles of political accommodation of elites, implemented through a power-sharing arrangement. What people think of peace has not been part of these negotiations. Based on insights from the public perception of peace survey from April and May 2023, this chapter will explore people’s conceptions of peace, what their perception of peace is, and how it should be implemented.

As the first major question respondents were asked what they consider as the three main elements of peace. The results (see Graph 1) see two elements clearly standing out: safety (61.4%) and justice (42.5%). With some distance, rights (31.4%) come in as the third element in the national

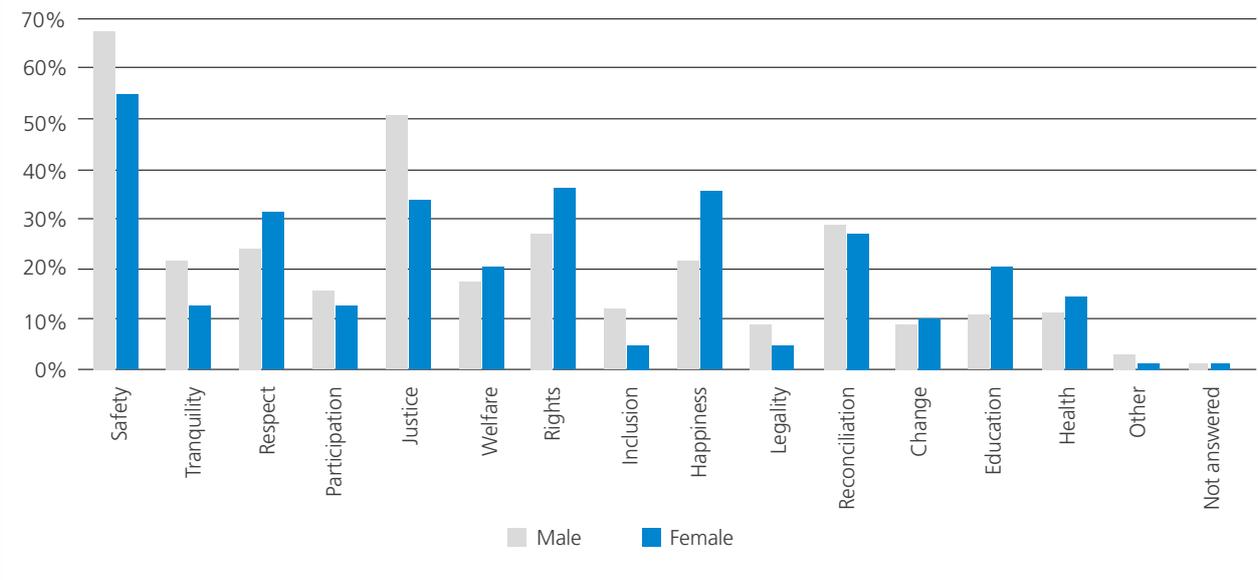
comparison. Three more elements were chosen by about 28% of respondents: happiness, reconciliation, and respect, comparably ‘soft’ components that clearly symbolise the wish for a more positive vision of peace beyond the mere absence of violence. In turn, elements that the participants felt less strongly about were legality (6.8%), inclusion (8.8%) and change (9.9%), which, as discussed below, represents the specific South Sudanese experiences of violence and war.

Looking at the results in more details, the diversity of results is striking. One impacting factor is location and the particular conflict history the respective location went through. Counties such as Pibor (27.7%) and Yei (28.3%) cared less strongly about safety compared to Renk (85.9%) and Yirol West (85.4%). As discussed further below, these differences often relate to justice claims prevalent among the communities in these counties.

Graph 1: MAIN ELEMENTS OF PEACE: TOP SIX MENTIONS (N=4,482)



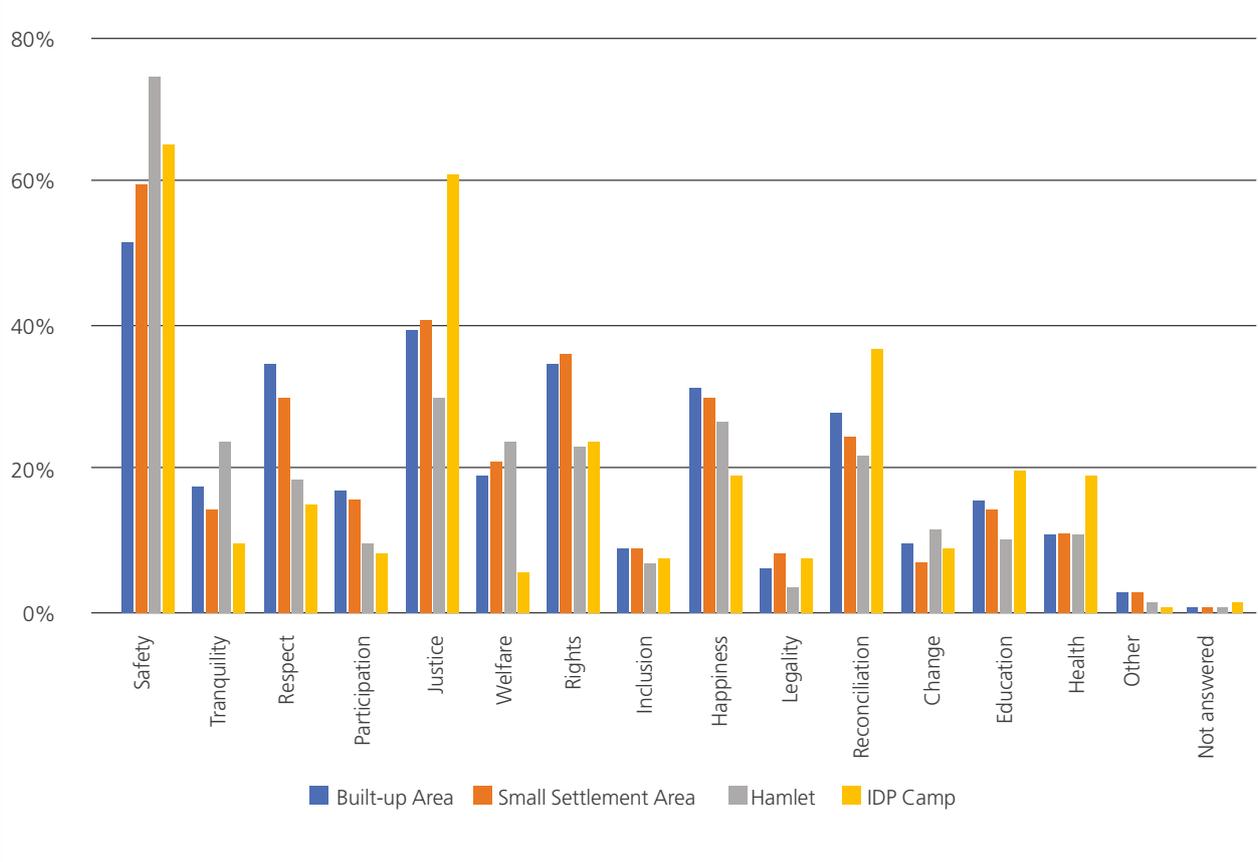
Graph 2: ELEMENTS OF PEACE, BY GENDER (N=4,482)



When looking into further detail, the first striking aspect is that the results are gendered, in some of the elements to a significant extent. In general words, the results confirm that female conceptions of peace are more encompassing and ‘positive’ than male ones, which, in the South Sudanese context, predominantly focus on safety and justice.

Women, in turn, while still ranking safety highest – albeit by a much smaller margin – consider elements such as rights, happiness, reconciliation, but also education, welfare, and health, also as significant. Surprisingly, for both gender, participation and inclusion rank low by comparison.

Graph 3: PILLARS OF PEACE, BY SURROUNDINGS (N=4,482)



A second impacting factor on how people conceptualise peace are their surroundings (see Graph 3). Particularly striking are the feelings of people living in the IDP/PoC sites: for them, the two elements of justice and reconciliation rank significantly higher than for the rest of the population, which reflects their experiences of displacement and ethnopolitically motivated violence. The importance of safety increases with the remoteness of the areas where respondents are living in: while it is a main element of peace for only 52.6% of respondents living in town-like surroundings, it is of high relevance for 75.6% of those living in hamlets.

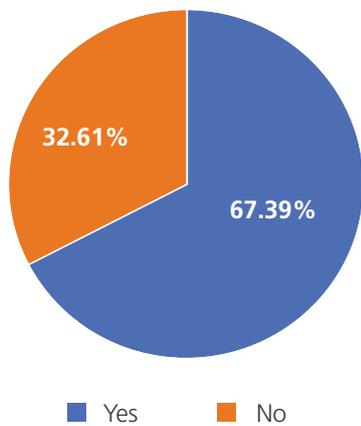
Is South Sudan at Peace?

Another element to consider when reflecting on peace conceptions of people is if they are actually thinking if they

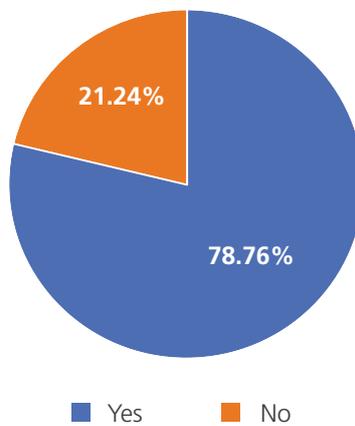
currently live at peace or not. The survey asked about this condition in two different sorts of ways: first, by directly asking respondents if they perceive South Sudan being at peace at the moment and, second, by asking five questions reflecting people’s everyday peace experiences, which are effectively considering the everyday security situation: can people use the main roads, can they travel in the countryside off the main roads, can they attend their neighbour at night when there is need to, can they access markets, and can they pursue cultural activities?

In general, more than two thirds of respondents (67.4%) see South Sudan at peace in April/May 2023 (see Graph 4), which is a steady improvement from 2021, where answers were split in half (Dawkins et al. 2023). These results are highly dependent on the everyday security experiences of people (see Graph 5 and Graph 6, which are calculated based on an everyday security index based on the average of answers to the five questions presented above). While 78.8% of respondents with positive perceptions of their everyday security situation see South Sudan at peace, it is only 43.5% of those with negative ones.

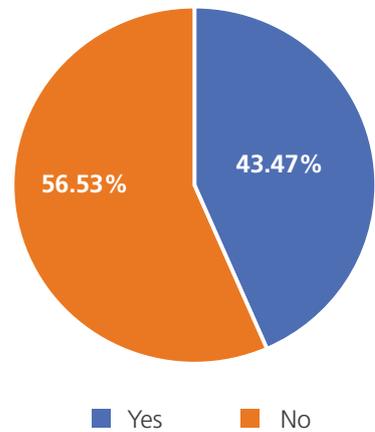
Graph 4: IS SOUTH SUDAN AT PEACE? (N=4,404)



Graph 5: IS SOUTH SUDAN AT PEACE? (RESPONDENTS WITH GOOD PERCEPTION OF EVERYDAY SECURITY, N=2,985)



Graph 6: IS SOUTH SUDAN AT PEACE? (RESPONDENTS WITH BAD PERCEPTION OF EVERYDAY SECURITY, N=1,417)



Strikingly, while everyday security is the most reliable indicator for people’s perceptions of the peace process and the performance of the peace actors in peace agreement implementation, it is only marginally influencing the conceptions of peace people have. When prolonging the question if South Sudan is at peace to the opinions on the main elements of peace (see Graph 7), there is hardly any differences, apart from reconciliation and justice being stronger favoured by those who do not see South Sudan at peace.

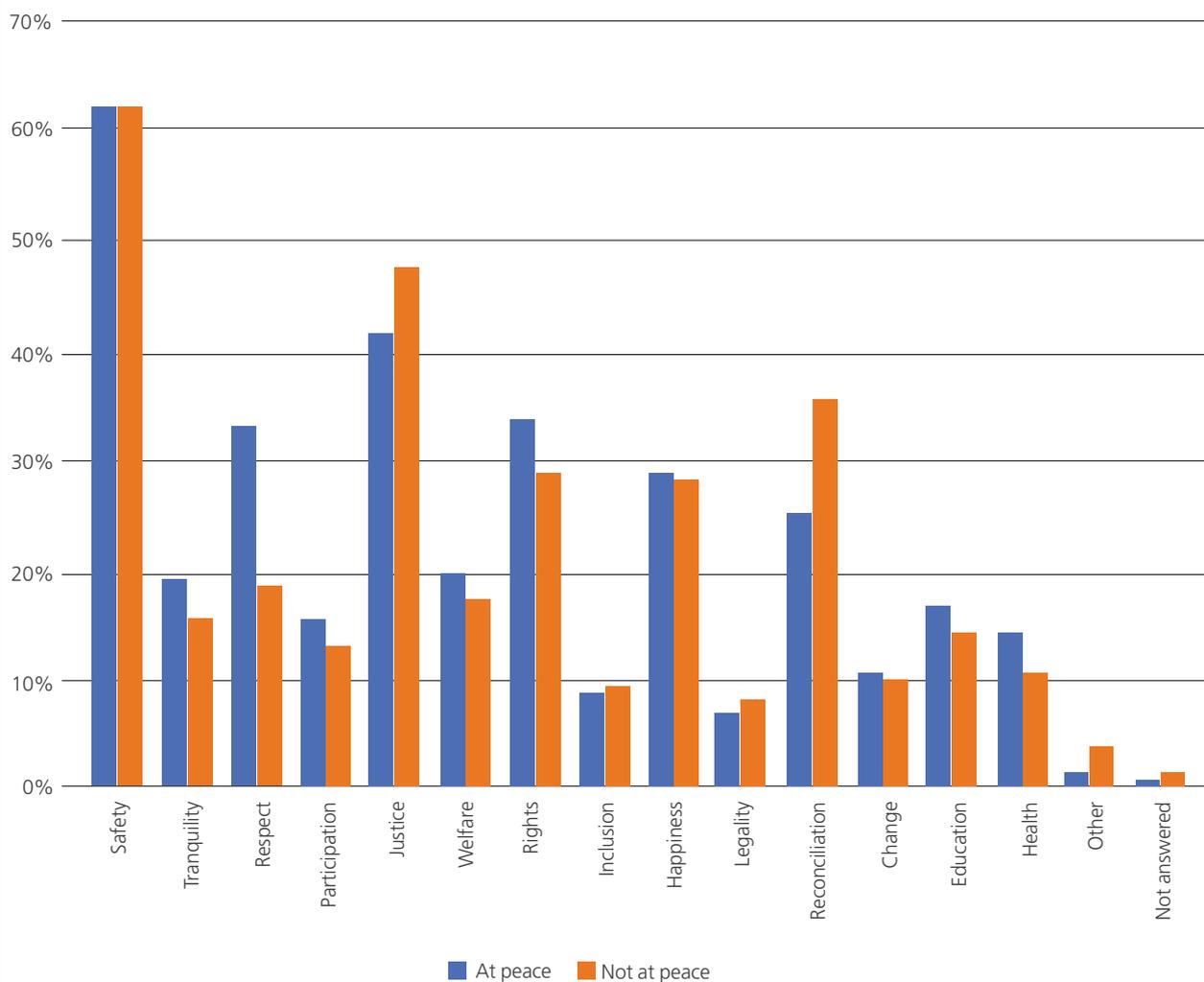
These results suggest that it is more gendered and contextual experiences, also at the community level, that shape what people think about peace. While everyday experiences very much impact what people think about the peace process and related politics, their conceptual thinking of peace appears to be impacted more by long-term insights and particular lifeworlds. Safety, justice, and rights emerge as the key pillars that are, however, also understood as both contested and contesting. They will be discussed in more detail below.

Everyday Security

Safety and security have been the main issues for ordinary South Sudanese especially people in the rural areas and others who have fled to the IDP camps. For this survey, participants from more peaceful counties such as Renk and Yirol West Counties felt more strongly about safety compared to those in the more conflict-affected counties like Yei and Pibor. This could be interpreted as their safety has been neglected over the years.

As highlighted above, however, these experiences of violence reflected in the conceptions of peace are long-term and collective. As Graph 8 demonstrates, the given importance to specific peace pillars is barely influenced by experienced everyday security. The most striking difference is that safety is perceived, albeit slightly, lower in importance by respondents with bad everyday security experiences, while justice, in turn, is rated higher, which points towards

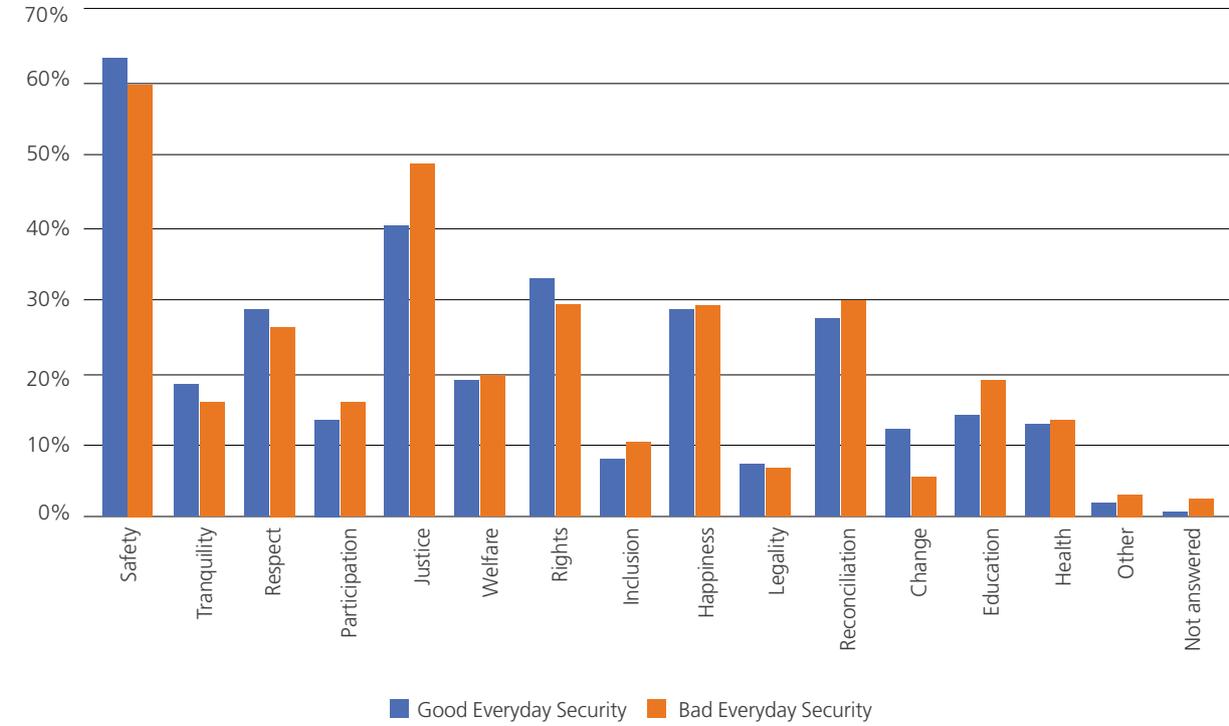
Graph 7: ELEMENTS OF PEACE, BY PERCEPTIONS OF SOUTH SUDAN BEING AT PEACE (N=4,404)



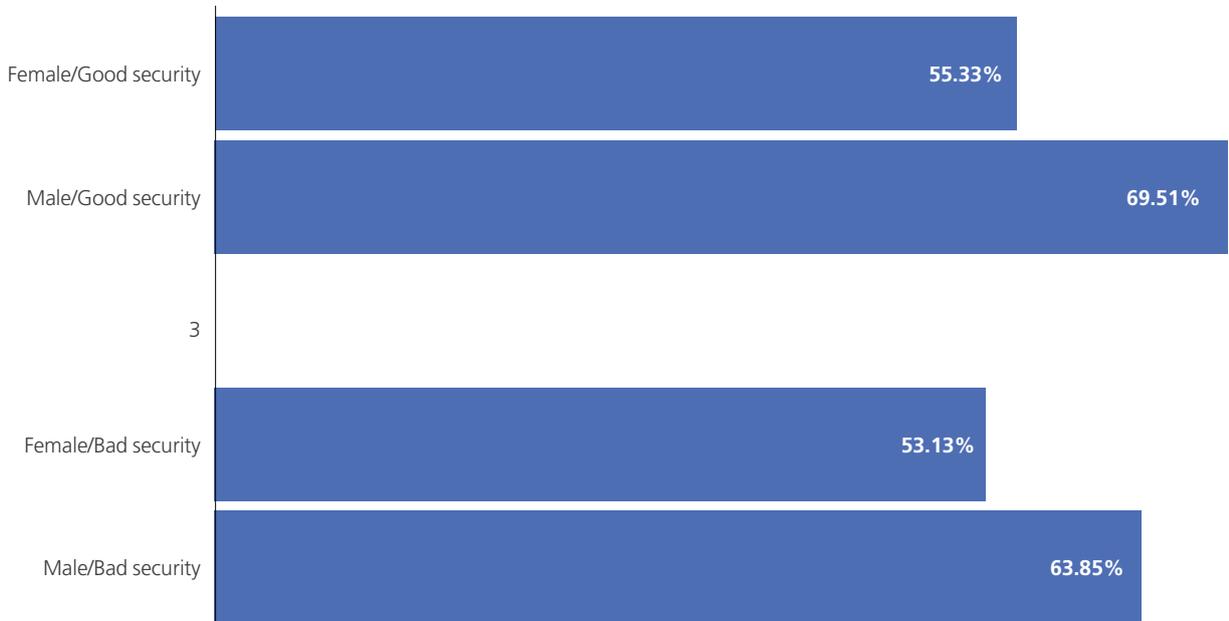
the existence of long-held grievances. Indeed, these results can be explained to a large extent by the responses of

people living in the IDP/PoC sites, where everyday security is notoriously bad, while the feeling of lived injustice is high.

Graph 8: ELEMENTS OF PEACE, BY PERCEPTIONS OF EVERYDAY SECURITY (N=4,480)



Graph 9: SAFETY AS AN ELEMENT OF PEACE, BY GENDER AND PERCEPTIONS OF EVERYDAY SECURITY (N=4,480)

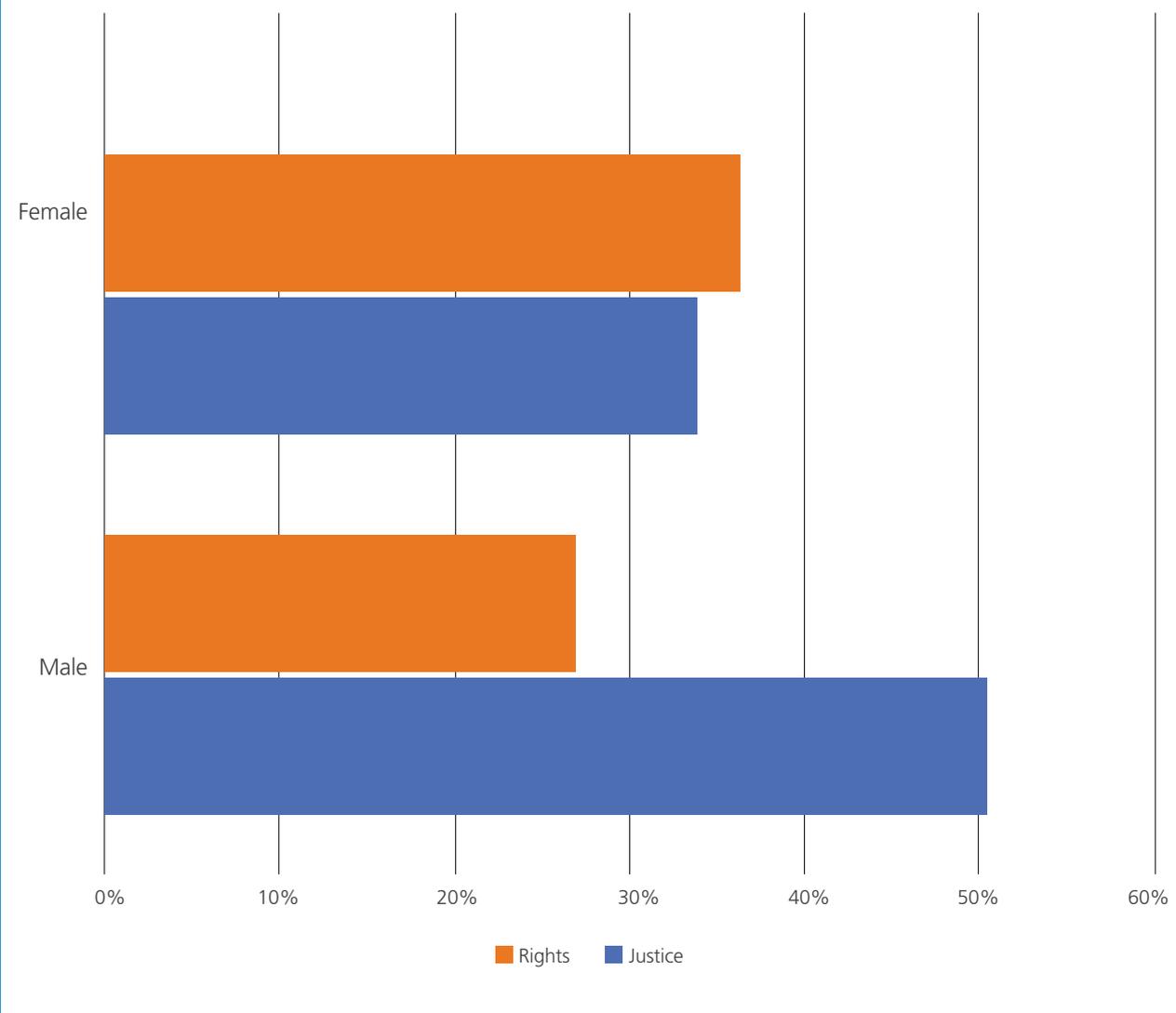


Rights and Justice

When disaggregating these results further, it shows that they are correlating significantly with gender. Men with good everyday security experience rate safety the highest (69.5%), compared with only 53.3% of women with bad everyday security experiences. These results seem to turn commonly held assumptions, whereby women are hit particularly hard by conflict and are thus more concerned about safety than men, upside down. Indeed, these results appear to be more concerned about what people risk losing in a relapse to armed violence, than by thinking of how to improve the given situation further. Men living in a good everyday security situation are the ones who have to lose the most: they face the danger of having to join the fight themselves or become specific targets of armed violence. In turn, those living in bad surroundings are often forced to arrange themselves with bad situations while, at the same time, having to think on how to approve their situation in structural ways.

Two of the structural concerns considered as most important by respondents are rights and justice. These elements sound closely related; however, they reflect different conceptions of peace. While justice remained undefined for the question of the elements of peace as rights, a term that was only disaggregated at a later stage (see below), it is likely that respondents see it as a response to injustice done to them in earlier stages of the conflict: be it physical atrocities committed to them, be it displacement and land grabbing, be it political marginalisation. Interestingly, the respective perceptions are highly gendered (see Graph 10): men perceive justice as far more important than rights (50.4% vs 26.9%), women prefer rights to justice, albeit by a smaller margin (36.4% vs 33.8%). These results point towards a possibly higher trust in rights-providing institutions by women, while men may tend to see rights as insufficient to satisfy existing justice claims.

Graph 10: JUSTICE VS RIGHTS AS PILLARS OF PEACE, BY GENDER (N=4,482)



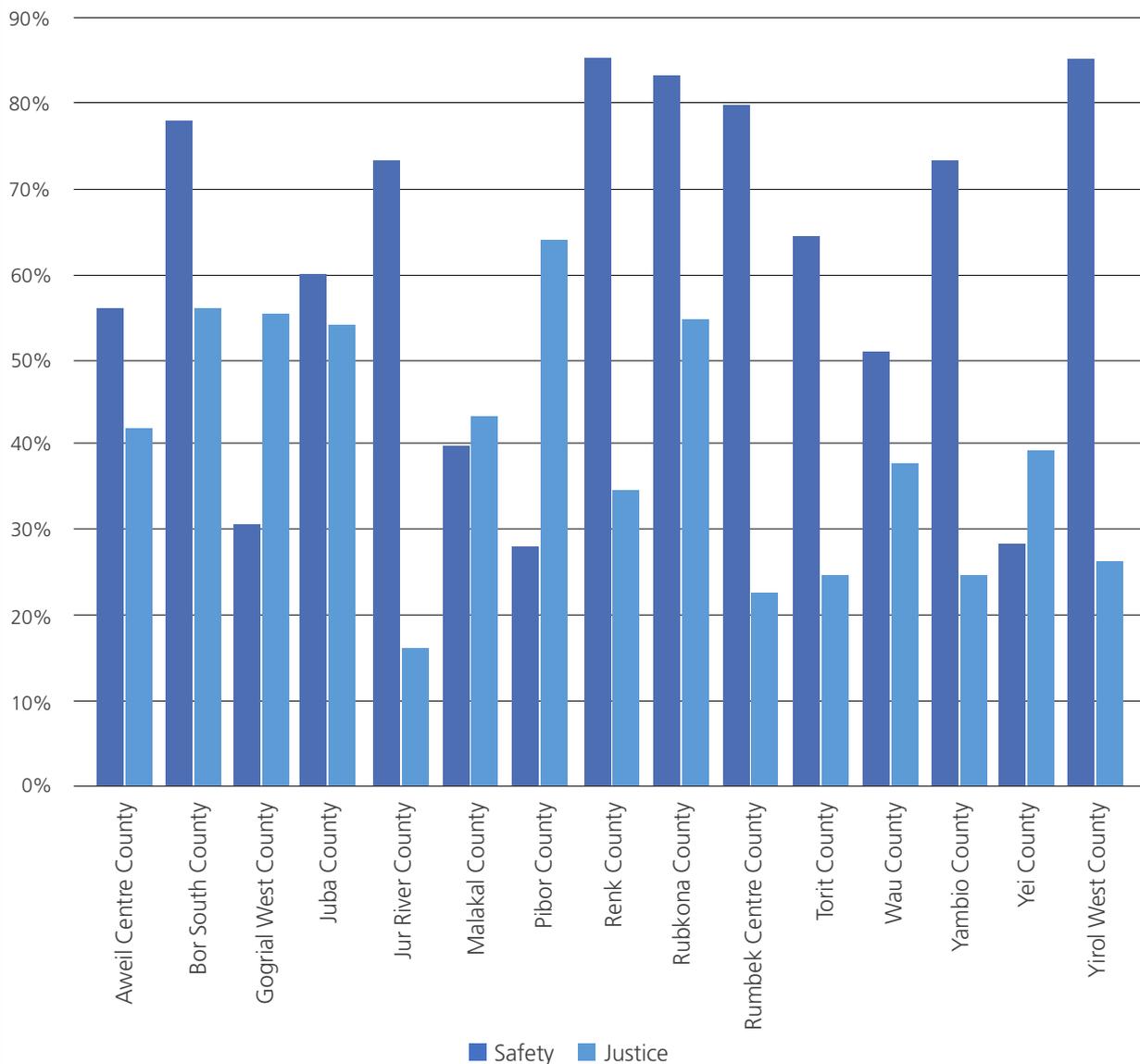
When comparing the importance of safety and justice, there are also considerable differences. Particularly striking are the regional differentiations (see Graph 11) that reflect the peculiar conflict histories of communities. In general, there is a correlation whereby a higher importance given to justice results in a lower importance of safety and vice versa. Particular cases in point are the counties in Lakes State – Rumbek Centre and Yirol West – where safety concerns dominate over justice claims, which seem to reflect the particular experiences and the current governance situation in the state (see the case study on Rumbek Centre further below).

On the other hand, places with a large population of internally displaced, such as Malakal, Rubkona and Juba, and places with a particular history of violent contestation, such as Gogrial West and Pibor with strong traditions

of violent cattle raids, and the national capital Juba, the epicentre of political infighting and land disputes, see justice raised as a pillar of peace far more strongly.

Against this background, inquiring further about the rights component gives additional insights about the substantial divergence between justice and rights as elements of peace. The compliance with laws, an essential component of any rights-based approach, emerges as the main challenge. When asked whether people would comply with the laws (see Graph 12), respondents voiced overwhelmingly negative perceptions. More participants (32.1%) felt that compliance with the laws was ‘somehow low’ in their communities, with a further 24.3% feeling that compliance was ‘very low’. In comparison, only slightly above 40% of respondents saw the compliance as ‘somehow high’ or ‘very high’.

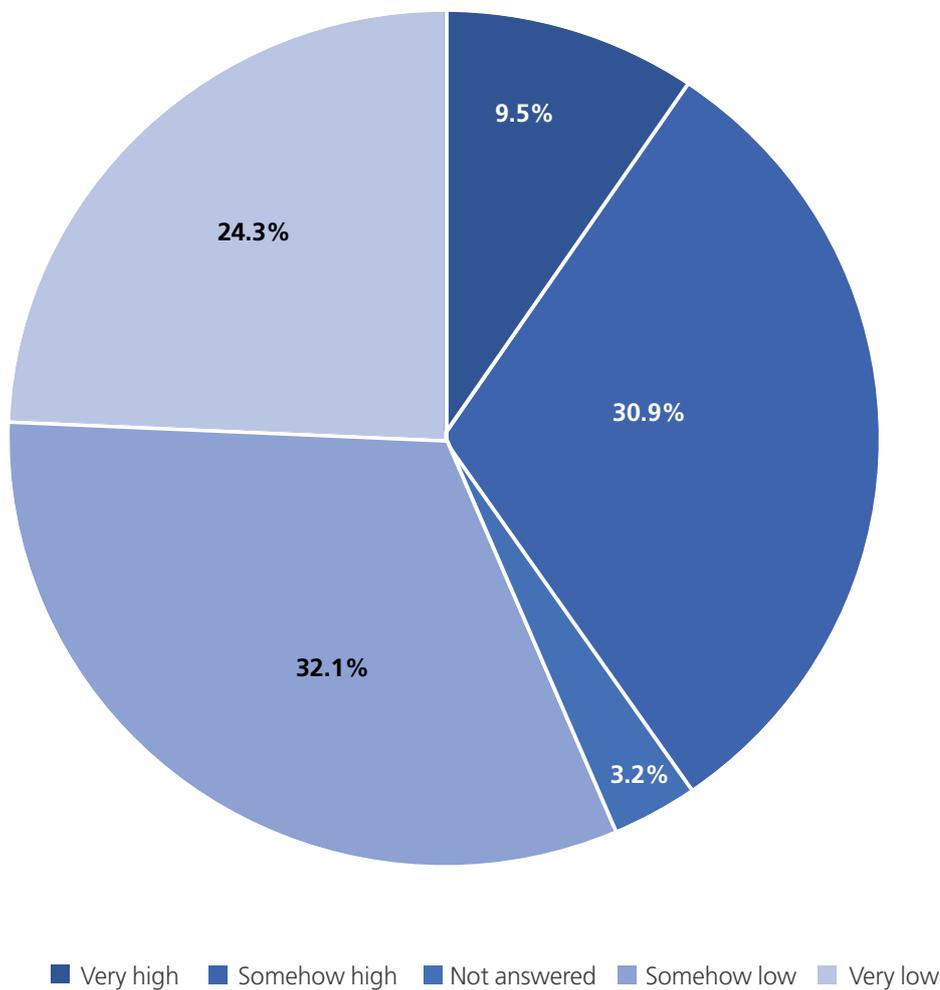
Graph 11: SAFETY AND JUSTICE AS ELEMENTS OF PEACE, BY COUNTY (N=4,482)



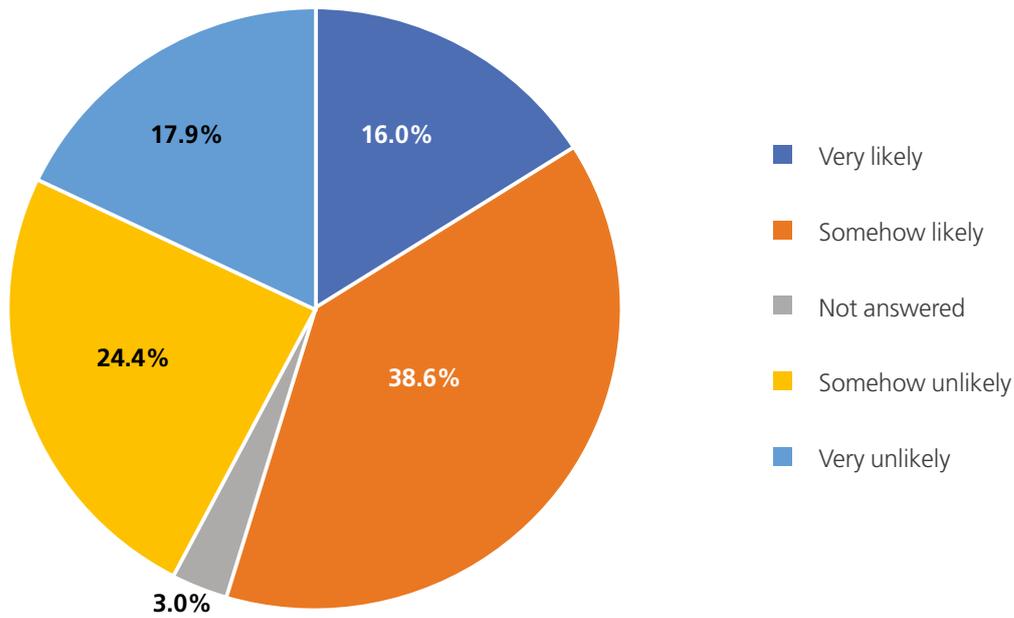
On the positive side, Gogrial West (34.7%) and Jur River (31.6%) were more upbeat about 'very high' compliance with the laws. Participants from Yambio (0.5%) and Yei (0.9%) felt otherwise. Interestingly, these results do not reflect the importance given to justice issues in these localities – the compliance with laws impacts the importance given to rights but is not able to have significant influence on understandings of justice. The exception are participants from IDP Camps, where the compliance with laws is considered as being 'very low' by a majority of respondents (38.1%), which seems to be reflected in the high relevance given to the justice component of peace.

The variations may be also related to the level of stability and the functioning of national and state institutions in those respective locations. Yei, for instance, has seen intense violent conflict between the government forces and the SPLA-IO since 2016 until 2019 and the law enforcement and justice institutions have been affected severely as a result. Jur River County, a county in Western Bahr el Ghazal State, in contrast, is currently under a popular governor whose administration of the state has been exemplary. Justice and law enforcement institutions may have benefited from her rule as a result, hence the more optimistic opinions of the participants there.

Graph 12: PERCEIVED COMPLIANCE WITH LAWS (N=4,482)



Graph 13: CRIMES DEALT WITH BY THE JUSTICE SYSTEM (N=4,482)



To further enquire about legal compliance, respondents were asked about their perceptions of the likelihood that crimes would be dealt with by the justice system in their communities (see Graph 13). Unexpectedly, the results are higher compared to the previous question. Law enforcement appears to be in a better state than law compliance. A majority of respondents (54.6%) see it as, 'somehow' or 'very', 'likely' that crimes will be dealt with by the justice system, compared to 42.3% with a negative view.

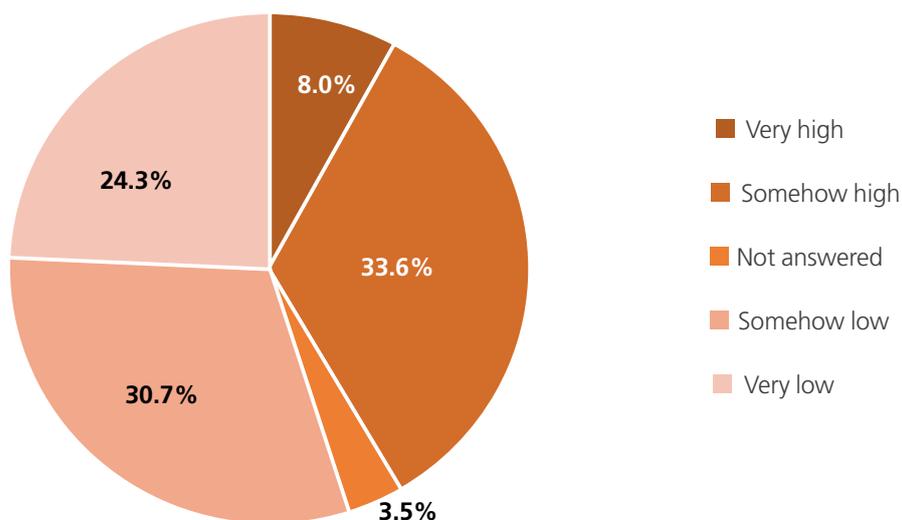
Answers confirm, however, that the perceived functionality of the justice system is related to the contextual surroundings: the most optimistic places, namely Aweil Centre and Renk, have had a longer history of low levels of armed violence and fairly effective governance, compared with other parts of the country. There are also stark differences between urban settings and IDP/PoC camps. It is obvious that most government institutions in South Sudan are based in towns and residents can easily access them. The IDPs may have fled to the camps for their safety because the state was not able to protect them in their original habitat, hence their opinion.

Human Rights

As shown above, rights play an important role in people's conceptions of peace, albeit they do not rank in the two top spots. The challenges in implementation and enforcement may have likely contributed to this assessment. While the implementation of laws by courts is seen positively by most respondents, this picture changes when looking at human rights – a much more general and encompassing form of rights compared with laws that, regularly, are enforced by traditional authorities.

Asked whether respondents thought if human rights are being guaranteed in their communities (Graph 14), 41.6% of respondents tended to positive views, compared with 55% voicing scepticism. Apart from Renk (42.1%) in Upper Nile State, the rest of the counties that have confidence that their rights would be guaranteed were all from Greater Bahr El-Ghazal, the region where the main bulk of the current political elites who rule the country is coming from, with Way, Yirol West, and Rumbek Centre showing positive results.

Graph 14: TO WAR EXTENT ARE HUMAN RIGHTS GUARANTEED IN YOUR COMMUNITY (N=4,482)

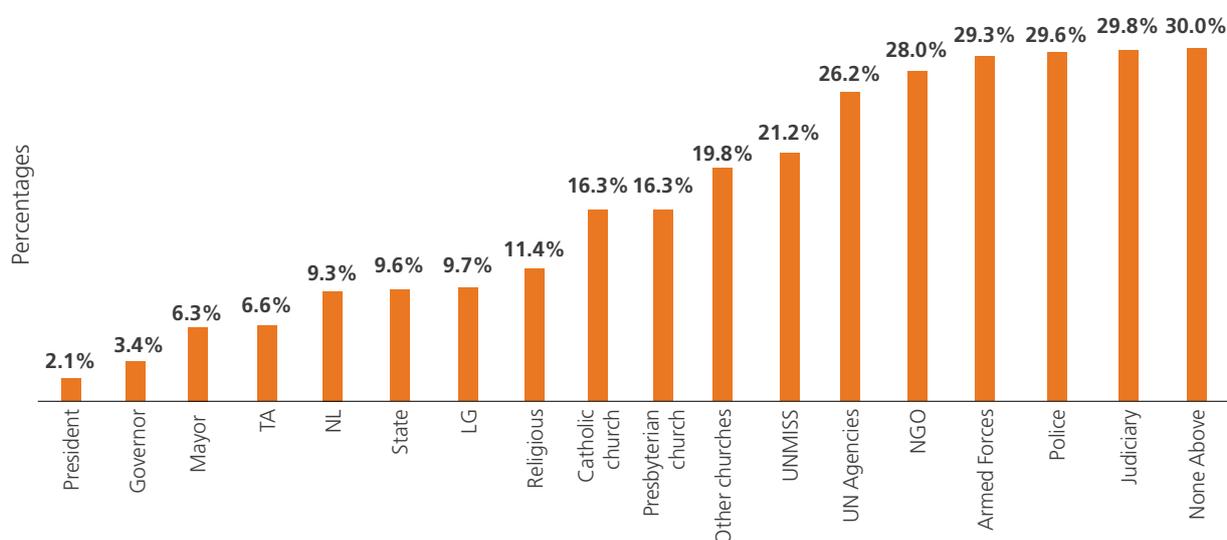


These responses again follow the trend that counties which did not experience high levels of insecurity are more positive about their human rights being guaranteed. Apart from the localised conflicts, most part of Bahr El-Ghazal region were not affected by the conflicts of 2013 and 2016.

The responses regarding the institutions playing a substantial role in ensuring safeguarding human rights in their communities (see Graph 15) showed surprising insights. Thirty percent of the participants did not name any institution that would guarantee human rights in their communities, which is a sobering result. Highly interesting is the divergence between government and state institutions of law enforcement. While the judiciary

(29.8%), the police (29.6%) and the armed forces (29.3%) have the comparatively highest rates, the President (2.1%), the Governor (3.4%), and the mayor (6.3%) have the lowest acceptance. In contrast to the qualitative part of the research (see below), that gives traditional authorities remarkable relevance in all aspects concerning peace, only 6.6% of survey respondents see them in a role of safeguarding human rights. It could be that people locate traditional authorities less in the rights and more in the justice realm. Results vary widely across regions. In Gogrial West, for instance, the area where the President is coming from, astonishing 88.5% of respondents see the President as the most important institution to ensure human rights.

Graph 15: WHAT INSTITUTIONS ARE SAFEGUARDING HUMAN RIGHTS IN YOUR COMMUNITY (N=4,482)⁴



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

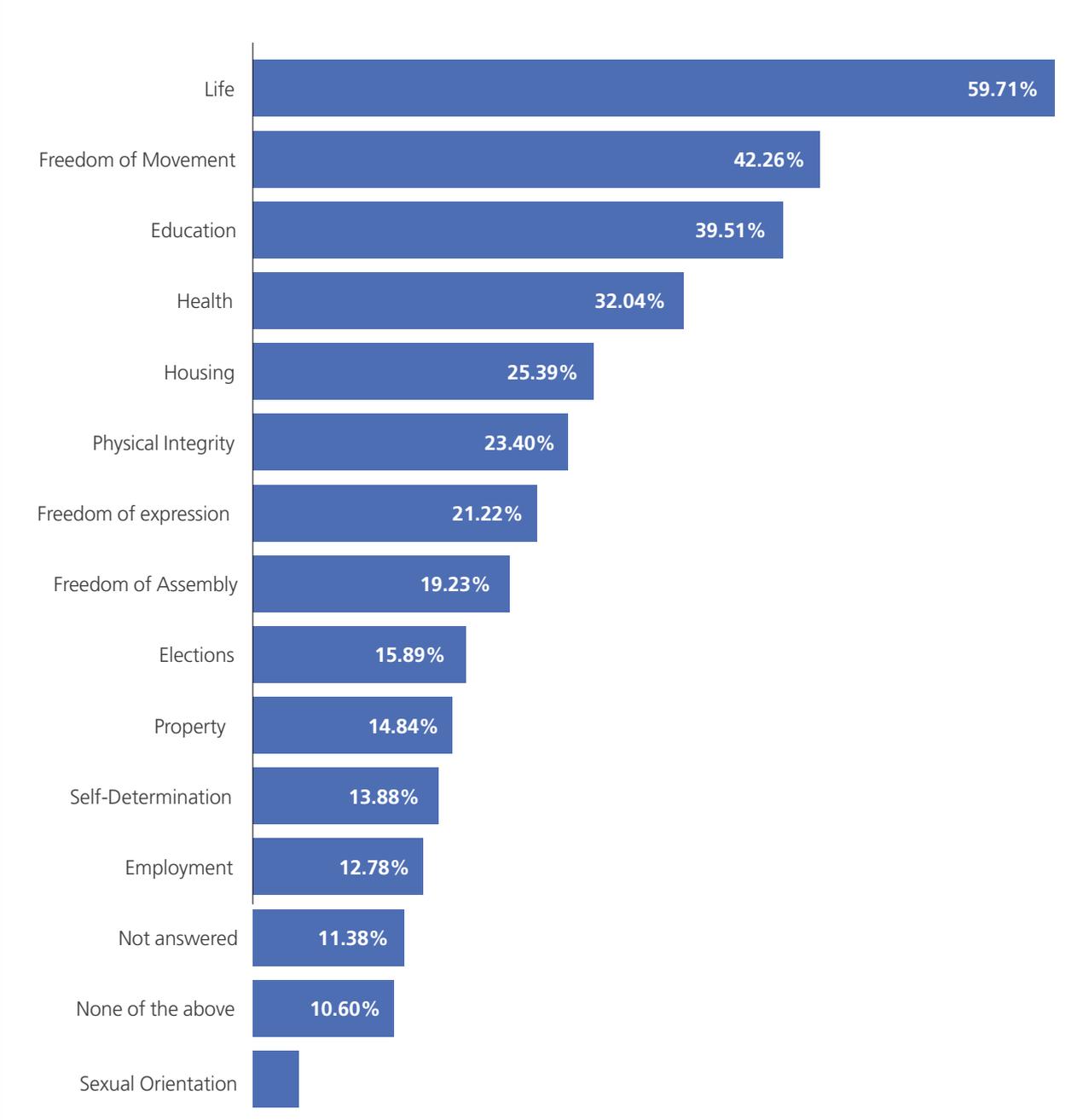
The armed forces not only ranked high as an institution that safeguards human rights, it came also out on top regarding those institutions endangering human rights in the communities, with 37% of the respondents pointing their way. This shows the highly contested character of the armed forces, which is often characterised by personal affiliations as well as subnational conflict settings. In any case, the answers underline the dominant role the security apparatus plays in the country.

Unsurprisingly, other state institutions follow, most strongly, the state (22.6%) and the Office of the Governor (21.7%). Apart from those in the IDP Camps, where most participants thought that the president (43.3%) endangered human rights, the armed forces led the way with rural areas

(42.5%), IDP Camps (39.5%) and urban areas (29.8%) scathing about them.

Which specific rights are protected (Graph 16) and not protected (Graph 17) in communities showed some contradictory results, with the most prominent and well-known rights featuring prominently in both queries. While there may be a certain order bias in the options presented to the respondents at play, the most prominent choices are telling. While to right to life dominates the answers in terms of protection (59.7%), freedom of expression is the most raised right that is endangered (named by 50.1% of respondents, with multiple answers possible in both questions).

Graph 16: WHAT TYPES OF HUMAN RIGHTS ARE WELL-PROTECTED IN YOUR COMMUNITY (N=4,482)



In terms of the protected rights, life is the only element that was named by more than half of respondents, with freedom of movement, education, and health named by roughly a third and above. All other rights were only mentioned by a quarter of respondents or less, with physical integrity (23.4%) and property (14.8%) being of particular concern. Overall, the trust in human rights protection is low.

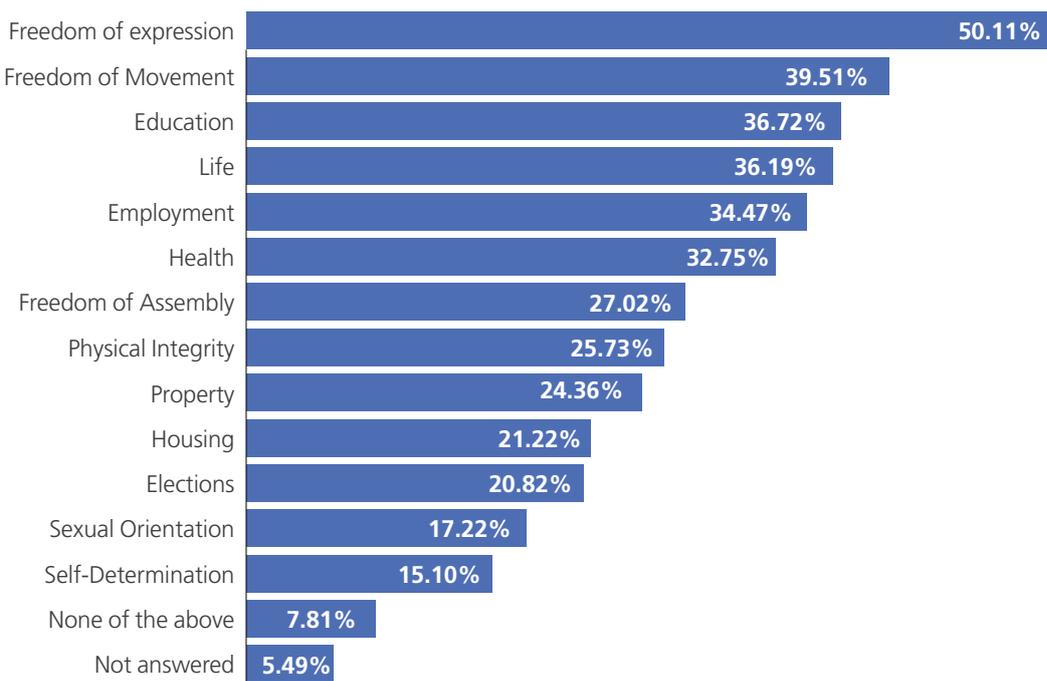
The high prominence of freedom of expression among the endangered rights is a strong statement concerning an open political environment that is conducive to holding free and fair elections, which are, as of current, scheduled for December 2024. Answers on the endangered, not protected rights are more wide-spread and seem to reflect the particular circumstances of respondents. Apart from freedom of expression, employment is the second right that stands out negatively, with few respondents seeing it protected while a high number seeing it endangered. Interestingly, the right to life is, in comparison, seen as the most positive right in terms of its protection. This can be seen as a reflection of the low (official) execution rate of the death penalty but is nonetheless surprising given the substantial number of extra-legal killings in some parts of the country.

In general, the views of the participants of the survey seem to reflect the environment they are in. Participants in the places affected by the conflicts are critical about the role of the government institutions in safeguarding their human rights, for instance. This is in contrast with the participants in more stable counties especially in the Bahr El-Ghazal region. Importantly, the conceptions of peace raised by the participants of the survey appear to reflect experiences that are predominantly collective and long-term, which contrasts with the more immanent impact of everyday security experiences when assessing the peace process and the effectiveness of peace actors.

While the assumptions whether current surroundings are peaceful and secure, overall, do not have considerable influence on people’s conceptions of peace, regional and gender differences have, as well as the surroundings. Male conceptions of peace appear stronger oriented towards safety and justice, whereas female conceptions, while acknowledging these factors, have a stronger focus on rights and reconciliation elements. The regional differences seem to reflect long-standing grievances, neglect, but also specific histories of violence. Generally, the trust in state institutions is low, which is reflected in the main elements of peace and might explain why the element of rights is not considered as being as important as safety and justice. These results highlight the difficulties a peacebuilding approach resting mainly on state building will have to face in South Sudan.

The Elements of Peace: Reflections

Graph 17: WHAT TYPES OF HUMAN RIGHTS ARE NOT PROTECTED IN YOUR COMMUNITY (N=4,482)



Peace and Transformation of Armed Violence: Experiences from the Regions

Given that the conflicts in South Sudan are diverse and experienced differently across the country, pinpointing a single or a set of mechanisms applied at the national level is not practicable. Understandings of peace are highly diverse, as are connected needs and expectations. These assessments are confirmed by the responses by participants of the qualitative study component from the four counties selected as the case studies: Malakal, Rumbek, Yambio, and Yei. The following section will provide insights in the views of those actively engaged in peacebuilding, for instance, through advocacy campaigns, peace dialogues, and radio talk shows.

No Justice, No Peace: Malakal County

Malakal County is one of the thirteen counties in the Upper Nile State. Its administrative headquarters is Malakal town, also the capital of Upper Nile State. It has been at the epicentre of ethnopoliticised conflict, involving the four major communities, Shilluk, Dinka, Nuer and Maban.



Map Upper Nile State showing Malakal, the administrative capital of Malakal County © VOA

These ethnic groups have had their historical grievances against each other exacerbated by the national politics. The inter-communal tensions have repeatedly escalated over the control of Malakal town, once a cosmopolitan environment. These disputes also reflect political contestation at the national level. The allegiance of the Shilluk people has shifted over the years from government to SPLM-IO and back, hostilities between them and the other communities has never stopped. When the Shilluk people side with the government, they would fight the Nuer, and when they side with the SPLM-IO, they would fight with the Dinka.

Maban and Shilluk are predominantly agriculturalists while Dinka and Nuer mainly practice pastoralism. The inhabitants of this county also do fishing along the Nile River and its tributaries. Apart from limited trade among the communities, most of the fish and farm produce is for subsistence. However, the level of instability coupled with climate change has kept these communities on survival mode. In July 2023, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) categorised Malakal County in the 'crisis' level (OCHA 2023). In March 2023, the national Ministry of Health also declared a cholera outbreak in the county (WHO 2023). These things indicate the vulnerability of the citizens of this county as a result of the persistent conflicts there over the years.

The county holds the last protection of civilians (PoC) site in the country after the others were emptied or redesignated as internally displaced peoples (IDPs) sites (Harragin 2020). When the war broke out in 2013, Malakal town was overrun by the Sudan People's Liberation Army in Opposition (SPLA-IO) and many residents sought refuge in the United Nations Mission in South Sudan's (UNMISS) protection of civilians (PoC) sites. The PoC is a shelter within the UNMISS camps housing those who fled from the government or other armed group for fear of persecution. Although Malakal was quickly recaptured by the government forces after heavy fighting, the town and its environs are still deemed insecure for the residents to go back to their places of origin. The tribes not aligned to the government and its allied militias feel more insecure to venture out of the PoC. Over the years, the PoC has come under attack from various groups including government forces and its allied militias (Kebebew 2023).

The issue of returnees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Malakal County has compounded the problems facing the county already. According to REACH (2023) report, 10,000 people new arriving from Sudan residing between the Bulukat transit centre, the PoC, and Malakal Town while an unspecified number were at the airport area and the mosque. Before that, there were about 18,000 IDPs from northern Jonglei State and 22,000 more from the other areas in Upper Nile State residing in Malakal town (ibid.). The outbreak of the war in Sudan in April 2023 has compounded the refugee crisis. Displaced people

from Sudan, mostly South Sudanese returnees, have come through or settled in the state.

Climate change has already had significant impact on the county. Many people were displaced from the neighbouring counties and are now sheltering in Malakal town adding to the existing strain on and competition for the limited resources, jeopardizing the fragile security situation the county. Flooding in northern Jonglei has also resulted in population movements to Malakal. Sometimes viewed as a disguised landgrab by the inhabitants of the county such as the Mabanese, the movements for people to the county has become a flashpoint adding to the already existing insecurity in the county.

Efforts to transform the conflict situation have struggled to produce tangible results. UNMISS may not enjoy the same trust from all the communities in the Malakal County, but opening its gates to those whose lives were at risk in the initial days of the conflict in 2013 and setting up the PoC should not be underestimated as a gesture of impartiality. Building on this, it is engaged in continuous patrolling and has also tried on many occasions to conduct peace dialogues among the communities there (Levine-Spound 2022; Caragounis 2021). Some international NGOs are engaged in peacebuilding activities, however, due to its chronic instability, Malakal is considered to be a too risky investment for many. The predominant focus of most NGO activities remains at the grassroots level, as the highly politicised ethnopolitical contestation is hard to address.

Religious institutions play a significant role. They organize and take part in peacebuilding efforts within the county (Caragounis 2021). Often seen as nonpartisan, they command respect from the citizens. Malakal County hosts heads of churches such as the Catholic Bishop of the Diocese of Malakal. Local authorities, such as the State Ministry of Peacebuilding, are engaged in such work as well but suffer from a severe shortage of resources. The Shilluk of Malakal County are also subjects of the King Dak Padiet and is highly respected by his subjects. However, his

Religious institutions, often seen as nonpartisan, play a significant role. They organize and take part in peacebuilding efforts within the county (Caragounis 2021).



possible role in peacemaking has been made difficult under the circumstances. Many parties have sought to enlist the king's support during the conflicts and have rendered his position to be seen as partisan.

To assess the views of people in the country, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) conducted three focus group discussions and fourteen key informant interviews (totalling to 44 participants of 23 females and 21 males) between 13 – 16 June 2023 in addition to the perception survey. The participants were drawn from traditional authorities, Ministry of Culture, Youth & Sports, legal practitioners, religious leaders, elderly, internally displaced persons (IDPs), businesspeople, persons with disability (PWDs), women groups, youth groups, Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare and the media.

Asked about what peace meant to them, participants mentioned 'development', 'absence of war', freedom of movement', 'security', 'living in harmony' as their main priorities. In turn, when asked about the opposite of peace, the answers given above about peace were flipped by the participants: they talked about 'war', 'insecurity', and 'lack of development'. When identifying the fundamental elements of peace, 'security', 'absence of tribalism', 'justice', and 'employment' were highlighted. These mentions reflect the survey results for Malakal County, where the elements of justice (43.4%), safety/security (40.3%) and reconciliation (39.1%) dominate.

The high relevance of justice in relation to safety and security is surprising at first glance, especially given that Malakal County has seen two intense episodes of war in 2013 and 2016. This may point to the high number of unresolved conflicts about land, especially related to the territorial claims of Shilluk, Dinka, and Nuer, and shows the necessity of tangible mechanisms to sustainably address rights-related issues for conflict transformation to prevail. Less surprising is the high relevance of development. Malakal town was the probably most developed town in Southern Sudan before independence but has suffered significantly through the armed conflict. Much of Malakal town has been destroyed during the conflict. Neighbourhoods have been razed to the ground, the airport is in a dilapidated state, the Upper Nile University was closed for years. In short, development has not been an option or has been rolled back during the war, and participants want to see this changed.

Asked about the indicators to analyse changes with regards to peace, participants talked of 'people/IDPs returning to their homes', 'improved security', 'functioning of basic services'. Many people in Malakal County have been displaced by the war to other countries such as Ethiopia and Sudan. While some IDPs have sought shelter in the UNMISS' PoC site in Malakal town, it is not surprising that they feel that the return of people to their places of origin would

be an indicator of peace. Since most basic services such as schools and medical services have been affected since the war started, having them up and running, especially in a context where these amenities have been in place before, would also indicate that peace has returned.

Queried on the institutions that they believed represented or worked for peace in their community, participants named 'political parties', 'NGOs', 'religious institutions' (mainly the church), 'UNMISS', 'community leaders/chiefs', and the 'Ministry of Peacebuilding'. The strong relevance of political parties is surprising given the overall low credibility of parties across South Sudan. One potential explanation is the political diversity in state and county administrations, which may lead participants to think that political accountability is a comparatively strong factor.

In their assessment about methodological approaches, reconciliatory steps ranked high, especially 'awareness raising', 'preaching peace', 'loving others', 'forgiveness'. The high ethnopolitical contestation that undermined inter-communal trust explains these answers. Hence, as the most important concrete steps, 'forgiving each other', 'equal distribution of resources', 'avoid cattle raids', 'avoid tribalism', 'reconciliation', and 'civic education on peace' were raised. These answers point towards the linkage between inter-communal distrust and competition over scarce resources. Allocating these resources equitably and to the right owners in Malakal County could go a long way in reducing tensions in the county.

When queried about important laws or rules in the community, participants mentioned 'the Constitution of South Sudan', 'customary laws', 'Labor Act'. The Constitution of South Sudan provides many rights for the citizens in the South Sudan. But these are hardly accorded to its citizens. Malakal County is no exception but when the participants mention it, it shows that the citizens there know their rights are enshrined in it. The South Sudan Labor Act 2017 has been referenced many times by the youth involved in labour disputes with mostly aid agencies (Craze 2018). These disputes with aid agencies have sometimes disrupted their operations across the country and led to more suffering of those most in need. Yet, it should not be forgotten that these aid agencies' jobs are part of the South Sudan's political economy and have been the cause of conflicts between the locals and the aid agencies (Craze 2023; 2018).

On whether these laws are complied with, unexpectedly, most participants thought so. This is confirmed by the perception survey data, which confirms that Malakal ranks as one of the most law-abiding counties in South Sudan in the perception of its citizens. This is surprising for a county that has seen wars for the most parts of South Sudan's independence, and it would be safe to think that the rule of law has broken down in the county over the years.

Against this background, the responses point towards a highly organised and politicised level of violence that is less connected to criminality and more to a contestation about claims and rights that may be seen by many as justified.

Regarding the institutions that the participants had confidence in in their community, majority mentioned 'church'. Other named the 'Office of the Governor', 'NGOs' and 'UNMISS'. Surprisingly, the 'armed forces' were also named by some participants, which is a substantial divergence from other case study counties and the national survey results. Also, Malakal had more participants stating their confidence in the office of the governor among the four case studies. This may indicate that the former or current governor (both appointed after the signing of R-ARCSS) are popular in the county. The lack of confidence in the judiciary and police, in turn, may indicate lack of trust of the citizens in these law enforcement institutions and a possibility of breakdown of rule of law in the county given the prolonged conflict and deterioration of the capacity of the government to support these institutions. The army took over the role of the police while judiciary may not have a greater role to play as accountability was not prioritised during the war and in the implementation of the R-ARCSS.

The notions and concepts of peace in Malakal County are as diverse as the conflicts there. Many participants indicated that they have confidence in the Office of the Governor along with institutions such as the church, NGOs, UN/UNMISS and traditional authority in contributing to peace and conflict resolution in their community. Despite having been at war for many years, a majority of participants still perceived that the laws were being complied with in their

community. The high relevance of justice points towards the severely politicised context of the conflict in Malakal, especially related to competing claims by contested communities. While community reconciliation ranks high, the responses show that the peace/justice-link rests at the core of conflict transformation in the county.

Security First: Rumbek Centre County

Although Rumbek Centre County has never directly experienced civil war in its territory after South Sudan's independence, it has never been left out in discussions about conflicts in the country. Subnational conflicts have marred it for years until they subsided after the appointment of Governor Rin Tuany Mabor to oversee the affairs of Lakes State. Rumbek, the administrative headquarters of Rumbek Centre County and at the same time the capital of Lakes State, holds a symbolic significance in the country's history. Until the signing of the CPA in 2005, it acted as the de facto capital of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) after being recaptured in 1997 from the Sudan Armed Forces (Reliefweb 2005). During that time, most of the top-ranking SPLA commanders were stationed there. It shows the symbolic importance of Rumbek to the ruling SPLM party. Any conflicts that would destabilize the county and the adjacent areas are seen as priority by the President (Sudan Tribune 2015).



Map of Lakes State showing Rumbek, the administrative capital of Centre County © VOA 2015

Rumbek Centre County is made up of mainly Dinka Agar sub-sections, mainly agropastoralists rearing livestock and cultivating crops for subsistence. Apart from the livestock sold in the local market, the county is dependent on food imports, mostly from Uganda. Subsistence agriculture has suffered greatly because of insecurity as young men could not cultivate as they would be easy targets of revenge killings (Muwangala 2019). Women and girls who do most of the domestic work were also subjected to rapes when tending the farms. This has contributed to a decline in agricultural production. Resource scarcity in the county contributes to competition for the little available exacerbating existing conflicts. This competition is mostly manifested through cattle raids and land disputes among the youth of Rumbek Centre and also between them and those of the bordering counties.

The County is governed by Dut Manak Akuot, a member of the South Sudan Opposition Alliance (SSOA) (Emmanuel 2022). Although the population is made up of predominantly SPLM supporters, the R-ARCSS power-sharing arrangement and allotment of the posts consigned Rumbek Centre under SSOA. However, Governor Rin Tueny, a military general representing the SPLM, still controls all major affairs of the county (Pospisil 2023). Under Rin Tueny's governorship, security in the whole state has vastly improved. It seems that he has found a formula, albeit at a cost of human rights, to control the conflicts across the state – Rumbek Centre County inclusive.

Rumbek Centre County experienced a volatile and highly violent period before Governor Rin Tueny was appointed in 2021 (The East African 2021). The norm was a vicious cycle of inter- and intra-communal conflicts related to cattle raids (Wild et al. 2018), revenge killings, and land (cattle camp) disputes among and between the youth of Rumbek Centre and other counties. Long-standing issues are the feud between the Kuei and Rup over the ownership of the Marial-bek cattle camp (Reliefweb 2013) and the land contestation between the Pathiong of Cueibet County and the Rup of Rumbek Centre County.

Other conflict factors are long-standing hostilities between community youth based on raiding activities that go on for generations, especially pitching Rumbek Centre against the neighbouring counties of Cueibet, Rumbek East and Rumbek North. The prevalent raiding culture drags pastoralist youth into the search of quick riches by raiding and stealing cattle from other communities. Exorbitant bride price charged on young men who want to marry is thought to be one of the driving forces behind cattle raids and theft (Udier 2019; Pospisil et al. 2024). The interests from the different actors to influence or start these conflicts is a contributing factor. Politicking among elite figures of rivalling Dinka clans has been a continuous element, especially since it often goes along with kinship mobilization along community lines (McCrone 2021; Watson 2021).

For the resolution of these conflicts, people strongly rely on traditional authorities and non-state actors. The role of chiefs is vital in settling conflicts related to land, cattle theft, and other social issues such as adultery. The imposition of 'wanh alel' (Leonardi et al. 2011) rulings administered by local chiefs have become standard practice in resolving local disputes. More sophisticated and grave issues such as inter-county cattle raids and murder cases, however, are resolved by the county authorities such as the County Commissioner, County Judge, and the security apparatuses, often by applying extra-legal means. The role of community leaders including spiritual leaders cannot be underestimated. Symbolically, their presence in peace initiatives lend them great weight and have been used by the county authorities and aid agencies to try and legitimize the peacebuilding processes (UNMISS 2014). The decisive difference in recent years, however, has been the authoritarian approach of the governor, which has helped reduce the frequency and intensity of these conflicts (Pospisil 2023), albeit the sustainability of this approach remains doubtful.

The contribution of international partners in peace transformation in the Rumbek Centre is significant. UNMISS has a large base in Rumbek and conducts regular patrols to conflict hotspots in a bid to diffuse tensions within the communities. Along with other aid agencies working on peacebuilding activities, the mission supports dialogues among communities as part of their community violence reduction (CVR) initiatives.

For assessing the peace perceptions on the county in addition to the survey data, FES conducted three focus group discussions, fourteen key informant interviews (totalling to 44 participants of 23 females and 21 males) in Rumbek between 15 – 19 July 2023. The participants included government actors, authorities (e.g., justices of the peace, traditional authorities, elders) and members of the civil society, human rights organizations, religious groups, victims, displaced persons.

Under Rin Tueny's governorship, security in the whole state has vastly improved. It seems that he has found a formula to control the conflicts across the state – Rumbek Centre County inclusive.



According to Deng et al. (2022), over three-quarters of participants surveyed in 2022 from Rumbek Centre believed that the prospects for peace in South Sudan in the coming three years was 'very good', which is the most optimistic response in a country-wide comparison, reflecting the impact of Rin Tueny's security-first approach. His priorities reflect the priorities raised in the consultations. When asked about the concept of peace, 'absence of violence', 'absence of war', and 'freedom (of movement, and be able to do anything you want without being attacked or killed)' have been mentioned prominently. The opposite of peace was seen in more complex ways, with elements such as underdevelopment and the destruction of lives and property raised. These references reflect challenges in food production in the past, as young men feared being killed when they go farming while women were susceptible to rapes (Mwangala 2019).

The fundamental elements of peace highlighted by the participants in Rumbek Centre confirm this assessment: 'safety', 'tranquillity', 'stability', and 'forgiveness' rank first. These sentiments are backed by the survey data, where respondents in Rumbek Centre County ranked 'safety' (80.5%) highest, followed by 'welfare' (44.9%) and 'tranquillity' (43.2%). It is not surprising that the participants thought highly about safety and tranquillity in a county that has experienced rampant violence. The mentioning of welfare suggests that communities may now feel that the next focus by the county government should be shifted to the provision of basic services such as livelihoods for the communities residing in the county.

Participants' views on how to recognise peace were on factors such as 'freedom (of movement, to do farming)', 'children going to school', and 'no highway robberies', which, again, confirms the above-mentioned findings. When queried on the institutions that work for peace in the county, majority of respondents named the 'Office of the Governor', 'church', 'non-governmental organisations', 'chiefs/traditional authorities'. As highlighted by Pospisil (2023), the appointment of Rin Tueny as the Governor has brought stability to a volatile state although he has deployed draconian approaches to achieve this goal. His rule and peace have been synonymous and the respondents of this county rate him highly as a 'peacemaker'. It therefore speaks to how peacebuilding, by its beneficiaries, is often defined along narrow boundaries (Kurtenbach 2017).

Interestingly, when asked about their personal contributions, views turned towards reconciliatory approaches. Responses ranged from 'awareness raising', 'spreading messages of peace/preaching peace', 'forgiveness', 'reconciliation'. These answers appear more straightforward but thinking about how one would take up the initiative to raise awareness or spread the message of peace are dependent on the role one plays in the community. It would be easy to do so when you are a church leader, for example, unlike when you are a farmer or a cattle keeper especially in

times of hostilities with other communities as they are unable to travel freely from your community to another. For now, Rumbek Centre is in the state of notable pause in violence and these initiatives could yield further dividends in cementing peace in the communities through spreading messages of peace and awareness raising about benefits of peaceful coexistence.

Participants' opinions with regards to the most important steps to achieving peace centred on '(civilian) disarmament' and 'justice for victims (of violence)'. The arms proliferation has been a perennial problem in the region (Radio Tamazuj 2020) and has been at the centre of Rin Tueny's peacebuilding approach, despite the often highly contested character of disarmament campaigns. The mentioning of justice is an interesting proposition, since Rumbek Centre ranks second lowest (22.4%) among surveyed counties whose participants thought about 'justice' as an important element of peace. Undeniably, however a lack of justice for victims of violence has led to more violence as civilians have taken law into their own hands in order to avenge for lost relatives who feel that justice was not be served when they were aggrieved. Mobile courts supported by partners such as United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) cannot fill all the void (UNDP 2019). Attempts by the governor of Lakes State to administer justice in ways such as fire squats have been blamed for being heavy-handed and not following due legal procedures although they have acted as deterrents (Pospisil 2023). Participants may have felt that more is needed beyond what the partners and the current governor are offering in order to have a lasting peace in their communities.

The vast majority of participants who were asked about the rules/laws that they thought were important for peaceful co-existence in their communities mentioned 'customary laws'. Although Rumbek has county and high courts, the most popular places for adjudication of community disputes are the traditional courts headed by local chiefs. They are easily accessible and less bureaucratic. They are also conducted in open air where everyone in the community is allowed to listen to arguments of both sides and the rulings are also passed in the same setting.

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Most common and violence-igniting cases such as elopement and adultery are settled by the traditional courts through 'wanh-alel'. To underscore the importance of traditional courts, the Lakes State Parliament passed the Lakes State Customary Laws in 2022. Although some the articles are controversial, the law underscore the importance of the traditional authorities in administering justice in the county. On whether they can foster peace, people in Rumbek Centre seem to agree, as they also think that laws are widely abided.

With regards to the confidence in local, national and other institutions, the majority of the participants named 'office of the governor', 'church', 'NGOs'. Other notable mentions included 'UNMISS' and the 'army'. This is in line with the national survey data. As discussed earlier, Rin Tueny has gained remarkable popularity by eradicating violent conflicts in areas under his jurisdiction. Rumbek Centre has benefited immensely from this in terms of security and stability. The approach relies on a large contingent of organised forces, including the army, supporting the Governor in his attempts to restore law and order. His success has largely been through the use of these forces. Hence, the popularity of the governor can also be linked to the popularity of the armed forces and the other security personnel he is in charge of.

In sum, the views of the participants in Rumbek Centre County with regards to peace and the relevant institutions for conflict transformation are shaped by the long episodes of armed inter-communal violence. A security-first approach dominates, with the highest trust put into the

State Governor. The role of rights, in contrast, is limited. Interestingly, reconciliation appears to play an important role at the interpersonal and intercommunal level, which points towards the implicit insight of many that a heavy-handed security approach alone may be insufficient to achieve sustainable peace.

Safety and Reconciliation: Yambio County

Yambio County is one of the ten counties making up Western Equatoria State, containing the state headquarters. It borders Lakes State to the North and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to the South. Yambio town, which is also the capital of Western Equatoria State, was the first major town in Southern Sudan liberated by the SPLA in the early 1990s. Despite numerous attempts by the government of Sudan to recapture it through sustained bombardment and sending forces by road from Wau, the SPLA held onto it until the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed in 2005. However, national and subnational conflicts have persisted there since 2006.

The major ethno-linguistic group in the county is Zande, the third largest group in South Sudan as well (Small Arms Survey 2016).



Map of Western Equatoria State showing Yambio County © Google Maps

The town is also the seat of the Zande king, Peni. With Yambio town being the state capital and the biggest administrative and commercial hub in Western Equatoria, the population is diverse and contains refugee contingents from CAR, the DRC, Eritrea and, more recently, Sudan, in the Makpandu Refugee Camp. Commercially, it exports teak through Uganda.

As part of the 'Equatoria greenbelt zone', the county is a regional breadbasket and has moderate temperatures because it receives rainfall almost throughout the year. It is known for its fertile soils. The main crops in the state are maize and cassava. Although, due to the armed violence in the area, especially after 2016, agricultural production declined, making the county food insecure over the years.

Yambio County has experienced episodes of violent conflict since 2006. The intensity of these conflicts rose sharply after 2016, when the SPLA-IO established presence in the county through current Governor's Alfred Futuyo's Arrow Boys militias. Political power wrangling and ethno-political tensions with Dinka and Nuer communities contributed to the conflicts in the county. The disputes are always a mixture of local and national issues, with Yambio becoming one of the centres of the often-violent contestation between the SPLM and the SPLM-IO.

When the 2016 crisis erupted in Juba, Futuyo and the Arrow Boys pledged allegiance to the SPLA-IO after their demands, especially the relocation of State resources towards the Balanda, were not met by the then-Governor of the Western Equatoria State, Patrick Zamoi, a Zande loyal to the SPLM leadership. The political tensions between these two politicians inflamed ethno-political tensions between Balanda and Zande. They remain prevalent to this day (Craze 2023c). These rivalries led to severe infighting in the State, especially in 2021, when violent conflict broke out between Balanda and Zande in Tambura, an area claimed by both tribes. Scores were killed and many more were displaced.

The intervention of civil society organisations and church leaders, finally, calmed down the situation. Further interpersonal power conflicts, especially between the newly appointed Minister of Presidential Affairs, Joseph Bakasoro, and the Speaker of the TNLA, Jemma Nunu Kumba, both senior Zande politicians, could contribute to further intercommunal feuds (Boswell 2019).

Attempts to arrest the conflict situations in Yambio have yielded mixed results. Church-mediated talks between the armed splinter group South Sudan National Liberation Movement/Army (SSNLM/A) and the government through the National Security Services (NSS) in the area were a success, although the SSPDF, under their former Chief of Staff, General Paul Malong Awan, tried to scupper them (Small Arms Survey 2016). General Malong of the SSPDF

and General Akol Koor Kuc of the NSS, although both proteges of President Salva Kiir, have always been rivals and sought to stand in each other's way. This played out in these talks as the SSPDF tried to sabotage the talks but attacking the bases of the SSNLM/A during the phase of a ceasefire (Small Arms Survey 2016).

Actions by international actors, especially UNMISS and international NGOs present in the area, helped to reduce community tensions. National civil society and community-based organisations played a substantial role in these efforts (Mbugo 2017). While such mediation efforts have contributed to reducing the tensions in the county, there appears to be an uptick of political tensions in the county in the forefront of the national elections, which is underlined by the appointment of Joseph Bakasoro as Minister of Presidential Affairs in late 2023.

To understand how inhabitants of Yambio County espouse the notion of peace, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) conducted three focus group discussions (FGDs) with total number of thirty participants (ten each FGD), fifteen key informant interviews in addition to the survey data. The sex aggregation of the participants was 27 females and 18 males. These stakeholders were drawn from the Office of the Mayor, Yambio County Judiciary, interfaith groups, Seventh Days Adventist Church, civil society organizations, elders, traditional authorities, women, youth, Human Rights Commission, Conflict Resolution Commission, internally displaced persons from Tambura County, gender-based violence survivors, and the Yambio County Islamic Council.

Asked about their conception of peace, participants prominently mentioned 'love among people', 'living in harmony', 'happiness', 'good security', 'freedom of movement to the farms/without fear', 'absence of conflict/violence', and 'development'. Given the severe political tensions among senior politicians in Yambio, especially in Yambio town where the seat of the state government is based, the fuel inter-communal distrust, these answers are hardly surprising.

Actions by international actors, especially UNMISS and international NGOs present in the area, helped to reduce community tensions.



Historically, hatred among these figures based on their political affiliations has triggered down to the grassroots level, where citizens have been pitted against each other leading to deadly conflicts (Craze 2023c). People appear tired of being dragged into power contestations that bring them no benefits. It is against this backdrop that the participants may feel that peace would mean loving each other – not just the politicians alone but also the citizens.

The opposites to peace for participants in Yambio were ‘death’, ‘child abuse’, ‘hearing gunshots all the time’, ‘killing of people’, ‘insecurity’, ‘war’, ‘poverty’, ‘land disputes’, and ‘displacement’, which reflects the brutal character the war has taken in the region. There were killings, a lot of people were displaced from their villages to Yambio town for fear of being killed or abducted. Participants experienced firsthand what it is like to live through war. The fundamental elements of peace confirm these assumptions: respondents talked about ‘love’, ‘good security’, and ‘development’, which reflects the survey results, which revealed that respondents in Yambio County viewed ‘safety’ (73.7%), tranquillity (47.8%), and welfare (31.6%) as the most important elements of peace.

The indicators to analyse changes to and identify peace include ‘access to farms’, ‘no gunshots’, ‘rate of rapes reduced’, ‘free movement’, and ‘electrification of town’. Most of the citizens in Yambio County are agrarian (FEWS NET 2018) and, thus, depend on farming for their livelihoods. But ever since the conflicts have gripped the county for years now, farmers have not been able to freely move, till their land, and access the markets. Transport has become a significant issue. These challenges are reflected in these answers and explain the high relevance of issues such as access and free movement.

The institutions most trusted to work for peace include ‘chiefs/traditional authority’, ‘judiciary’, ‘CSOs’, ‘UN’, ‘women and youth groups’, ‘UNMISS’, ‘religious groups’, and ‘NGOs’. Again, the highly important role of chiefs and traditional authorities in peacebuilding is confirmed. Like in most other parts of the country, the role of the religious institutions in preaching peace and trying to make sure that conflicts are addressed is vital. The role of the non-governmental organisations, especially those working on peacebuilding, is also seen as crucial. In contrast, the role of the Zande king could have gone a long way in remedying disputes in the county. The problem of him only representing one tribe limits his authorities towards other communities, such as the Balanda. A Zande-to-Zande feud would be ideal for his intervention.

Asked about their personal (potential) contributions to peace in their community, the most common answers were ‘build good relationship with other people’ and ‘(taking part in) dialogues’. These answers underpin the highly elite-

dominated socio-political context in Yambio. People do not seem to see a role in wider conflict resolution attempts ranging beyond the interpersonal level. Elites appear to call the shots. Citizens in Yambio County could be essential to peacebuilding processes but have been left on the periphery most times.

Asked about what the most important steps were to achieve sustainable peace in their community, participants mentioned ‘creating awareness about peace’, ‘keeping soldiers in the barracks’, ‘proper security’, and ‘avoiding tribalism’. Armed forces have become part of the lives of the people in Yambio County that they have been battling all sorts in anti-government elements. In the process, they have committed various atrocities against the communities they were supposed to protect (HRW 2016). This is the context in which the participants would want to see them going back to their barracks, as they have become a threat to the communities’ peace. Participants also clearly rejected tribalism. Most senior politicians in the region have attempted to play the tribal card to their advantage. The participants believe that avoiding using tribalism in Yambio County as a political tool would be a necessary step along the path of achieving sustainable peace.

On the most important rules and laws in their community, the majority of participants ranked customary laws as the most important. This view reflects that, in Yambio County as well, minor disputes among citizens are settled by the local courts. Also mentioned was the ‘South Sudan Constitution’, which appears to reflect a desire for a functional national order. Pressed on whether the rules and laws applied to all citizens, the majority of the participants answered with ‘yes’. Some dissenting voices, however, raised that these rules and laws applied ‘only to the poor’. By contrasting this statement to the events in the whole country, it underpins the assumption that elites who have committed crimes during the wars in the country for which they have never been held to account. It is also the case with those accused of corruption, who too go unpunished.

Asked about what institutions the participants had confidence in within Yambio County, majority of the participants named ‘church’, ‘NGOs’, ‘UN’. Surprisingly, others also named the ‘armed forces’. Fewer participants had confidence in the ‘office of the governor’, which is unsurprising in an SPLM-IO governed state that hosts popular SPLM politicians. The survey results largely confirm these findings with ‘religious houses’ (45.9%), ‘traditional authorities’ (43.1%), and ‘NGOs’ (28.2%) ranking prominently. There appears to be hardly any trust into the armed forces (0.5%). The mixed feelings of participants about the armed forces could be because of their dual role in the conflicts in the county: on the one hand, they appear to be protecting the citizens of the county even by taking up the role of the police force.

On the other hand, they are accused of committing crimes against civilians in their fighting with the non-state armed groups operating in the county. The popularity of the church among the participants is apparent given its perceived neutrality and the role it plays in mediating the local peace processes in the county.

Although the views about the notions of peace from the participants in Yambio County vary, they point to the fact that the impact of conflicts on them is direct and felt hardly. The high importance of the ability to move freely can be explained by this fact. At the same time, there appears to be a feeling of lacking political influence, despite – or also because – some senior political figures of both government and opposition come from the area. When political influence seems limited, interpersonal elements seem to gain in importance.

Peace Implementation: Yei County

Yei County in Central Equatoria State look back at a dynamic conflict and peace history. The county receives rainfall almost throughout the year. It is part of the South Sudan's 'greenbelt zone', bordering Western Equatoria and the Democratic Republic of Congo. With its fertile soils, it is one of the breadbasket counties in the country in terms of agricultural production. However, after the start of the second phase of the civil war in 2016, Yei's name became synonymous with gross human rights violations committed by the conflict parties against the civil population. As a result, many of its citizens fled to seek refuge in camps in Uganda.



Map of Central Equatoria State showing Yei County © wikipedia

Sometimes known as “Small London” by those who reside there, Yei town, the headquarter of the county, was liberated by the SPLA in 1997 in a bloody battle. Its capture provided morale to the SPLA and in the same period, towns such as Rumbek, Tonj, Yirrol were captured from the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF). It was also one of the most bombed towns in southern Sudan by the SAF's Antonovs after its capture. The town went on to house most of the SPLA commanders during the later years of the Sudan civil war until 2005, when the Southern Sudan government's seat was transferred to Juba, the current capital city of South Sudan. Until now, many the SPLA generals of the civil war era still have large tracks of land, sometimes with extensive buildings, that they own in Yei town.

While the largest population group in Yei are Kakwa, the county has seen movements of IDPs from Greater Bahr El-Ghazal and Greater Upper Nile in the course of the wars (Justin and Verkoren 2021). Especially, Bor Dinka from Jonglei settled in the area from the early 1990s as a result of armed infighting in their home territories after the SPLA Nasir split. This settlement of people from other regions in the country is a source of conflict as settlers from other regions are accused of land grabbing (Justin and van Dijk 2017). In addition to the receiving rains throughout the year, the county is also endowed with fertile soils that are ideal for subsistence and cash crops production.

The local Yei market, supplied by the villages around it, is always stocked with fruits and vegetables such as mangoes, bananas, and spinach. Crops like maize and cassava are produced as well. According to OCHA (2015), before the 2016 conflict the county was one of the least food-insecure places in the country. Some of this teak plantation grows in Yei County. Since the war broke out in the county in 2016, illegal teak logging has become commonplace (The East African 2018).

Yei County does not follow the typical template of the South Sudanese conflicts. It has its own dynamics and actors driving these conflicts. The geneses of these disputes are subnational as much as they are national. Unlike other counties in the country which have seen wars of varying magnitude before the country's independence, Yei County was safeguarded by the Ugandan army in the first period of the South Sudanese civil war. However, issues ballooned into fully-fledged war in 2016. Used by the SPLA-IO forces as a hideout after fleeing Juba, they tapped into local grievances and recruited disgruntled youth into their ranks to fight the government forces.

The main source of intercommunal tensions in Yei County, again, relates to land (Justin and van Leeuwen 2016; Johnson 2014), with disputes existing among local communities as well as towards settlers from other regions, mainly in Yei town. Some prevalent land conflicts with long histories are those between Lugori and Yondu about

the contested area of Alero along the Yei-Kaya Road and between Somba and Morsak clans in Goja Boma of Otogo Payam over a land leased to an investor by the Somba elders but claimed by the Morsak (Justin and van Dijk 2017). There are also unresolved boundary issues around Yei, especially with the neighbouring county of Lainya, fuelled by disputed land claims.

Yei County is also the territorial centre for the National Salvation Front (NAS) militia, which has, so far, rejected to sign a peace agreement with the government. The leader of the group, Thomas Cirillo, a former SSPDF general, cited the marginalisation of Equatoria as the reason for his rebellion and, therefore, has been fighting for a federal system of governance where powers would be devolved to the local communities. NAS has been able to attract sympathising youth in the county who joined its ranks after the SPLM/A-IO signed the R-ARCSS in 2018.

Despite these challenges, the current security situation in the county is improving (Deng et al. 2023). In mitigating and resolving violent conflict, the role of traditional authorities has been key. Customary courts have been complemented by statutory courts over the years. Hybrid governance (traditional/informal and formal systems) in resolving disputes remains a common practice in Yei County (Justin and Verkoren 2021). The most complex cases such as homicides are settled by the statutory courts while minor issues such as cases of elopement are settled by local chiefs. This arrangement helps in reducing backlog of caseloads in the county. Giving in to local as well as international pressure, the government has installed court martials for the government's security apparatuses who were accused of committing rapes and other abuses against the communities in Yei County.

A traditionally strong role in conflict mediation and resolution is played by the churches, especially Christian churches which dominate the county. The Presbyterian Church, for instance, has been involved as the mediator in several local peace agreements in the county.

In mitigating and resolving violent conflict, the role of traditional authorities has been key.



As in other counties, UNMISS and aid and peacebuilding agencies contribute significantly. UNMISS operates a base in Yei County due to the notorious insecurity there, and a number of peacebuilding and aid agencies also have field presence. Initiatives such as peace dialogues among the communities and sometimes between the communities and the security forces have helped reduce some of the existing tensions in the county.

Complementing the insights from the peace perception survey, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) conducted three focus group discussions, fourteen key informant interviews (totalling to 44 participants of which 23 were females and 21 were males) in Yei County between 16 and 19 May 2023. The participants were drawn from traditional authorities, Ministry of Culture, Youth & Sports, legal practitioners, religious leaders, elderly, internally displaced persons (IDPs), businesspeople, persons with disabilities (PWDs), women groups, youth groups, Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare and the media.

The conceptions of peace raised by participants in Yei revolve around matters of everyday security: 'absence of war', 'freedom (of movement)', 'good security', 'absence of violence', and 'no gunshots'. Given the levels of violence Yei has experienced since 2016, these responses from the participants are not surprising. This is underlined by the concepts of the opposite of peace. Here, participants spoke of 'killings', 'rapes', and 'no freedom of movement'. Interestingly, when asked about the fundamental elements of peace, answers were far wider reaching and prominently highlighted elements such as 'justice', 'freedom of expression', 'development', 'reconciliation', 'accountability'. The justice elements underscore a feeling of being dragged into violence people had no substantial stakes in, and a strong feeling of the civil war, as a project, being unjust in itself. The focus on development is also not surprising, given that Yei had been a bustling business town before the war, with an almost near-constant electricity power supply. In the course of the war, all that was gone.

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Interestingly, the focus on rights and justice was confirmed by the peace perception survey. Here, respondents chose rights (43.3%), justice (39.3%), and happiness (38.8%) in that order as the most important features. These views contrasted a bit with the other 15 counties surveyed where majority chose safety (61.4%). 'Movement', 'functional markets' and the 'provision of educational services' are the most important components by which participants can identify peace. Also here, however, there are elements that suggest a proper implementation of transitional promises, especially the 'return of refugees', 'low crimes', and 'no curfew'.

Yei has the reputation of being a county with a low trust in the government. The responses on the question of which institutions represent or working for peace confirm this assumption. Participants listed 'civil society organizations (CSOs)', 'United Nations agencies', 'UNMISS', 'community leaders', 'churches', 'army', and 'County Peace Committees'. CSOs, UNMISS, and the church have played an important role throughout the times of war in the county. Through their humanitarian interventions and peacebuilding initiatives, they stood with the people of Yei in times of need. The trust put in the army is somewhat surprising but might be a result of recent efforts of civil-military dialogues that are pursued by a number of civil society actors.

On what one could do to contribute to peace in their community, participants provided answers such as 'awareness raising (about the importance of peace)', 'radio talk shows', 'not spreading hate speeches'. The later answer is interesting. Hate speech has been a characteristic of the South Sudanese civil war. People have spewed hate messages mainly on social media platforms, mostly by those in the major towns in the country and the diaspora to advance tribal ideas or plan violence (Ferroggiaro 2018). Starting from an individual level, refraining from hate speeches could make a great difference in creating a peaceful South Sudanese society. The answers also confirm the awareness about the dangers of ethno-political tensions in Yei, a traditionally multicultural place.

The most important steps to achieving sustainable peace in their community, 'unification of organized forces', 'repatriation of soldiers', 'disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR)', and the 'payment of organized forces on time' were raised as the main component. These answers are interesting in two respects. First, Yei County has had a large number of armed forces since the war started there in 2016. The armed forces' presence in the county is always a reminder of the ills they committed against the civilians there. To minimize the chances that a fully blown civil war would erupt again and to reassure that citizens that the forces there would not subject them to inhumane treatment that happened before, the participants feel that the removal of these armed forces from the county

would quell these fears. Secondly, the answers show a high awareness towards the implementation of the security-related provisions of the peace agreement. In particular, the unification of forces and DDR have to be mentioned in that respect, answers that set Yei somewhat apart from the other case study counties.

Asked about the most important rules or laws for the community or for peaceful coexistence, the respondents mentioned 'customary laws', 'land laws', 'by-laws', which, again, confirms the high relevance of customary law to resolve community disputes and the importance of land-related issues. On whether these laws are abided by everyone in their community, respondents in Yei County had mixed reactions. Some said 'yes', others said 'yes, but....', while some indicated that they were 'not applicable to all'. These varying views on this question are understandable given the breakdown of some institutions during the war and the still unequal application of legal procedures in the county.

The above-mentioned distrust in government institutions is confirmed by answers to the question in which institutions people have the most confidence in. The most frequent answers were 'church', 'NGOs', 'UN', and, again, surprisingly, 'armed forces'. For the NGOs, UN and church, their role is obvious, and it is understandable why many participants have confidence in them because of

their contribution to humanitarian and peacebuilding activities in the county. Similarly, the survey data for Yei County regarding institutions that the participants thought protected human rights in their communities, the religious houses (55.3%), UNMISS (36.5%) and UN Agencies (32.4%) led the way. Since armed forces and police scored very low in the survey (1.4%), it is likely that the answers in the interviews and focus groups are shaped by more recent efforts of trust building between military actors and the communities that reflect more positively on peacebuilding-active participants, who might have more direct exchange with the SSPDF.

Putting these responses into perspective, peace is conceived differently by the participants in Yei County. Issues related to return of refugees, for example, rank high. The role of the churches, UN agencies and NGOs in peacebuilding activities is highly acknowledged by the participants given how they think about them. Issues of accountability and reconciliation also are of considerable importance, as are, importantly, issues regarding the reform of the security sector. Yei seems to keep a safe distance to institutions of national and even local government, while still demanding a proper implementation of the national peace deal with consequences that are to be felt in the immediate surroundings. Interestingly, the felt distance to the government seems to render peace as a more safety-led but also implementation-led affair.

Conclusions

Throughout its history, South Sudan has experienced violent conflicts at different levels. These conflicts have caused immense suffering for its citizens. The conflict actors have also been diverse with many springing up while others disappear based on whether their motives have been met or not. The motivations for the conflict actors are national – political influence, competition for state resources), subnational (land disputes, cattle raids, and revenge killings), and transnational (border land disputes, support for the opposition armed groups fighting against national governments). At times, national and subnational motives have merged and manifested itself through tribal militias and warlords trying to advance the interests of the national elites from the grassroots level.

South Sudan is also a highly diverse context. What happens in one place is not necessarily repeated in another. South Sudanese experience different realities. This is true regarding their social and cultural experiences and livelihoods; this is also true regarding their exposure to armed conflict and violence.



Against this background, the PEACEption study for South Sudan has revealed three main insights:

perceptions of peace are always a reflection of the experienced surroundings,

an institutional diversity of peace actors is required to deal with the multiplicity of challenges and related expectations,

and national peace processes remain naturally fragile in a fragmented context.

First, expectations of peace are, first and foremost, reflections of the experiences of war and violence. In short, the stronger the long-ranging community experiences of violence, the more the importance of personal safety becomes. The more communities feel disadvantaged by allegedly unresolved ‘root causes’ of conflict, the stronger the quest for justice. The more tired communities are of armed violence in general, the stronger the reference to reconciliation. And finally, in more general terms, the more communities are removed from violent experiences, the more diverse and complex the idea of peace becomes.

Overall, how people conceptualise peace remarkably differ from how people assess a peace process and the performance of peace actors. While the latter is mainly

shaped by the personal and more immanent impressions of everyday security, the former appears stronger shaped by longer-term collective experiences. Johan Galtung’s famous distinction between negative and positive peace has to be seen in this light. Negative peace might have a bad reputation but, as the findings of these studies show, communities have experienced a long-term loss of it, the peace becomes an effort of security restoration in the first place. All ‘positive’ peace elements that go beyond the immediate absence of violence are secondary – apart from instances when people believe in a just cause and see violence as partially necessary to achieve this just cause.

Second, the study has also revealed differences in what actors and institutions people trust when they look for peace and peacebuilding. While the church, the United Nations peacekeeping mission and civil society organisations can look at a fair level of trust in most areas, their acceptance is not universal. The trust towards the state and its institutions, especially the armed forces, very much depends on the experiences of people in the respective regions. The only institutions that are trusted in all areas of South Sudan are traditional authorities and their instruments, such as traditional courts and religious institutions. This insight points towards the importance of the local in peacebuilding and, thus, confirms longer-held assumptions by the ‘local turn’ movement in peace and conflict studies (Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013). In general, people trust their own communities to build peace and only then call for external support – and external, in the context of South Sudan, also refers to state actors – when there is an active, negative interference felt working against these local peace infrastructures.

In general, people trust their own communities to build peace and only then call for external support when there is an active, negative interference felt working against these local peace infrastructures.



Finally, these insights point towards the more indirect conclusion that national peace projects, such as the implementation of a national peace agreement in a transitional phase, have to remain fragile in the context of fragmented, highly diverse contexts of challenges to and expectations of peace. This is a given condition and not necessarily a problem as such, when the national level focuses on two primary tasks: the provision of everyday security without an armed and partial interference in subnational conflict settings, and the guarantee of justice claims or, if these are contested, the establishment of credible procedures for their transformation. These assumptions give suggestions for the remaining phases of the transitional period in South Sudan: the unification and professionalisation of the security sector into a non-partisan instrument of security provision is a matter of upmost importance and, probably, more relevant than focusing on implementing the widest possible variety of different elements. The insights of this study recommend focusing on the elements that matter most for people in their everyday lives and expectations.

While the study has fallen short of revealing unanimous elements of peace for the people of South Sudan, it has

still presented important insights. Peace is diverse and a matter of negotiating a variety of expectations that are, predominantly, reflections of collective everyday experiences. This diversity has to be taken seriously and needs to inform both peacemaking and peacebuilding endeavours. For international actors, the probably most important take-away is modesty. Their skillset is often less required than they might think, and the usefulness of external support might remain at a logistical level. Yet also this insight is contextual.

The insights of this study recommend focusing on the elements that matter most for people in their everyday lives and expectations.



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