SSD

PEACEPTIONS

SEARCHING FOR PEACE IN SOUTH SUDAN: HOPE DIES LAST

South Sudan

Sabine Kurtenbach, Jan Pospisil, Anna Reuss

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Recognised as an independent state in 2011, South Sudan is the youngest and poorest country in the world. However, violence and armed conflict have continued, demonstrating how local and national conflicts interact. A Comprehensive Peace Agreement signed in 2018 remains fragile.

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There is a striking difference between how people conceptualise peace and how they assess a peace process and the performance of peace actors. While the latter is mainly shaped by personal and more immanent impressions of everyday security, the former seems to be more strongly shaped by longer-term collective experiences.

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There are wide variations in the actors and institutions that people trust in peacebuilding. While the church, the United Nations peacekeeping mission and civil society organisations enjoy a fair degree of trust in most areas, their acceptance is not universal.

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German Institute for Global and Area Studies
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SEARCHING FOR PEACE IN SOUTH SUDAN: HOPE DIES LAST

South Sudan

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Recognised as an independent state in 2011, South Sudan is the youngest and poorest country in the world. Following secession, a new civil war began in 2013 and ended with a peace agreement in 2018. Some armed actors remain active, and the resulting insecurity is preventing the return of internally displaced people and refugees. The conflicts are intertwined and have pitted elites against each other, competing for power and national resources.

Perceptions of peace reflect the lived environment: Security and justice are the most frequently mentioned elements at the national level. Peacebuilding requires an institutional diversity of peace actors to cope with complexity, and national peace processes remain fragile in a fragmented context.

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Content

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INTRODUCTION – THE CONCEPTUAL APPROACH OF PEACEPTION

The PEACEption project is a collaborative and participatory project between the German Institute for Global and Area Studies, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) in Berlin, various national FES offices, and many local researchers and partners. The overall aim is to identify and analyse the understanding and perception of peace by different actors and the general population in the six countries participating in the study (Colombia, Venezuela, Cameroon, the Philippines, Tunisia and South Sudan).

It was Willy Brandt who coined the famous phrase »*Peace is not everything, but without peace everything is nothing*«. Many political sermons, national and international policy documents postulate »peace« as a goal. This is nothing new; it permeates time and space. However, there are differences in the underlying definitions and concepts of peace, as well as in the answers to the question of how to achieve and maintain peace. Understandings of peace and its goals vary among external and internal actors at the international, national and local levels, as well as among different population groups. Understanding these differences is key to developing context-specific strategies for sustainable peacebuilding.

The project follows a common methodology using the same key concepts in order to set the necessary scientific standards for the comparability of the country studies.

The core of the project is to provide a conceptual framework within which different conceptions of peace can be highlighted and their differences analysed in order to formulate concrete proposals for peacebuilding. The concept of peace is based on three basic functions of any society across time and space, across historical and cultural boundaries: (i) security, i.e. physical integrity; (ii) participation, i.e. individual and collective human rights; and (iii) a set of norms and values that enable constructive conflict transformation. However, the specific forms these three pillars take vary according to historical and cultural legacies as well as political and economic developments, among other factors. From this perspective, peacebuilding is a non-linear and multi-scalar process, shaped by local, national and international developments and dynamics, and by a variety of actors.
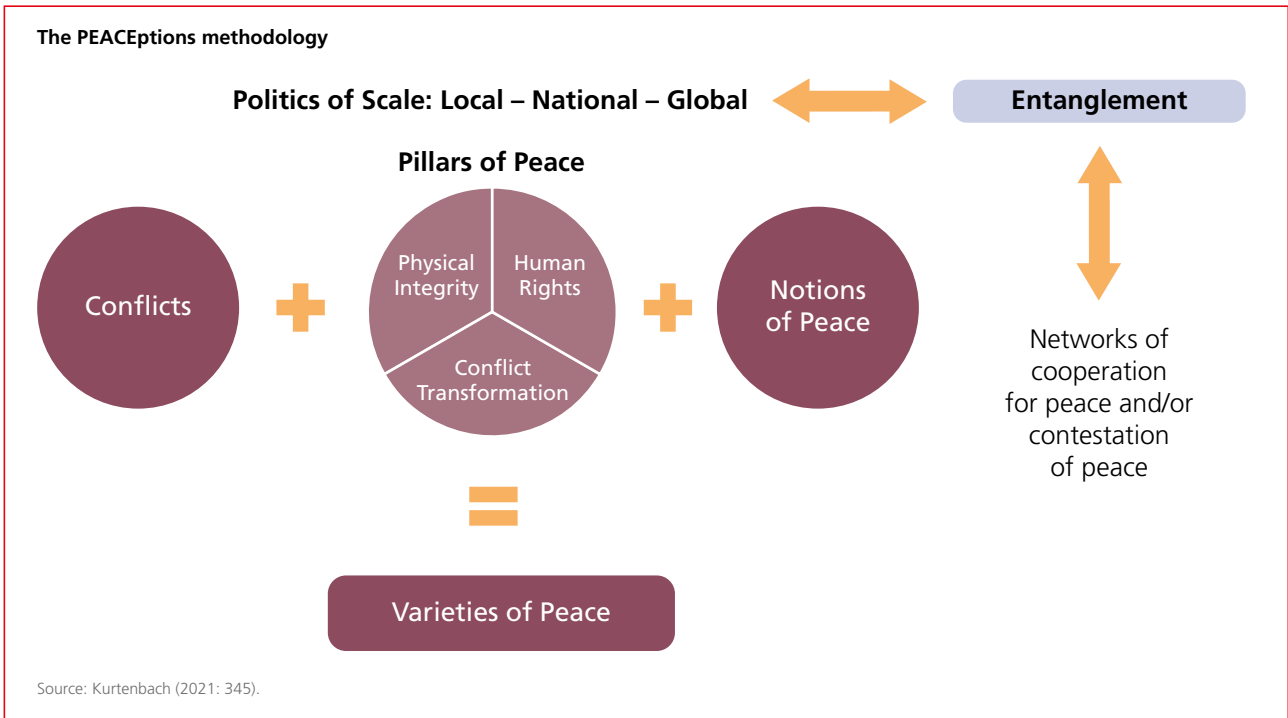
The case studies use a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods. As a first step, the main conflicts (and their actors) are analysed at different levels. Qualitative and quantitative data on the three pillars of peace make it possible to identify deficits but also opportunities for peacebuilding. Quantitative data are drawn from international sources in order to make the results comparable across case studies, while available national and sub-national data are used to complement and deepen the analysis. Qualitative case studies from local contexts of varying degrees of peacefulness provide nuanced information on specific conflicts, actors and contexts. The picture is rounded off by a survey of the prevailing notions of what peace means to different groups of actors at the local, national and international levels, as well as to the state and society (see Figure 1). The survey serves as a baseline for the needs and preferences of the respective society. In South Sudan, the PEACEption survey was embedded in the annual Public Perception of Peace Survey conducted by Detcro and the PeaceRep research programme.

The overall objectives of the project are therefore

– to understand peace by analysing the underlying conflicts and the conceptions of peace of different actors and levels within and between societies on the basis of a consistent framework;
– to assess peace by comparing the status of the three main pillars of peace at the national, sub-national and transnational levels and their interrelationships; and
– to promote peace by developing policy recommendations that can bridge different meanings and conceptions of peace in the cases analysed and more generally for the FES and other actors.

Beyond the policy level, the results of the project can also be useful for the strategic planning of the participating FES offices. They help to analyse the interrelationships and trade-offs between different areas of FES work at the country level and the development of peace as an overarching goal.

The PEACEptions methodology

Politics of Scale: Local – National – Global ⟷ **Entanglement**

Pillars of Peace

Conflicts **+** Physical Integrity | Human Rights | Conflict Transformation **+** Notions of Peace ⟷ Networks of cooperation for peace and/or contestation of peace

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Varieties of Peace

Source: Kurtenbach (2021: 345).

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THE SPECIFIC CONTEXT IN SOUTH SUDAN: THE YOUNGEST STATE[1]

Recognised as an independent state in 2011, South Sudan is the youngest and poorest country in the world. South(ern) Sudan's history has been violent, with varying levels of violence over time. Even before Sudan's independence from Britain in 1956, a southern Sudanese resistance movement, the Anya-Nya, demanded greater autonomy for the southern region (Malwal 2015). In 1972, the so-called Addis Ababa Agreement between the Sudanese government and the Anya-Nya guerrillas granted the southern region federal status. Nevertheless, the war resumed, driven first by a resurgence of the Anya-Nya as Anya-Nya Two, and then by the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) led by John Garang De Mabior, which became the main resistance force (Rolandsen and Kindersley 2019). The second phase of the war lasted over 21 years and brought untold suffering to the people of South Sudan, with an estimated two million lives lost (Wilson Center 2002). It is considered 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. Supported 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 and set out a number of provisions, including recognition of the semi-autonomous status of Southern Sudan, elections to be held three years after the signing of the agreement, and an independence referendum to be held after a transitional period of six years. Following an overwhelming vote in favour of secession from Sudan, South Sudan declared independence on 9 July 2011.

South Sudan's population is estimated at 15 million (IMF 2023). The youth make up the largest portion of the population and face high rates of unemployment. Approximately three-quarters of the population live in rural areas (Guarcello et al. 2011). There are 64 ethno-linguistic groups, each with its own dialect (Madut 2020; see Figure 1). According to the United States Department of State (2021), the majority of South Sudanese (60.5%) are Christian. The remaining 40% are made up of followers of indigenous religions (32.9%) and the Islamic faith (6.2%).

Economically, South Sudan was a middle-income country before the outbreak of civil war in December 2013, boosted by its oil revenues. Since 2015, the country's economic status has been in steady decline (World Bank 2015). The country remains almost entirely dependent on oil revenues as its main export and hard currency earner. Despite this nominal wealth, more than three-quarters of the population are in need of humanitarian assistance (World Bank 2023). Oil revenues have remained firmly in the hands of powerful government officials and some elements of the security sector. Subsistence agriculture and livestock are the main sources of livelihoods. They are also the main sources of conflict, as competition for these scarce resources has fuelled sub-national conflicts.

Politically, the South Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) is the dominant political party. The SPLM is led by the current president, Salva Kiir Mayardit, who has led the government since the country's independence. The political space has remained narrow since South Sudan's independence, with limited room for manoeuvre for other existing political parties. At the national level, power and state resources are concentrated in the hands of the president. All major public office holders are appointed by the president, and resources are also directed to the sectors of his choice (Craze 2023). This creates an incentive for everyone else to try to seize this power and gain access the state coffers, usually by force, as political and civic space has become severely restricted or non-existent.

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1 This reports draws on Pospisil and Kunhiak Muorwel 2024.

3

THE MAIN LINES OF CONFLICT

The conflicts in South Sudan are dynamic and multidimensional. The constellation of actors is constantly changing, and defections of local commanders from the main armed actors are a regular occurrence. It is worth noting that national conflicts are merging into sub-national conflicts and vice versa. Although there are constants (actors and causes) to the endless cycle of violence, emerging challenges such as climate change and the war in neighbouring Sudan have exacerbated existing tensions (Muorwel et al. 2023). National conflicts pitting government forces against rebels are commonplace.

These wars begin with disputes over power and resources, with elites calling the shots (D'Agoot 2020; Koos and Gutschke 2014). Civilians and their livelihoods bear the brunt of these violent conflicts emanating from national actors. They are either caught in the crossfire or deliberately targeted by the forces of the warring parties. Localised conflicts are also taking place in villages and cattle camps, where communities are fighting each other over scarce resources such as cattle and land.

Three main lines of conflict can be identified

- National conflicts: control of power and resources
- Local/subnational conflicts
- Transnational conflicts: border disputes and regional instability

National conflicts have pitted elites against each other. Their main motives have been competition for power and national resources. With little or no accountability, power gives a licence to expropriate national resources to family members and close allies (Craze 2023). The tentacles of this competition for power manifest themselves in many ways. The elite's struggle for power came to a head in December 2013. Two years after the country celebrated its independence, war broke out in Juba and quickly spread, mainly to Greater Upper Nile. Dissatisfied with the state nominations for representatives at the national convention, some SPLM cadres, including the former vice president who was also the deputy chairman of the SPLM, boycotted the meeting, held a rally on 14 December 2013 and denounced the convention. On the evening of the following day, 15 December 2013, fighting broke out between the presidential guards and Riek and Kiir loyalists at the Giada military barracks.

Divisions and conflicts have been fed and fuelled by divisions along ethno-political lines. President Salva Kiir, a Dinka, and his long-time nemesis Riek Machar, a Nuer, have largely relied on tribal loyalties and mediation to advance their agendas, to the detriment of ordinary citizens. Government corruption became endemic and national institutions remained weak, resulting in empty public coffers and a lack of accountability (Craze 2023). Public services deteriorated, with civil servants going unpaid for months. All of these issues have served as fuel for the past and ongoing conflicts.

While a comprehensive peace agreement was signed in 2018, ongoing violence and insecurity are preventing the return of one of the largest numbers of internally displaced people and refugees in the world, with 2.3 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and 2.4 million refugees according to UNHCR (2023).

In addition to the armed violence driven by national issues that has plagued South Sudan, subnational conflicts have claimed more lives alongside the civil wars. These local and subnational conflicts are sometimes ignited or fanned by national politics in what Alex de Waal has called the »political marketplace« (de Waal 2015). Often, tribal sentiments have been amplified by elites at the national level to inflame conflicts in communities to promote self-interested agendas. The following section discusses the different conflicts, their nature, actors, dynamics and impact in each region.
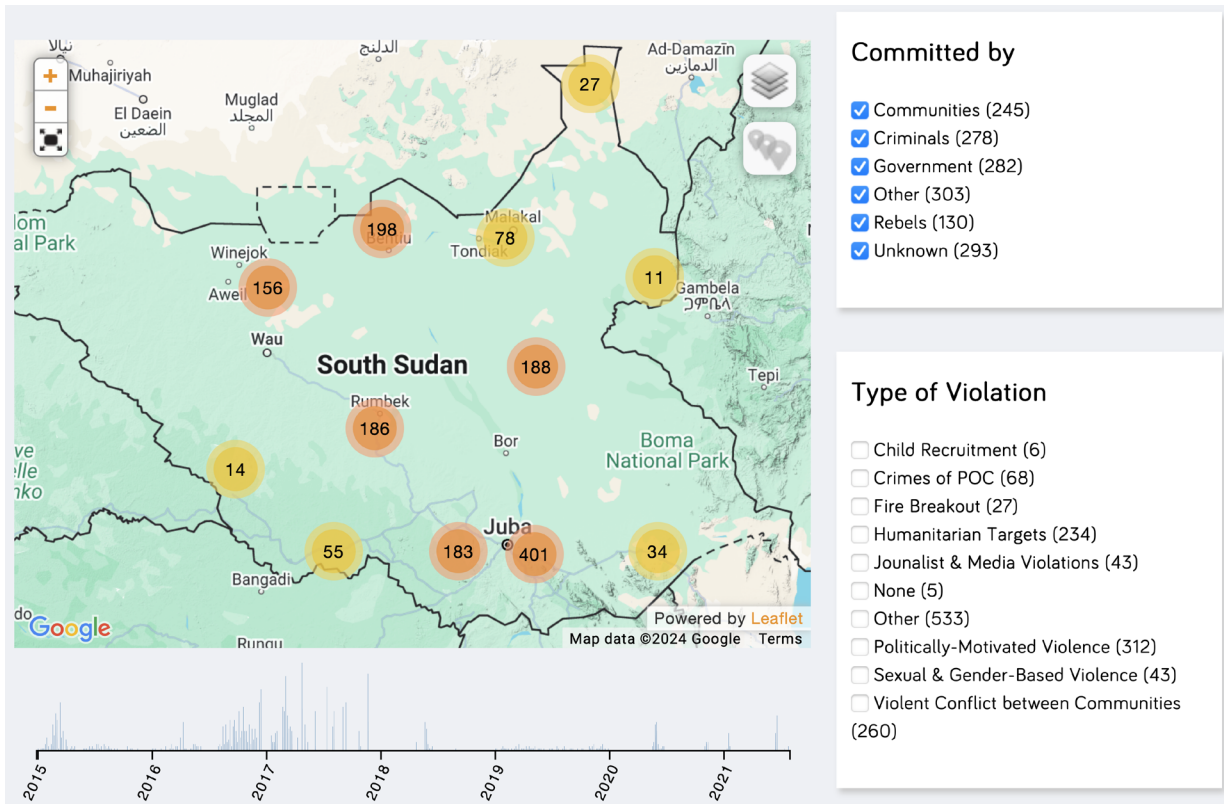
Land disputes, cattle raiding, revenge killings and abductions remain the main conflict issues in the Greater Upper Nile region. These issues tend to develop along ethno-political lines and are influenced by elite politics from the national level. Although local communities may have genuine reasons for resisting other ethnic communities claiming their land, these sentiments have been exploited by elites for personal gain. For example, Johnson Olony, a renegade Shilluk general in the Agwelek militia, rebelled before the outbreak of the civil war in 2013, claiming to be fighting to reclaim Shilluk land. To garner support from his Shilluk kinsmen, he accused the government of giving land to Dinka, particularly in Malakal, the capital of Upper Nile State (Grant 2018). He reportedly enlisted the support of the Chollo king, who commands great respect among his Shilluk subjects (Radio Tamazuj 2017a).

Cattle raids and revenge killings have become endemic over the years. Most of the people in the Greater Upper Nile region are pastoralists. Longstanding pastoralist practices have become militarised and politicised (Wild et al. 2018), leading to a high death toll. Community-based cattle raiding is commonplace, especially in Jonglei and the administratively separate Greater Pibor Administrative Area. The difference with this centuries-old practice today is that it has become more deadly due to the use of modern weapons and the politicisation of the issue (da Costa 2023).

Land disputes, tribal politics, civil wars and tensions between farmers and pastoralists are the main conflict issues in the Equatoria region. As in the other regions, these tensions remain unresolved, exacerbated by the return of people from refugee camps in Uganda, where conditions have become intolerable for many due to cuts in humanitarian aid. Although the post-independence civil wars have not affected the region as severely as the Greater Upper Nile, Greater Bahr El-Ghazal has still experienced persistent localised conflict. Cattle raiding and revenge killings have been the most common sources of conflict.

In addition to sub-national and national conflicts, South Sudan faces transnational challenges. The cross-border problems appear complex and difficult to resolve, as these conflicts are also highly politicised. Apart from Kenya, all of South Sudan's neighbours – Ethiopia, Sudan, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda – are facing civil wars and/or political instability of varying scale and dynamics. These wars also affect South Sudan in many ways.

Figure 1:
Violent conflicts in South Sudan (2015–2021)

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THE PILLARS OF PEACE

4.1 PHYSICAL SECURITY

Due to the multiple violent conflicts, physical security is scarce in Southern Sudan. Violence is linked to the various armed conflicts and state repression, and varies over time (see Figures 2-4). Although the major wars started in Juba, the highest levels of violence are felt in the remote towns and rural areas.

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

4.2 HUMAN RIGHTS

With the exception of some press freedom, political, civil and labour rights declined in the early years of independence (Figure 5). The survey results show that people are aware of the challenges in implementing and enforcing basic human rights in their communities. A sobering finding is that thirty per cent of respondents could not name any institution that guarantees human rights in their communities.

However, when asked whether they thought human rights were guaranteed in their communities (Figure 6), 41.6% of respondents tended to respond positively, while 55% were sceptical. Apart from Renk (42.1%) in Upper Nile State, the remaining counties that were confident that their rights would be guaranteed were all from Greater Bahr El-Ghazal, the region from which most of the current political elites who rule the country come, with Way, Yirol West and Rumbek Centre showing positive results. These responses again follow the trend that counties that have not experienced high levels of insecurity are more positive about their human rights being guaranteed. Apart from the localised conflicts, most of the Bahr El-Ghazal region was not affected by the conflicts of 2013 and 2016.

Figure 2:
Violent Incidents & Deaths South Sudan 2011-2022
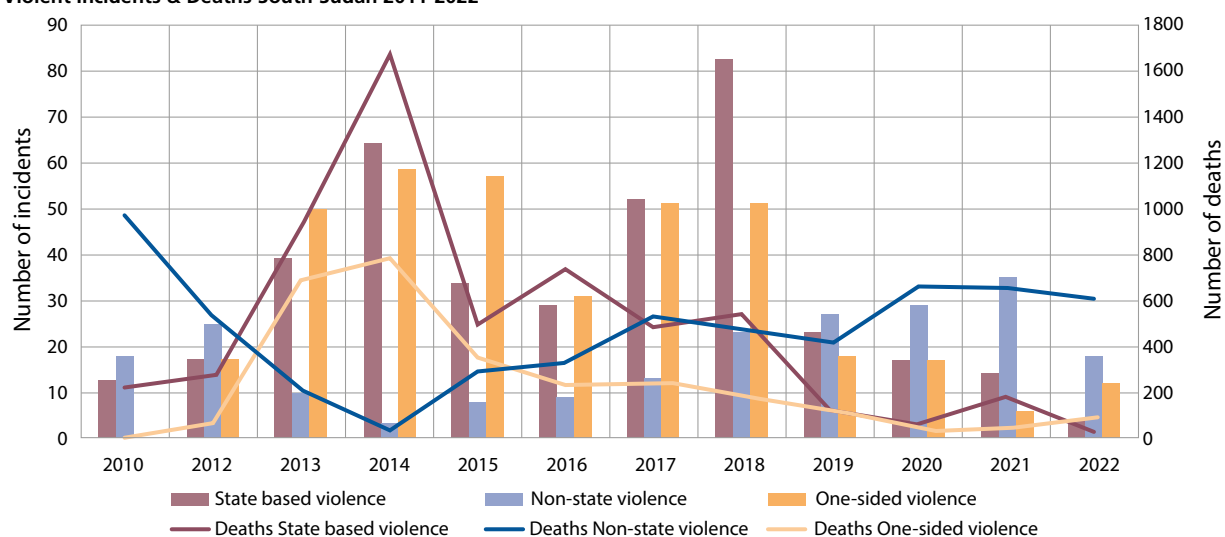
Source: UCDP

Figure 3:
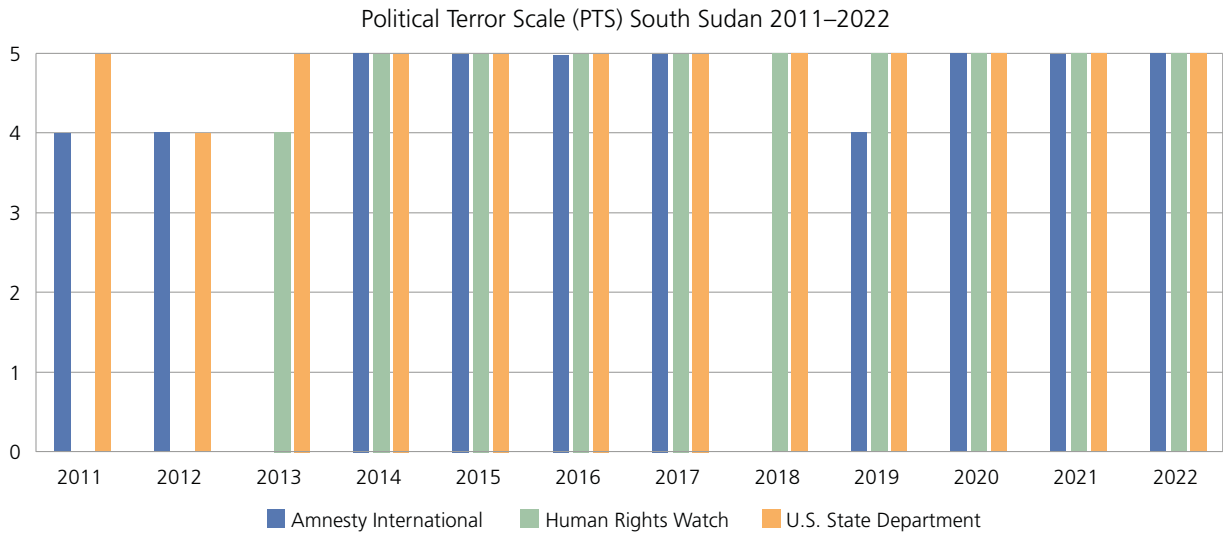**Political Terror Scale (PTS) South Sudan 2011–2022**

Political Terror Scale (PTS) South Sudan 2011–2022

Source: PTS

Figure 4:
Homicides in South Sudan 2010–2019 (WHO)

Homicides in South Sudan 2010–2019 (WHO)

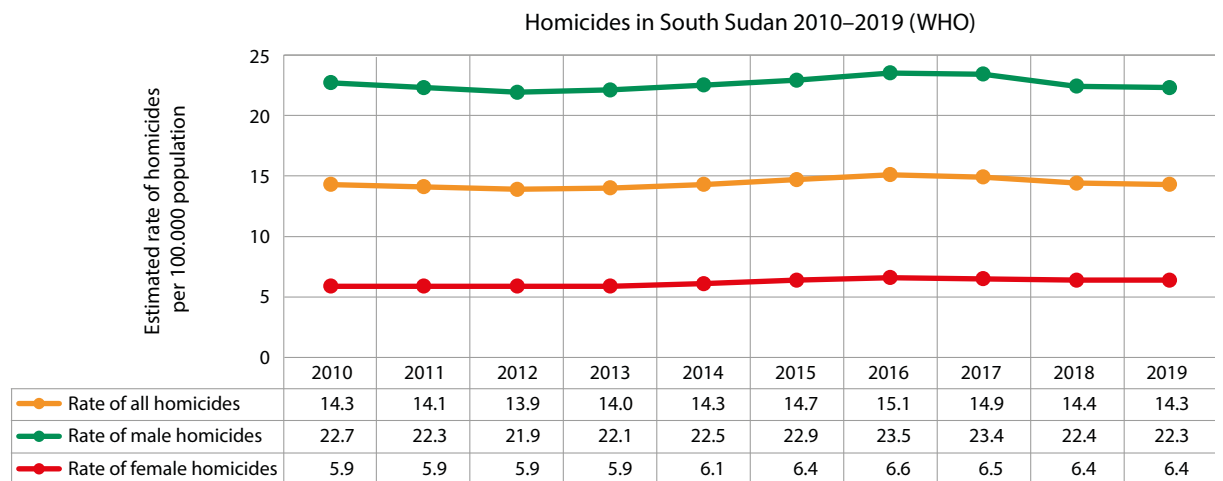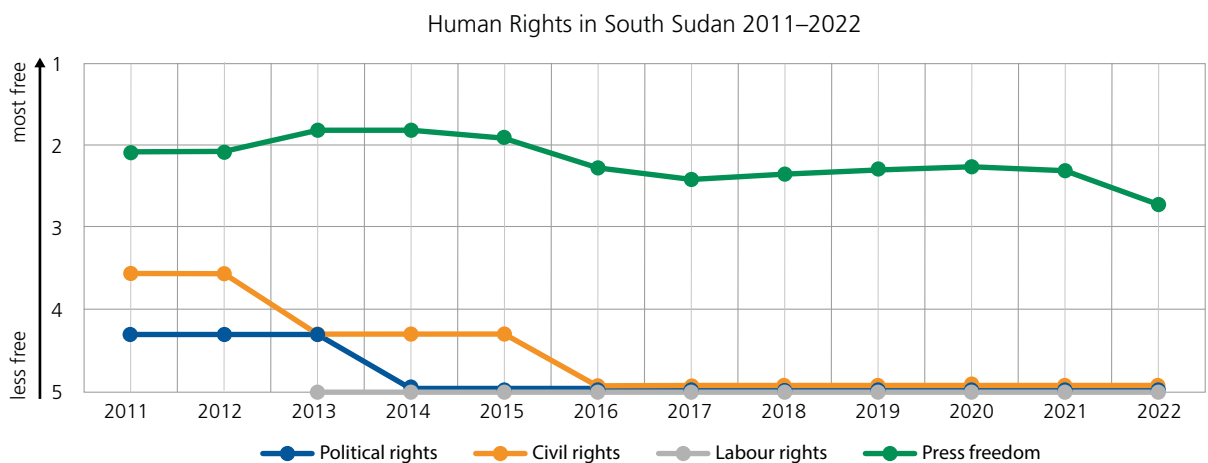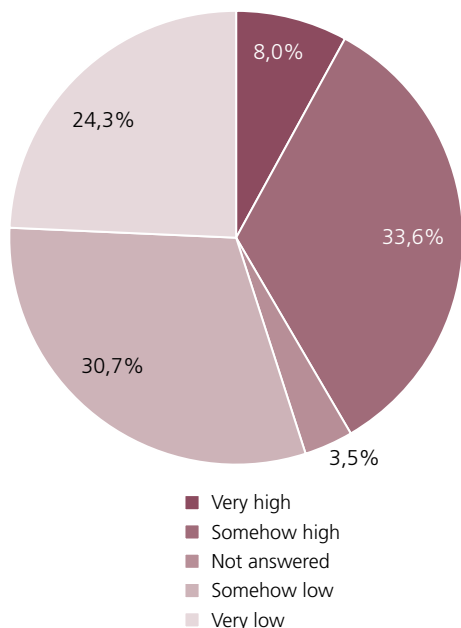|	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Rate of all homicides	14.3	14.1	13.9	14.0	14.3	14.7	15.1	14.9	14.4	14.3
Rate of male homicides	22.7	22.3	21.9	22.1	22.5	22.9	23.5	23.4	22.4	22.3
Rate of female homicides	5.9	5.9	5.9	5.9	6.1	6.4	6.6	6.5	6.4	6.4

Figure 5:
Human Rights in South Sudan 2011–2022

Human Rights in South Sudan 2011–2022

Sources: Freedom House (2023). Freedom in the World Country Report. Retrieved 25 September 2023 from https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world.
International Trade Union Confederation (2023). Global Rights Index. Retrieved 25 September 2023 from https://www.globalrightsindex.org/.
Reporters Without Borders. (2023). World Press Freedom Index [South Sudan/Africa]. Retrieved 25 September 2023 from https://rsf.org/en/world-press-freedom-index.

Figure 6:
»To what extent are human rights guaranteed in your community?« (n=4,482)

- 8,0% Very high
- 33,6% Somehow high
- 3,5% Not answered
- 30,7% Somehow low
- 24,3% Very low

Legend:
- Very high
- Somehow high
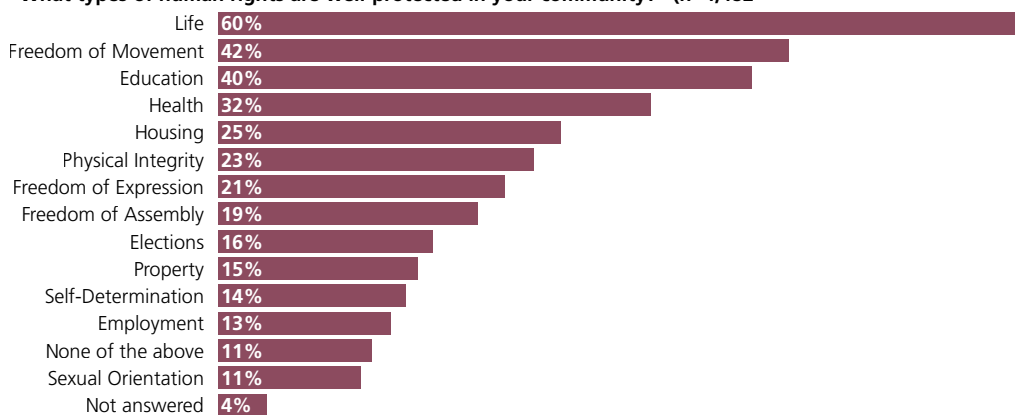- Not answered
- Somehow low
- Very low

Source: Pospisil and Kunhiak Muorwel 2024

The question of which specific rights are and are not protected in communities (Figures 7-8) showed some conflicting results, with the most prominent and well-known rights featuring prominently in both questions. While there may be some order bias at play in the options presented to respondents, the most prominent choices are revealing. While the right to life dominates the responses in terms of protection (59.7%), the right to freedom of expression is the most frequently mentioned right at risk (cited by 50.1% of respondents, with multiple answers possible in both questions).

In terms of protected rights, the right to life is the only one mentioned by more than half of respondents, with freedom of movement, education and health mentioned by around a third or more. All other rights were mentioned by a quarter or less of respondents, with physical integrity (23.4%) and property (14.8%) being of particular concern. Overall, confidence in the protection of human rights is low.
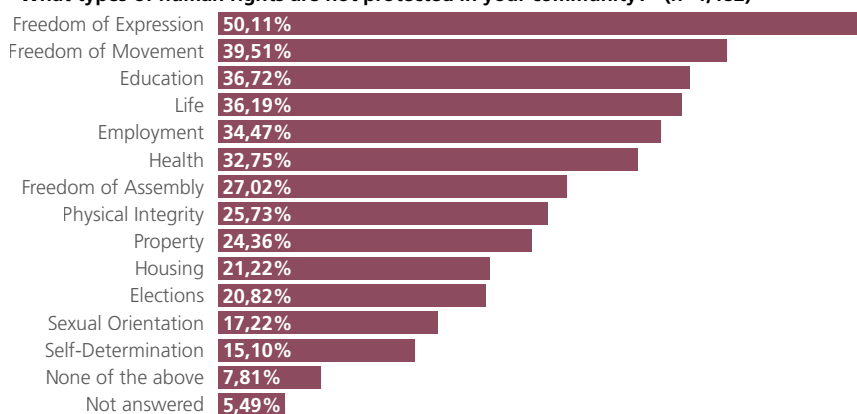
The high prominence of freedom of expression among the rights at risk is a strong indication of the lack of an open political environment conducive to the holding of free and fair elections, currently scheduled for 22 December 2024. The responses to the unprotected rights at risk are more

Figure 7:
»What types of human rights are well-protected in your community?« (n=4,482

Right	%
Life	60%
Freedom of Movement	42%
Education	40%
Health	32%
Housing	25%
Physical Integrity	23%
Freedom of Expression	21%
Freedom of Assembly	19%
Elections	16%
Property	15%
Self-Determination	14%
Employment	13%
None of the above	11%
Sexual Orientation	11%
Not answered	4%

Source: Pospisil and Kunhiak Muorwel 2024

Figure 8:
»What types of human rights are not protected in your community?« (n=4,482)

Right	%
Freedom of Expression	50,11%
Freedom of Movement	39,51%
Education	36,72%
Life	36,19%
Employment	34,47%
Health	32,75%
Freedom of Assembly	27,02%
Physical Integrity	25,73%
Property	24,36%
Housing	21,22%
Elections	20,82%
Sexual Orientation	17,22%
Self-Determination	15,10%
None of the above	7,81%
Not answered	5,49%

Source: Pospisil and Kunhiak Muorwel 2024

varied and seem to reflect the particular circumstances of the respondents. After freedom of expression, employment is the second right that stands out negatively, with few respondents seeing it as protected and a large number seeing it as endangered. Interestingly, by comparison, the right to life is 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 also surprising given the significant number of extrajudicial killings in some parts of the country.

4.3 CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION INSTITUTIONS

Unfortunately, the World Justice Project has no data on the rule of law in South Sudan. With respect to the World Bank's governance indicator on the rule of law, which has a range of +2.5 to -2.5 (Kaufmann et al 2010), South Sudan is rather at the bottom with -1.97 in 2020 and -2.06 in 2022.[2] Of particular interest 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 levels of acceptance, the president (2.1%), the governor (3.4%) and the mayor (6.3%) have the lowest.
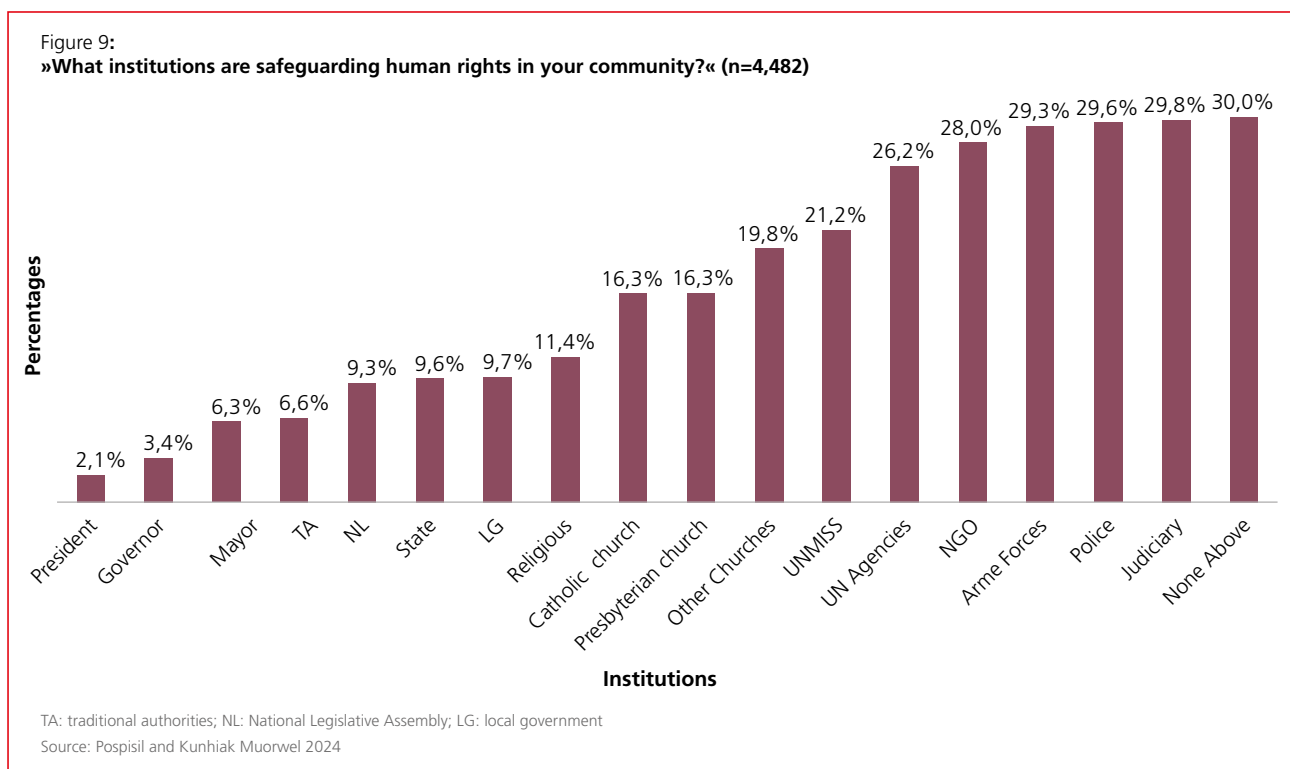
The armed forces not only ranked highly as an institution that protects human rights, but also came out on top as an institution that threatens human rights in communities, with 37% of respondents pointing in its direction. This illustrates

the highly contested nature of the armed forces, which are often shaped by personal allegiances and sub-national conflict situations. In any case, the responses underline the dominant role played by the security apparatus in the country. Unsurprisingly, this is followed by other state institutions, most notably the state (22.6%) and the governor's office (21.7%). Apart from those in the IDP camps, where most respondents felt that the president (43.3%) endangered human rights, the armed forces came out on top, with rural areas (42.5%), IDP camps (39.5%) and urban areas (29.8%) scathing about them.

In contrast to the qualitative part of the research, which gives traditional authorities a remarkable relevance in all aspects of peace, only 6.6% of respondents see them as playing a role in safeguarding human rights. It may be that people locate traditional authorities less in the realm of rights and more in the realm of justice. The results vary greatly from region to region. For example, in Gogrial West, the region from which the current president hails, an astonishing 88.5% of respondents see the presidency as the most important institution for ensuring human rights.

In Rumbek Centre County, people rely heavily on traditional authorities and non-state actors for conflict transformation. When asked about the rules/laws that they consider important for peaceful coexistence in their communities, the vast majority of participants mentioned »customary laws«. Although Rumbek has district and high courts, the most popular places for adjudicating community disputes are the traditional courts, which are headed by local chiefs. They are more accessible and less bureaucratic. They are also held in the open air, where everyone in the community can hear the arguments of both sides, and the decisions are made in the same setting.

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2 https://databank.worldbank.org/reports.aspx?Id=ceea4d8b&Report_Name=WGI-Table.

Figure 9:
»What institutions are safeguarding human rights in your community?« (n=4,482)

TA: traditional authorities; NL: National Legislative Assembly; LG: local government
Source: Pospisil and Kunhiak Muorwel 2024

The role of the chiefs is crucial in resolving conflicts over land, cattle rustling and other social issues such as adultery. The most common and violent cases, such as elopement and adultery, are settled by traditional courts through »*wanhalel*« (Leonardi et al. 2011). The imposition of »*wanh alel*« rulings administered by local chiefs has become standard practice in resolving local disputes. However, more complex and serious issues, such as inter-county cattle raids and murder cases, are resolved by county authorities such as the county commissioner, the county judge and the security apparatus, often through the use of extra-legal means. To underline the importance of traditional courts, the Lakes State Parliament passed the Lakes State Customary Laws in 2022. Although some of the articles are controversial, the law underlines the importance of traditional authorities in administering justice in the county. As to whether they can promote peace, people in Rumbek Centre seem to agree, as they also believe that the laws are widely respected.

In contrast, in Malakal County, many participants indicated that they trust the office of the governor, as well as institutions such as the church, NGOs, UN/UNMISS and traditional authorities, to contribute to peace and conflict transformation in their community. Despite many years of war, the majority of participants felt that the law was being upheld in their community. The high relevance of justice is indicative of the highly politicised context of the conflict in Malakal, particularly in relation to competing claims by warring communities. While community reconciliation ranks highly, the responses show that the peace/justice nexus is at the heart of conflict transformation in the county.
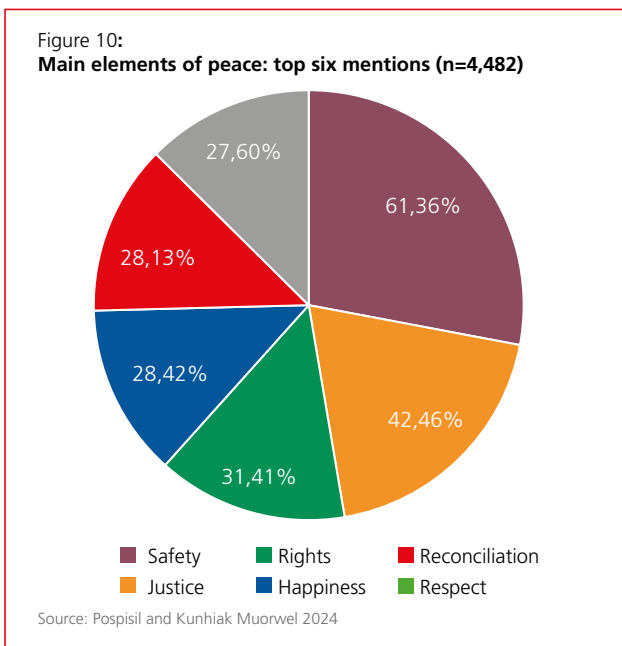
5

PERCEPTIONS OF PEACE

South Sudan is currently undergoing a period of transition from war designed to provide a pathway towards peace. However, this process is based on elite assumptions and relies on the principles of elite political accommodation implemented through a power-sharing arrangement. What the people think about peace has not played a role in these negotiations. Based on the findings of the Public Perceptions of Peace survey conducted in April and May 2023, this chapter explores people's perceptions of peace and how peace is and should be implemented.

Figure 10:
Main elements of peace: top six mentions (n=4,482)

61,36%
42,46%
31,41%
28,42%
28,13%
27,60%

- Safety
- Justice
- Rights
- Happiness
- Reconciliation
- Respect

Source: Pospisil and Kunhiak Muorwel 2024

The first major question asked respondents what they considered to be the three main elements of peace (see Figure 10). Two elements stand out clearly: security (61.4%) and justice (42.5%). Rights (31.4%) is a distant third in the national comparison. Three other elements were chosen by around 28% of respondents: happiness, reconciliation and respect, comparatively »soft« components that clearly symbolise the desire for a more positive vision of peace beyond the mere absence of violence. On the other hand, elements that participants felt less strongly about were legality (6.8%), inclusion (8.8%) and change (9.9%), which, as discussed below, represent the specific South Sudanese experience of violence and war.

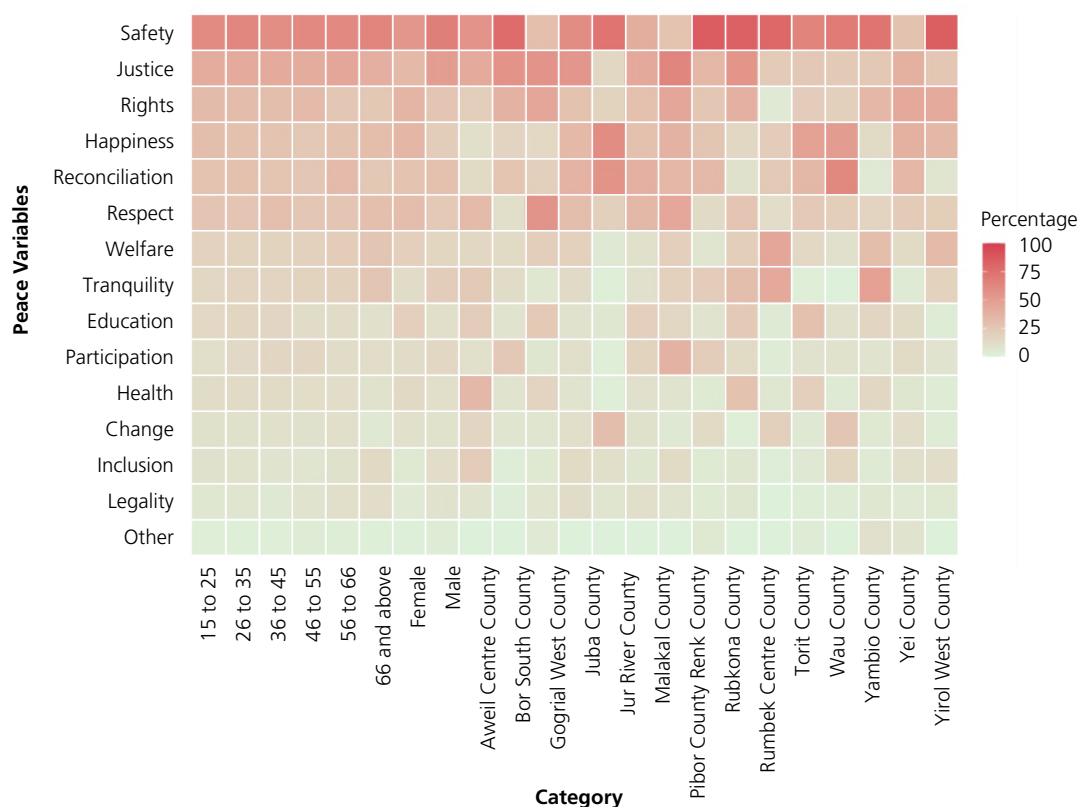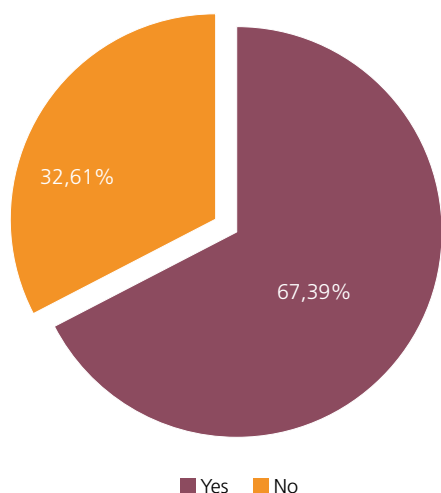Looking at the results in more detail, the diversity of outcomes is striking. One influencing factor is location and the particular conflict history that locations have experienced. Counties such as Pibor (27.7%) and Yei (28.3%) were less concerned about security than Renk (85.9%) and Yirol West (85.4%). As discussed below, these differences are often related to the justice demands prevalent among the communities in these counties.

Looking in more detail, the first striking aspect is that the results are gendered, to a significant extent in some of the elements. In general terms, the results confirm that women's conceptions of peace are broader and more »positive« than those of men, which in the South Sudanese context tend to focus on security and justice. Women, on the other hand, while still prioritising security – albeit by a much smaller margin – also consider elements such as rights, happiness, reconciliation, but also education, welfare and health to be important. Surprisingly, for both genders, participation and inclusion rank low in comparison.

A second factor influencing people's understanding of peace is their environment. 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, reflecting their experience of displacement and ethno-political violence. The importance of security increases with the remoteness of the areas in which respondents live: while it is a key pillar of peace for only 52.6% of respondents living in urban settings, it is highly relevant for 75.6% of those living in hamlets.

Another element to take into account when considering people's perceptions of peace is their assessment of the current situation as peaceful or not peaceful. The survey inquired about this state of affairs in two different ways: first, by directly asking respondents whether they perceive South Sudan to be at peace at the moment, and second, by asking five questions that reflect people's everyday experiences of peace, which effectively take into account the everyday security situation: »can you use the main roads?«; »can you travel in the countryside off the main roads?«; »can you visit your neighbour at night if you need to?«; »can you access markets?«; and »can you engage in cultural activities?«.

Figure 11:
Heatmap (n=4,482)

Figure 12:
Is South Sudan at peace? (n=4,404)

32,61%

67,39%

Yes   No

Source: Pospisil and Kunhiak Muorwel 2024

While everyday security is the most reliable indicator of people's perceptions of the peace process and the performance of peace actors in implementing the CPA, it has only a marginal impact on people's perceptions of peace. When the question of whether South Sudan is at peace is extended to opinions on the main pillars of peace, there is little difference, except that reconciliation and justice are more favoured by those who do not see South Sudan as being at peace.

These findings suggest that it is more gendered and contextual experiences, including at the community level, that that tend to shape what people think about peace. While everyday experiences have a strong influence on what people think about the peace process and related policies, their conceptual thinking about peace seems to be more influenced by long-term insights and particular life-worlds. Security, justice and rights emerge as key elements that are, however, also understood as both contested and as sources of contestation. These are discussed in more detail below.

For ordinary South Sudanese, especially those in rural areas and others who have fled to the IDP camps, safety and security, i.e. physical integrity, was the most important issue. In this survey, participants from more peaceful counties such as Renk and Yirol West felt more strongly about security than those in more conflict-affected counties such as Yei and Pibor.

However, as highlighted above, these experiences of violence reflected in conceptions of peace are long-term and collec-

In general, more than two-thirds of respondents (67.4%) saw South Sudan as being at peace in April/May 2023, a marked improvement from 2021, when responses were evenly divided (Dawkins et al. 2023). These results are highly dependent on people's everyday experiences of security, calculated using an everyday security index based on the average of responses to the five questions above. While 78.8% of respondents with positive perceptions of their daily security situation see South Sudan as being at peace, it is only 43.5% of those with negative perceptions do.

tive. However, the importance attached to specific elements of peace is hardly influenced by the everyday experience of security. The most striking difference is that security is perceived to be less important, albeit slightly so, by respondents with poor experiences of everyday security, while justice is perceived to be more important, indicating the existence of long-standing grievances. In fact, these results can be largely explained by the responses of people living in IDP/PoC sites, where everyday security is notoriously poor and the sense of injustice experienced is high.

Further disaggregation of these results shows that they are significantly correlated with gender. These findings appear to challenge the common assumption that women are particularly affected by conflict and therefore more concerned about security than men. In fact, these findings seem to indicate that people are more concerned about what they risk losing in the event of a relapse into armed violence than they are about how to improve their current situation. Men who live in a good everyday security situation are the ones who have the most to lose: they run the risk of having to join the fight themselves or of becoming a specific target of armed violence. On the other hand, those who live in a bad environment are often forced to cope with a bad situation, while at the same time they have to think about how to improve their situation in structural terms.

6

ACTORS IN PEACEBUILDING

Various internal and external actors are engaged in peace-building in South Sudan. Since South Sudan's independence referendum in 2011, the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) has been mandated to contribute to peace-building, protect the civilian population and stabilise the situation, with around 17,000 military personnel and 2,000 police officers at its disposal. The mandate has been renewed several times, most recently in 2024.

UNMISS currently has a large base in Rumbek and conducts regular patrols to conflict hotspots in an effort to defuse tensions within communities. Together with other aid agencies involved in peacebuilding activities, the Mission supports inter-community dialogue as part of its Community Violence Reduction (CVR) programme. UNMISS has a base in Yei County due to the notorious insecurity there, and a number of peacebuilding and relief agencies are also present in the area. Initiatives such as peace dialogues between communities, and sometimes between communities and the security forces, have helped to reduce some of the existing tensions in the county.

A traditionally strong role in conflict mediation and resolution has been played by the churches, particularly the Christian churches that dominate the county. The Presbyterian Church, for example, has been involved as a mediator in several local peace agreements in the county. Another important internal actor in peacebuilding is traditional authorities, who play a key role in mitigating and transforming violent conflict. Over the years, customary courts have been complemented by statutory courts. Hybrid governance (traditional/informal and formal systems) to resolve disputes remains a common practice in Yei County (Justin and Verkoren 2022). The most complex cases, such as murder, are resolved by the statutory courts, while minor issues, such as cases of elopement, are resolved by local chiefs. This arrangement helps to reduce the backlog of cases in the county. In response to local and international pressure, the government has established courts martial for government security forces accused of rape and other abuses against communities in Yei County. Community leaders are important because their presence in peace initiatives gives them great weight and has been used by county authorities and aid agencies to try to legitimise peacebuilding processes (UNMISS 2014).

In Yambio, as in most other parts of the country, the role of religious institutions in preaching peace and trying to ensure that conflicts are addressed is crucial. The role of non-governmental organisations, especially those involved in peacebuilding, is also seen as crucial. On the other hand, the role of the Zande king could have gone a long way towards resolving the conflicts in the district. The problem is that he represents only one tribe, which limits his authority over other communities, such as the Balanda. His intervention would be ideally suited to a Zande-to-Zande feud. When asked about their personal (potential) contributions to peace in their community, the most common responses were »build good relationship with other people« and »(taking part in) dialogues«. These responses underline the highly elite-dominated socio-political context in Yambio. People do not seem to see a role for wider attempts at conflict resolution beyond the interpersonal level. The elites seem to be in charge. Citizens in Yambio County could be essential to peacebuilding processes, but have mostly been relegated to the periphery.

This is reflected in the trust people have in these institutions. In terms of working for peace, the most trusted institutions include »chiefs/traditional authority«, »the judiciary«, »civil society organisations (CSOs)«, »the UN«, »women and youth groups«, »UNMISS«, »religious groups«, and »NGOs«.

7

LESSONS LEARNED

Throughout its history, South Sudan has experienced armed conflict at various levels, causing immense suffering to its citizens. The conflict actors have also been diverse, with many emerging and others disappearing depending on whether their motives have been fulfilled or not. The motivations of armed actors are national (political influence, competition for state resources), subnational (land disputes, cattle raiding and revenge killings) and transnational (border land disputes, support for armed opposition groups fighting national governments). At times, national and subnational motives have merged, with tribal militias and warlords seeking to advance the interests of national elites at the grassroots level.

South Sudan is also a highly diverse context. What happens in one place is not necessarily replicated in another. South Sudanese experience different realities. This is true in terms of their social and cultural experiences and livelihoods; it is also true in terms of 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 environment; an institutional diversity of peace actors is required to address the multiplicity of challenges and related expectations; and national peace processes remain inherently fragile in a fragmented context.

First, expectations of peace are primarily a reflection of experiences of war and violence. In short, the greater the community's extended experience of violence, the greater the importance attached to personal security. The more communities feel disadvantaged by the lack of transformation of the »root causes« of conflict, the stronger the demand for justice. The more communities are tired of armed violence in general, the stronger the reference to reconciliation. Finally, and more generally, the more removed communities are from violent experiences, the more diverse and complex their conception of peace becomes.

Overall, how people conceptualise peace is remarkably different from how they assess a peace process and the performance of peace actors. While the latter is mainly shaped by personal and more immanent impressions of everyday security, the former seems to be more strongly shaped by longer-term collective experiences. Johan Galtung's famous distinction between negative and positive peace must be seen in this light. Negative peace may have a bad reputation, but as the results of this study show, communities have experienced a long-term loss of it, and peace becomes an effort to restore security in the first place. Any »positive« elements of peace beyond the immediate absence of violence are secondary – except in cases where people believe in a just cause and see violence as partly necessary to achieve justice.

Second, the study also revealed differences in the actors and institutions that people trust in their search for peace and peacebuilding. While the church, the United Nations peacekeeping mission and civil society organisations enjoy a fair degree of trust in most areas, their acceptance is not universal. Trust in the state and its institutions, especially the armed forces, depends very much on the experiences of the people in the respective regions. The only institution that is trusted in all areas of South Sudan is traditional authority and its instruments, such as traditional courts. This finding points to the importance of the local in peacebuilding, confirming long-held assumptions of 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 seek external support – and external in the context of South Sudan also refers to state actors – when active, negative interference is perceived to be working against these local peace infrastructures.

Finally, these findings point to the more indirect conclusion that national peace projects, such as the implementation of a national peace agreement in a transitional phase, must remain fragile in the context of fragmented, highly diverse contexts of peace challenges and expectations. This is a given condition and not necessarily a problem per se if the national level focuses on two primary tasks: the provision of day-to-day security without armed and partisan intervention in sub-national conflict situations, and the guarantee of justice claims or, where these are contested, the establishment of credible procedures for their transformation. These assumptions suggest implications for the remaining phases of the transition in South Sudan: unifying and professionalising the security sector into a non-partisan instrument of security provision is paramount and probably more relevant than focusing on implementing as many different elements as possible. The findings of this study recommend focusing on the elements that matter most to people in their daily lives and expectations.

The fact that there are no unanimous elements of peace for the people of South Sudan is an important finding. Peace is diverse and is a matter of negotiating a variety of expectations that are largely reflections of collective everyday experiences. This diversity must be taken seriously and must inform both peacemaking and peacebuilding efforts. For international actors, perhaps the most important lesson is modesty. Their skills are often less needed than they think, and the usefulness of external support may remain at a logistical level.

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