They Left Us with Spears and Came Back with Guns

Armed Youth, Cattle Raiding and Community (In)security in Southern Unity State, South Sudan
Forward

By Reverend James Ninrew, Executive Director, Assistance Mission for Africa (AMA)

The war and the search for resolution of the conflict in the Republic of South Sudan have focused almost exclusively on political and military solutions. While I agree that the political elite, including military commanders are key players and stakeholders in a potential peace in South Sudan, the youth, chiefs, spiritual leaders are also important actors, whose views need to be considered moving forward. Indeed, youth form the majority of the fighting force, as well as the population demographic in the country, and need to be involved if we are ever to resolve this war.

This project, carried out by AMA and Justice Africa, highlights youth’s role in protecting and defending their communities from external attack, while at the same time showing how in their acquisition of arms for defence they have turned their guns on their own community members, becoming the “enemy within.” This is indicative of the level of lawlessness in the country and how fast South Sudan has descended down the path of state failure. The research that we present to you attempts to demonstrate how the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in the hands of our youth has undermined peace and stability in the country. It also illustrates the limitations of concentration solely on political elites without due consideration to the grassroots, where we operate.

As AMA we hope that in sharing the outcomes of this research and the report that we can help pave the way for engaging in grassroots peace building and encouraging collaboration within and between communities. If we want to realise peace we cannot leave any stakeholder behind.
About the Authors
This report was written and compiled, and based on an assessment conducted by Alicia Luedke and Flora McCrone. Alicia is a Canadian researcher whose work focuses on sexual and gender-based violence and conflict dynamics in the Great Lakes and Horn of Africa regions, and who has worked as a consultant for Justice Africa on several previous research projects. During this project, Flora was Justice Africa’s Research Coordinator, and holds a background in political anthropology, conflict and post-conflict transition in East Africa.

About Justice Africa
Justice Africa is an international non-governmental organisation founded in 1999 as an advocacy organisation and research institute. We serve as a platform to amplify the voices of Africa’s citizens and civic activists, and to foster solidarity between them. We seek to use innovative approaches to engage critically with and formulate practical solutions to the challenges of governance, peace and human rights faced across the continent. Justice Africa is registered in the UK, with a coordination office in Nairobi, Kenya and a country office in Juba, South Sudan.

About AMA
Assistance Mission for Africa (AMA) is a Christian non-governmental organisation with a vision for Africa and building a society where there is justice, allowing communities and churches to be self-actualising and there is development for all. AMA exists to build the capacity of communities including churches, to ensure that there is peace, equity and unity of purpose, in upholding justice, accountability and transparency. AMA’s strategic objectives include seeking to empower communities through enhancing their systems and structures. AMA’s work has involved programmes on peace and community security, natural resource management and community livelihoods, with a particular focus on youth and assisting community (re)integration.
List of Terms

AMA – Assistance Mission for Africa
ARCSS – Agreement for the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan (August 2015)
AUCISS – African Union Commission of Inquiry in South Sudan
CEPO – Community Empowerment for Progress Organisation
CSO – Civil Society Organisation
DDR – Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration
FGD – Focus Group Discussion
GOSS – Government of South Sudan
IDP – Internally Displaced Person
JA – Justice Africa
NGO – Non-Governmental Organisation
SGBV – Sexual and Gender Based Violence
SPLM/A – Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army
SPLM/A-IO – Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army – In Opposition
SSDF – Southern Sudan Defence Force
SSP – South Sudanese Pound
UN – United Nations
Boma – small administrative unit (large village cluster)
Gelweng – armed Dinka cattle keepers
Gogam – local term for the White Army militia
Hakuma – government
Payam – administrative unit below the county level but above the boma level
Tukul – rural style of thatched housing
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This paper was written from data collected in mid-2016 in Ganyiel, Southern Unity State. The research aimed to shed light into the causes of a dramatic spike in inter-communal clashes occurring in this area, but also found broader insights into conflict in South Sudan: that is that localised violence cannot be understood in isolation from the wider political crisis and that there is a cyclical relationship between local violence and violence connected to political competition between the ruling class.

In Ganyiel, little to no local governance nor service delivery, combined with the proliferation of arms in the area following the war, has led to increased violent cattle raiding against neighbouring communities, an escalation in revenge killings and widespread insecurity. There has been a noticeable rise in the scale and intensity of inter-communal clashes over cattle since December 2013, worsened by food insecurity, and the displacement of populations seeking new grazing pastures for their livestock.

The research found that the possession of light weapons permitted Payinjiar’s male youth a new form of dominance over their communities as they simultaneously seek to protect and defend against external attack as well as profit from the use of such weapons through predation against community members.

Local leadership, including chiefs, have lost authority or control over the youth; the authority of the chiefs in South Sudan is performative, in that it is contingent on their demonstrated ability to deliver justice and other public services to their community. In this case, their inability to atone for the cattle stolen during and since the 2015 offensive eroded their standing in the community in the youths’ eyes.

The paper concludes that the inclusion of armed youth, in addition to spiritual leaders and chiefs, in discussions around future security structures is critical. There are serious limitations to peace efforts when only political elites are considered in solutions and neglecting localised conflict and inter-communal tensions can significantly undermine peace settlements and the prospects for durable stability.

Key Findings

- Flooded with AK-model weapons taken from the SPLA during the course of fighting in 2015, and furnished with a fresh sense of revenge for the cattle looted by SPLA allied forces, the local White Army and neighboring Dinka youth, ordinarily operating under the umbrella of the gelweng in Lakes State, started re-engaging in cattle raiding.
- People in Payinjiar were doubtful of the sustainability of the ARCiSS through 2016. This created a sense that community members such as those in Payinjiar and neighbouring Lakes State, had a responsibility and need for creating a local peace.
- Any efforts to mitigate insecurity and cattle raiding need to begin with dialogue, starting first with individual communities in Payinjiar, after which dialogue could be extended to an exchange with neighbouring communities in Lakes state – this exchange should be mediated by an external and impartial body.
Methodology

This research report is based on data collection in Payinjiar county, Unity state in May and June 2016, as part of an assessment carried out by Justice Africa in collaboration with Assistance Mission for Africa (AMA), a South Sudanese civil society organisation (CSO). Data collection encompassed questionnaire-guided interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) with around eighty respondents from different segments of the local population, including cattle camp youth, members of the White Army (youth militia) and their leaders, SPLA-IO soldiers, local government officials at the county and payam level, customary chiefs, Nuer prophets, church leaders, civil society activists, judges, prisoners, prison guards, traders, and women’s groups.

Drawing on Justice Africa’s previous research experience in South Sudan, the researchers focused on documenting people’s experiences and understandings of cattle raiding and community security from a primarily qualitative perspective, in order to ensure a better understanding of the evolving dynamics of local violence since the start of the conflict in South Sudan in December 2013, as well as aid in identifying the myriad ways in which communities in southern Unity seek to cope with more localised challenges to their security.

Considering the politicisation of issues related to the looting of civilian property, state-sponsored violence and disputed administrative boundaries since December 2013, the researchers were careful to pose questions about cattle raiding and community security in general terms. This allowed respondents to speak openly about their experiences, while also ensuring that they did not feel pressured into answering questions that they were uncomfortable with, or might place them in jeopardy. For all respondents, principles of confidentiality and ‘do no harm’ were strictly followed, and only if informed consent was clearly and continuously provided were interviews and FGDs carried out. Accordingly, all of the significant identifying factors have been removed in order to protect the privacy and welfare of those who generously agreed to participate in the research.

Field Location

Payinjiar county is located on the southernmost tip of Unity state, South Sudan. Unity state witnessed some of the heaviest fighting since the beginning of South Sudan’s third civil war on 15 December 2013, including the May 2015 offensive by government troops and their allied militias, which saw mass displacement, death, the destruction of civilian property and widespread sexual violence.

Despite being subject to considerable assaults by the government under the SPLM/A, however, in 2016 Payinjiar was one of the few remaining opposition strongholds in Unity and unlike Pagak, which borders Ethiopia, was surrounded by government-held territory on all sides. This produced unique local violence dynamics and security challenges.

As an opposition-held area, Payinjiar was also relatively cut off from the formal aspects of government and the economy that emanated from the administrative capital, Juba. Surrounded by government troops and the communities affiliated with the SPLM/A, confrontations at Payinjiar’s borders, particularly with Lakes State (re)emerged as a major challenge to community security and were the site of violent cattle raids between Nuer and Dinka youth. Because of the dangers presented as a result of Payinjiar’s isolated position as the sole SPLM/A-IO area in a sea of government troops, community defence (primarily by armed Nuer youth) has assumed great importance, leading to the expansion of local militias for the purposes of protection.
Introduction

“The biggest problem here is the absence of peace facing us, because it results in random guns held by the youth, who are practic-
ing crimes with the guns. We need peace so that there is a mechanism to collect the guns from the youth.”

Cattle raiding and violence between armed youth have always been commonplace in South Sudan. However, there has been a noticeable rise in the scale and intensity of inter-communal clashes over cattle since December 2013, exacerbated by the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, worsening food insecurity, and the displacement of populations seeking new grazing pastures for their livestock. The result has been the continuing militarisation of South Sudanese youth and the intensification and escalation of violence and insecurity at the local level. The persistence of these more localised conflicts, particularly cattle raiding, cannot be analysed in isolation from the wider political crises between the SPLA and the SPLA-IO. Indeed, there appears to be a cyclical relationship between local violence and violence connected to the national level and political competition between the South Sudanese elite, such that cattle raiding can be considered a direct consequence of the conflict. At the same time, the absence of peace at the local level exacerbated the conditions that gave way to the broader civil war, by enabling the extension of the cycles of violence and revenge that fuelled the conflict in many parts of the country.

This report analyses the drivers of cattle raiding and insecurity in Payinjiar County in southern Unity State – an area that has been particularly hard hit by successive government offensives, but that also exhibits unique dynamics with respect to cattle raiding between groups on either side of the border between Unity and Lakes States. The report also explores the coping mechanisms of communities in Payinjiar when it comes to the changing nature of violence and insecurity, as well as the possibilities of community solutions for peace in the area. One of the major themes throughout the report is the precarious position of South Sudanese, specifically Nuer youth, in this context. It looks at the fluidity of the status of (male) youth as cattle keepers, community defence forces, threats to local security, fathers, brothers, husbands, and traders. We explore their use of agency, and limitations youth face when moving between the positions they choose to adopt and those ascribed to them by societal norms and histories of militarisation and conflict.

The Agreement for the Resolution of Hostilities in South Sudan (ARCSS) signed in August 2015 collapsed after clashes erupted in the capital city, Juba in July 2016, and a year on, political stalemate has ensured that peace at the local and national level is no closer a reality. Even where so-called ‘peace’ in South Sudan has been achieved, there tends to be a concurrent magnification of local level violence. Youth play an important role in the perpetuation of such localised violence, yet they also tend to be neglected from national level peace and nation building processes.

Even in the face of a breakdown in peace at the national level, Dinka and Nuer communities on either side of the Unity and Lakes States border noted that the broader conflict and political crisis between the government and opposition both obscured and instigated the local level violence between armed youth being discussed here. Understanding the connection between national level peace and conflict processes and those at the local level
is crucial to putting an end to cycles of violence and insecurity, as is understanding the position of male youth. As highlighted elsewhere:

“Youth are perceived to be important players in violence, but there is limited knowledge on the causes and drivers of such violence...to address the wide-reaching security problems...the government and international community need to obtain context specific research-based knowledge on both the youth population and the...impact of the civil war on social, political and economic structures.”

Interventions targeting youth and the conditions that engender local conflict and cattle raiding will be essential for maintaining some semblance of stability. So too will be enhancing the coping mechanisms of communities for managing new challenges to security at the local level. Thus far, internationally mediated peace processes have focused on the political crisis between the SPLA and SPLA-IO, ignoring local level tensions and actors. These actors, which include the armed youth who have been mobilised as community defence forces, remain a threat to both national and local level peace. And in many instances youth are better armed than the forces charged with maintaining security, including the police and army, which has culminated in new forms of authority, predation and criminality that communities are hard pressed to manage in the face of a complete breakdown of law and order.

Background

South Sudan’s Armed Youth

‘Youth,’ in South Sudan, is a commonly used, but highly ambiguous label, and can refer to a variety of different life-stages and experiences. The Government of South Sudan classifies youth as all citizens aged 18 to 45 years old. To more fully grasp what it means to be a youth in South Sudan, historian Cherry Leonardi explains that that status is most strongly identified by its ‘in-between’ status, specifically, the socio-political space between hakuma and ‘home.’ In this case, the notion of hakuma, or government, broadly encompasses a range of loosely related images, including the military, the town and the school. Meanwhile, ‘home’ is associated with the rural, with family and traditional authorities and livelihoods – namely cattle keeping or agriculture. Between the spheres of government and home, there exists a space of tension, wherein the youth have through various means attempted to straddle both, whilst avoiding being trapped within either sphere. Successive rounds of recruitment into rebel militia or the state military during South Sudan’s three civil wars pulling the youth towards the government sphere, mirrored by demands for them to remain at home in order to protect and provide for their communities, has made this position ever more precarious. In this light, a more nuanced understanding of the reasons that South Sudan’s youth have taken up arms emerges, and permits the observer to view them as something more than simply perpetrators of en-masse mindless violence. Rather, they are agents expressing the simultaneous pressures of both power and vulnerability. The area of this study, Payinjiar county, southern Unity state, is home to the Nuer tribe, a group whose geographical, political and socio-cultural position has made the experience of its youth particularly troubled, and violent.

The Nuer: A Century of Violence

The Nuer constitute South Sudan’s second largest tribe, after the Dinka, and like the Dinka, they are Nilotic pastoralists, specifically, cattle keepers. Geographically they are concentrated in the country’s Greater Upper Nile region, namely southern Unity state, southern Upper Nile state and Jonglei state, stretching from the centre of the country across to its far eastern border with Ethiopia. The famous Nuer (and Dinka) cattle camps have for many
years provided to outsiders with some of the most iconic images of South Sudan; seemingly timeless visions of remote, dusty hinterlands, where spear-carrying men and cattle live in connected harmony, wholly ‘traditional’ and untouched by modernity. In fact, these romanticised images obscure the reality of life for rural Nuer youth not only in the present day, but for much of the past century. Whilst the depiction of cattle as being central to a young Nuer man’s life is accurate, the other elements that shape and constitute their existence — namely marriage, guns, armed violence and the state - since the early 1900s, and in particular from 1991 to the present day, have largely been left out of the frame.

Instead of answering to a singular authority, Nuer society is organised and categorised into lineages according to patrilineal descent, with each lineage comprising a segment of society, and each segment containing subsegments reaching down to the level of the village and the household. Accordingly, customary authority within Nuer communities, principally in the hands of chiefs and elders, follows the vertical lines of each lineage segment. In addition to the customary system, authority amongst the Nuer has also emanated from prophets. Prophecy traditions of spirituality and morality have evolved alongside, and often in response to, the Nuer experience of violence and conflict — they remain highly influential over the meaning, use and prevalence of violence amongst their communities, often acting as the “gatekeepers” between their communities and the government or military, and yet their role is commonly under-appreciated by outsiders.

While the spear has always been considered the traditional weapon of choice for the Nuer, and guns portrayed as a symptom of modern warfare, in fact, waves of small arms have pervaded Nuer society throughout the last century; beginning in 1910 via trade across the Ethiopian border, this was followed by another influx at the end of World War II, when the British defeated the Italians in Ethiopia with the help of Nuer soldiers. Stocks of weapons were then replenished among Nuer communities through the South’s first civil war, led by the Anyanya rebellions, and during the second civil war the communist Mengistu regime in Ethiopia armed the SPLA until 1991. During this period, guns achieved a special status in Nuer society, considered as collective possessions, shared between brothers and cattle keepers. Guns were exchanged for communally-owned cattle and therefore “directly reinforced a socially expanded sense of self and the community.” As such, the ideological and material relationship between guns, manhood and the value of cattle developed within Nuer communities.

Male Nuer youth are principally tasked with guarding the community and its cattle from threat. Cattle raiding by the Nuer youth against rival groups has a long tradition, and participation in raids is associated with the fulfilment of manhood (and in many ways, personhood). Indeed, male youth in Nuer culture only transition to adulthood once they have passed through scarification rituals (the marking of six incisions on their forehead), after which they receive a weapon to participate in cattle raids and safeguard the cattle camps. Like the Nuer, the Dinka pastoralists communities too have a long tradition of armed cattle keeping youth. Customarily, whilst the raiding of cattle by Nuer against Dinka or other rival communities was considered ‘fair game’, for the Nuer, other forms of violence and warfare were governed and constrained by moral or spiritual codes which prohibited the intentional killing of women, children or the elderly, regardless of their ethnic group, and likewise the destruction of crops during confrontations was considered a violation of this code.

Meanwhile the traditional practical of inter-Nuer revenge killing has long born the potential to escalate across the lineage segments if left unchecked. Historically, the scale of violence was constrained in the sense that killings were carried out largely using spears, and therefore in any one attack the number of casualties was limited, and the perpetrator of the killing could be easily identified by the distinctive design of his spear. Homicide within the Nuer was seen as morally polluting and the perpetrator would immediately have to perform a purification ritual. However as spears began to gradually be replaced by guns in these scenarios, whereby one could kill a man from a distance and where the bullet could not easily be traced back to the shooter, such killings became “depersonalised,” and the moral and spiritual ramifications came to bear less weight.
Throughout the first and second civil wars in South Sudan from 1955 to 1972, and 1983 to 2005 respectively, “Nuer men fought on every side of every political schism that has radiated out from Khartoum and Juba.” Alongside the Dinka, the Nuer supplied the majority of the rebel forces that fought the Sudanese government, and subsequently the Nuerlands have provided the battleground for successive military confrontations between southern armed groups. Having been conscripted, often forcibly, into both the Sudanese national army as well as the (then rebel) SPLA, Nuer men were often forced to attack one another on the battlefield. Participation in these wars of hakuma therefore frequently violated the customary Nuer ethical codes for lethal violence and warfare of ‘home.’ Military leaders including Riek Machar, a Nuer originally from southern Unity, who was SPLA Zonal Commander during the late 1980s, actively encouraged this erosion of moral constraints within his tribe, seeking to convince both civilian communities and SPLA recruits, that “acts of inter-Nuer homicide carried out in the context of a ‘government war’ were devoid of the social and spiritual risks” associated with localised or ‘home’-based conflict. As described above, the introduction of guns over spears too helped to minimise the perception of personal responsibility and moral wrongdoing among Nuer SPLA recruits. Moreover, the practice of raiding communities by the SPLA, which was characteristic of the second civil war, fomented the association between cattle raiding, inter- and intra-ethnic armed conflict, and the military.

Against this backdrop of cattle, arms and men, it has been easy for many to forget the position of Nuer women; however shifting notions of gender, and customary practices around family and marriage, have equally had a hand in shaping the trajectory of violence among Nuer communities. Nuer society is deeply patriarchal, with women’s position within society and the household being heavily burdened and typically disadvantaged. It has been noted that “the transfer of bridewealth characterises the Nilotic institution of marriage”, and that women are principally valued by their families and communities insofar as they can be exchanged for cattle. The Nuer norms around marriage, in the face of dramatic shifts of other aspects of society, have proven highly resilient and enduring over the generations. Even today, the high price of bridewealth is a key factor fuelling cattle raiding, as young men seek to gain as many cattle as they can in order to marry, and achieve the status of full manhood and community recognition.

At the same time, for much of the past century, the perception that women (and children), unlike their menfolk, were not agents of war, afforded them protection during armed confrontations. As mentioned previously, it was believed that to intentionally kill a woman, regardless of her tribe, was “not only cowardly and reprehensible but, more importantly, a direct affront against God as the ultimate guardian of human morality.” In reality, women and children were killed, caught in the crossfire, whilst other women were taken as captives or wives, but generally, they were not considered as legitimate targets of war. However, once again, the increased prevalence of guns and military strategy by the SPLA brought about an unravelling of this moral safety net.

After 1991: The Nuer and the White Army

In November 1991 a “botched coup attempt” initiated by Riek Machar against the leader of the SPLA, John Garang, precipitated a mass killing of an estimated 2000 Dinka in the town of Bor. The attack was orchestrated by Machar’s breakaway faction, the (largely Nuer) SPLA-Nasir and a Nuer youth militia that came to be known as the White Army. The “reaching for the ethnic card” by Machar and other southern politico-military elites sent shockwaves through their respective armies and the civilian population, with the reverberations continuing to be felt today.

For most of the 1990s, Garang’s mainstream SPLA remained in control of Bahr el Ghazal and Equatoria. Machar’s SPLA-Nasir faction were based in the Upper Nile region, where they had control of the rural territory, whilst receiving support from the Sudanese government, which sought to aggravate the splintering of the SPLA in a strategy of ‘divide and conquer.’ During this period, SPLA-Nasir underwent a series of image makeovers and name changes,
eventually settling on the name SSDF.  

Regarding the Nuer youth militia, the term White Army translates in Nuer to mean ‘untrained’ or ‘informal’, distinguishing its youth fighters from those of formal armed groups (sometimes known as the ‘Black Army’). The term is something of a misnomer, in that the group’s methods for mobilisation and warfare, by definition do not resemble those of a typical army. Under the umbrella of the White Army, male cattle keeping youth from across the Nuerlands were armed and with the help of the SSDF, their level of organisation raised to a common leadership under their respective chiefs, following the traditional system of segmentary lineages. In general, the relationship between the SSDF and the White Army was informal and based on kinship ties, rather than being formalised or systemic. Pervasive insecurity and a need for fighters contributed to a broadening of the age range by which men in rural Nuer communities were considered ‘youth’ and therefore eligible for participation, to the extent that the White Army’s members came to range from ten to 40+ years in age. Fighters in this army were not recruited in the usual sense; rather, any male Nuer youth in possession of a gun was automatically considered a member. Whilst the existence of the White Army was first recognised in the wake of the 1991 Bor Massacre, it has been repeatedly mobilised over the past 20 years, either ad hoc, in response to an immediate localised threat for instance from rival cattle raiders, or at the request of the SSDF leadership. For the periods between active mobilisation, White Army members would return to their occupation of cattle keeping.

The events of 1991, and the strategic pitting of the Dinka and Nuer against one another by the military elite, caused a mutation of warfare ethics between the Nuer and Dinka. The Dinka cattle keepers of Bahr el Ghazal meanwhile had also been armed and organised as youth fighting force, known as the gelweng. This reconfiguration of relations between Nuer and Dinka communities, coupled with an inundation of guns and new military strategies which targeted entire cattle camps and communities indiscriminately, meant that unarmed Nuer and Dinka women, children and elderly found themselves trapped on the frontlines, and “gradually became recast by rival southern military factions as legitimate targets of ethnic annihilation.”

The saturation of guns in Nuer communities after 1991 shifted their perceived status. Instead of being considered a public good, in the collective possession of the community, guns were increasingly treated as private property by the cattle keeping youth. Within the White Army, subgroups began to emerge and engage in banditry, looting, cattle raiding, eloping and raping women within their communities. Not only had the perception of guns changed, but also the cattle keeping youth of the White Army themselves; they acquired a double identity, as both a source of protection and a potential threat to their own communities.

The status of women too shifted significantly in the years following the 1991 split. Broadly, the burden on women was heavily increased, with so many men being away from home fighting, or killed, vastly increasing the number of female-headed households. As mentioned, for the first time women, and children, were not just caught in the crossfire, but became strategic military targets in themselves. Soldiers would rape, shoot them at close range or slit their throats. Children and babies were killed on the basis that they would otherwise mature into an enemy in adulthood. It was not only at the hands of enemy soldiers that these abuses occurred. The “ideology of hyper-masculinity” through which the SPLA, and presumably the SSDF recruits, were indoctrinated with meant that, even when they returned home to their families, they would subject their wives to domestic abuse, sexual demands and threats. At the same time, some opportunistic White Army youth would engage in sexual violence against women of their own communities, and the gelweng would attack women during cattle raids against the Nuer communities; which in itself would fuel retaliatory cycles of violence. Nevertheless, in spite of a “forcible disregard of marriage norms by soldiers” and other fighters, the bridewealth system and institution of marriage proved highly resilient among cattle keeping communities, and the need to acquire cattle by young men remained a priority – indeed, young women would likewise encourage a high bride price, arguing that they could not be married off for less than their mothers. Many Nuer women were seen to act not just as passive victims, but in fact reinforced the mentality of militarisation and violence, urging their sons, husbands and brothers to engage in cattle raids, or to join the military.
The eight year long siege under which the Nuer (and Dinka) communities lived finally abated in the Spring of 1999, when scores of prominent Nuer and Dinka chiefs congregated in Wunlit, Bahr el Ghazal, in order to negotiate a binding peace agreement across the western Upper Nile-eastern Bahr el Ghazal divide, and to pressure the southern military elite to investigate and curtail cattle raiding by their troops. Nowadays, the Wunlit Agreement is lauded as a rare success story of civilian-led peace building, serving to blunt the edges of the following years for the communities living either side of the Nile, until the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed in 2005.

Disarmament

The signing of the CPA, ostensibly bringing peace to the south, and the Juba Declaration a year later in 2006, brought about significant changes for South Sudan’s plethora of armed groups. The SSDF was absorbed back into the SPLA as part of a process of “pythonlike” expansion, incorporating almost 100,000 new members of other armed groups into the nascent national army. Meanwhile the White Army militias were subjected to successive rounds of disarmament, in a bid to “reassert the division between civilian and combatant”, based on the normative assumption that underpins state building policy the world over, that the national army would exercise a monopoly over the use of legitimate force across the country.

Information regarding the disarmament of the White Army in western Nuerlands is limited, whereas for those in the east the process has been better documented. The first round of disarmament took place in early 2006, in Jonglei, and was an involuntary process. The White Army wanted to keep their guns for both offensive (raiding) and defensive purposes. They ambushed the SPLA, killing hundreds of soldiers and forcing the SPLA to temporarily retreat. During the forceful disarmament process, the White Army pillaged communities and the SPLA burned their huts. A second round of disarmament later in 2006 had more success: a 15 day period during which White Army and community members could voluntarily give up their guns was specified, which would be followed by a forcible round of disarmament by the SPLA for the remainder. Whilst the extent to which the voluntary aspect was genuinely voluntary has been questioned, in general this process proved more successful, with the external presence and support by a knowledgeable contingent of the UN, local NGOs and community authorities being considered a key factor in this.

Countrywide however, over the subsequent rounds of disarmament conducted up to 2013, for those of the Nuerlands (and elsewhere in the country), serious hazards and difficulties remained. One underlying problem was that the rounds of disarmament tended to be initiated on an ad hoc basis and thus lacked the adequate long term planning and necessary buy-in from the constituent communities. Furthermore, the SPLA’s use of a “rolling wave” technique, whereby they would move from one village to the next to collect weapons, rather than a “universal” and simultaneous process across communities, left a dangerous vacuum of security for the communities in its wake which the SPLA and government failed to remedy, and provoked well-founded suspicion that there was a deliberate attempted to disarm the White Army, whilst leaving the gelweng of Dinka communities relatively untouched. Likewise there are clear indications that the guns collected from communities were selectively redistributed to specific government officials or communities in what appears to be ethnic favouritism and a desire to arm the areas where particular government/military elites kept their own herds of cattle. Among both Nuer and Dinka communities, disarmament provoked them to rearm themselves, purchasing weapons circulating freely in the market.

15.12.13: History Repeating Itself

On 15th December 2013, fighting erupted between soldiers of the Presidential Guard in Juba. The crackdown against Nuer soldiers by the (majority Dinka) SPLA that swiftly followed, also targeted Nuer civilians living in Juba, who were subject to door-to-door searches and shootings by soldiers. This event, which marked the beginning of South Sudan’s third civil war, became known as the Nuer Massacre, and sent shockwaves countrywide. Once again the SPLA split, along the same fault lines of the 1990s; though the name of SPLA-IO that the wave of defectors gave themselves was
new, with Riek Machar at their helm and all of the senior commanders, but one being former SSDF commanders, this was a clear case of history repeating itself.

The battle in Juba escalated into a national war before what came to be the SPLA-IO leadership could assume control – we can say that the rebellion started before Riek himself rebelled. In the early phases, the SPLA-IO fighters were largely eastern Nuer White Army from Jonglei, who, along with other new members of SPLA-IO, marched on and captured Bor. With Unity being the only majority-Nuer state in the country, and the home of most of South Sudan’s oil fields, inevitably the fighting spread there, with SPLA-IO and White Army forces capturing Bentiu from government control a week later. There the fighting remained, as the SPLA and SPLA-IO grappled to gain and maintain control of strategic towns and territory. Across Unity, it was observed that, “the general logic of the conflict was one in which SPLA-IO forces attacked SPLA positions around Bentiu, in Rubkona and Koch, while the SPLA continued to raid and harass civilian populations in southern Unity.” Whilst the SPLA-IO fought alongside the White Army, the SPLA used local Dinka militia groups and the Bul Nuer, to whom some of the worst atrocities in Unity state were attributed.

The dry season military offensive, beginning in early 2015, saw the gravest violence not only in southern Unity, but perhaps the entire country, with the result that the UN and human rights groups found evidence of crimes against humanity. In February 2015 the SPLA-IO initiated a heavy round of recruitment of youth from the Nuer communities in southern Unity including in Payinjiar county, in anticipation of the coming offensive, and moving them to the frontlines around Bentiu – it was thought that some of this conscription was voluntary, but some was under a degree of force. Payinjiar, as well as neighbouring Mayendit and Leer counties, remained firmly under SPLA-IO control throughout the war, installing its own political administration, although effectively, the county commissioners and their staff formed a rebel military administration. There was a spike in the fighting in May 2015, as SPLA soldiers along with allied militia approached Payinjiar and Mayendit from neighbouring Lakes state, but the small contingent of SPLA-IO forces, along with large numbers of local White Army fighters, eventually repulsed the SPLA. In the process though, civilian killings, abductions of women and children, cattle theft, destruction of property, and mass sexual violence occurred. The town of Nyal in Payinjiar was captured and held by the SPLA for just one day before being recaptured, incurring heavy civilian casualties. Tayir, a river port and market village in Panyijiar was decimated by the SPLA, when they attacked it with barges and gunboats.

The signing and ratification of the ARCSS in August-September 2015 reportedly did little to change the government and SPLA conduct in the war in southern Unity, ignoring the ceasefire that had been imposed. Clashes in Leer and Mayendit brought waves of displaced communities to Panyijiar. As such, a “familiar rainy season pattern of intermittent clashes held sway, with the rains, as much as any peace agreement, being responsible for the diminished levels of violence.

“The Enemy Within”: Community Insecurity

Cattle Raiding

The resumption of large-scale cattle raiding and localised violence are predominantly grounded in the discourses and realities of competition between political elites in the government and the opposition. As observed in relation to the White Army of the eastern Nuerlands in Jonglei and Upper Nile States, the atrocities of the current war, which include the widespread looting of cattle, have supplied a strong sense of justice and the need to compensate for stolen property, enabling what the African Union Commission of Inquiry on South Sudan (AUCISS) referred to as “cycles of violence within violence” at the local level. For many people in Payinjiar the disarmament campaigns of the SPLA pre-December 2013 represented a “plan” against the Nuer since guns had been taken from Nuer youth and supposedly put in the hands of the Dinka youth in Lakes State. These are the same Dinka youth, or gelweng said to have fought alongside the SPLA in the offensive in 2015 and were purportedly in Payinjiar for the exclusive purpose
of capturing Nuer cattle. Since then, the *gelweng* have been tied up with the White Army in progressively more violent raiding parties.

Members of the local White Army and their leaders told the researchers that they felt constantly on the defensive against possible attacks by Dinka forces in Lakes State – fears that appeared to be well founded considering the dynamics of the 2015 military offensive. As historically was the case in South Sudan, the role of armed Nuer youth during the crisis was to defend Payinjiar from the SPLA and their related forces. In early to mid 2015 then, most of the White Army, or *gogam* members were stationed around the various *payams* to protect Payinjiar's borders with Lakes State and other government-held areas in Unity. This also seemed to be the case in the eastern Nuerlands. During a visit to Akobo County in July-August 2015 as part of a separate Justice Africa assessment the White Army there described their role:

> “The important role that we play right now is defence...[when] people from different communities come to us we defend the land and community. This is our role and the most important one.”

Certainly, the fact that Payinjiar remained in the hands of the opposition actually probably has little to do with the SPLA-IO themselves, and more to do with the efficacy of the White Army in defending their land from an encroaching enemy. Preoccupied with community defence during the government offensive, cattle raiding was said to be relatively low in the 2015 dry season “because we...[didn’t] have more bullets.” After defeating the SPLA, however, the area was awash with weapons. As one leader of the White Army commented: “You kill two Dinkas and get a gun for you and your brother.”

The perception amongst many Nuer communities that we spoke to in Payinjiar was that the government had purposefully armed Dinka youth in Lakes state to “disturb” and “mistreat” them, precipitating a shift to the more frequent and more brutal raids being witnessed in the area. As another participant reflected:

> “Previously, there was cattle raiding because both of us are interested in cattle. Therefore, we fight over it. But now, for them, they are the one causing the problem and then we have to go and revenge because the government equips them [being the *gelweng* in Lakes State] with guns and they were not disarmed and are given bullets regularly. Unlike us who were disarmed. It was only in the crisis that we managed to get guns when we were fighting.”

Though most people admitted that cattle raiding had always been a problem, they referred to the phenomenon pre-crisis as “normal,” comprising of low-level attacks between cattle camp youth usually armed with spears. Of course, this can be somewhat disputed and probably more accurately reflects the politicisation of issues linked to the theft of cattle since the start of the war in December 2013 and historical rivalries between the Dinka and Nuer - it is hard to imagine that the White Army so successfully thwarted SPLA advances equipped with mere spears. Nonetheless, as another member of the cattle camp noted to the researchers:

> “A spear is what we used previously...[because] before the crisis they disarmed us and took our guns. The government is supporting them [the *gelweng*] and giving them equipment, so when they came to fight us, we used our spears and took their guns.”

Flooded with AK-model weapons taken from the SPLA during the course of fighting in 2015, and furnished with a fresh sense of revenge for the cattle looted by SPLA allied forces, the local White Army and neighboring Dinka youth, ordinarily operating under the umbrella of the *gelweng* in Lakes State, started re-engaging in cattle raiding.

It is worth reiterating that, life for many South Sudanese revolve around cattle. They represent much more than a source of food, people cannot marry in most parts of the country without cattle, which create linkages between sub-clans and families when exchanged as part of bridewealth. Cattle are also a livelihood as people engage in the trade
of livestock for other goods, and in the face of the almost total economic collapse, cattle represent one of the few sources for survival for many individuals, families and communities. As members of one cattle camp visited declared:

“We use cows for two purposes. It is our food economic wise. We have no any other person who is earning money from the government. We survive only using our local economy. If we have a food shortage we can kill one and all of us can share and eat it. It is very important for us that we receive cows.” 85

As discussed earlier, the manhood, personhood even, of pastoralist male youth is grounded in their audacity and heroism in both protecting cattle, as well raiding cattle.86 As members of the White Army in Akobo County noted during the previously cited Justice Africa assessment:

“[At the] age of fifteen you will be marked and then you will be given your guns [to defend the cattle camps]. Mostly it is 14 or 15, but if you have no elder brother you start at the age of twelve and you will be given a gun and then you will take care of your brothers and your cows.” 87

This is how most of the White Army in Payinjiar conceived of their role. As one member of the White Army remarked to researchers:

“When they come we are ready to fight them. They come as thieves. There are too many gogams. They cannot come directly to these cattle camps. We will finish them!” 88

While couched in terms of defence, it is clear that Nuer youth in Payinjiar also go to neighboring Lakes State to raid cattle from Dinka youth on the other side of the border. These actions appeared to be justified on the basis of retaliation for looted cattle in the 2015 offensive. Equally, the proliferation of small arms amongst Nuer youth, who in the face of a complete breakdown in rule of law and limited opportunities for economic mobility, led them to raid in order to obtain resources. As one member of the White Army interviewed observed:

“Everything [being cattle raiding] is caused by the clashes. When there is insecurity, this thing of cattle raiding goes up. When there is no war, the things are normal, people are doing their normal jobs.” 89

This led to significant worsening of more localised tensions between Nuer communities in Payinjiar and Dinka communities in Lakes State, particularly Yirol and Rumbek Counties, which were only exacerbated by worsening food insecurity and the search for grazing pastures amongst populations displaced by both conflict and hunger. There were twelve grazing areas that were noted to be of particularly concern for communities with respect to cattle raiding between the youth in Unity State and those in Lakes State. These included: Pachinjok (Unity) and Yirol East (Lakes); Morgok (Unity) and Pagero (Lakes); Lothay (Unity) and Bolmo (Lakes), especially around the Guolgok and Amongping border between Unity and Lakes, respectively where cattle raiding was said to be unusually pronounced; Chuk (Unity) and Rumbek (Lakes); Mayom (Unity) and Maper (Lakes-Rumbek North). Cattle raiding was much more common in the dry seasons when people have to move further to find lands for their cattle to pasture; the swell of cattle raiding post-ACRSS in August-September 2015 corresponded to the end of the rainy season and start of the dry season in South Sudan.

It is worth noting as well, that it was not only cattle raiding and competition over grazing pasture causing tension. Many of those who participated in the research also noted the problems caused by conflict over other resources, including fishing areas. The port in Yirol County (Ayot) in Lakes State, for instance, has a direct border with (Gul) Payinjiar County, causing what one government official called “a lot of issues over the fishing and traders,”90 as traders sought to move down the supply chain to sell dried fish on the Juba market.
Revenge Killing

Revenge killing also (re)emerged as a significant danger for community members within Payinjiar. Like cattle raiding, revenge killing has long been an issue in the area and reflects the more general culture of revenge that persists in many parts of South Sudan. An assessment carried out by Mercy Corps just prior to the outbreak of the conflict, they found that seventy-four per cent, or 3/4 of rural youth in South Sudan were accepting of violence and that 2/3 youth felt that violence was an appropriate method for ensuring the defense of property. In Payinjiar, the number of arms in circulation amongst groups of youth, coupled with the lack of capacity amongst local justice and security providers, mean that youth often took justice into their own hands.

People began taking advantage of the climate of impunity caused by the war to settle old scores between rival families and sub-clans that stemmed from before the conflict. As the researchers discovered, this actually set in motion further cattle raiding. Customary punishments for murder amongst the Nuer in Unity State often constitute a certain amount of cattle paid out as compensation, ordinarily around 100. In fact, the majority of the 87 prisoners visited at the main prison in Ganyiel, as pictured to the right, were there on charges of murder waiting, for the compensation to be paid before they could be released. Since many individuals and families lacked the requisite resources to pay the compensation, the result was that the culprit’s peers would engage in cattle raiding to accrue the amount of cattle needed. If families were unable to acquire the cattle demanded as compensation, the result was often more revenge killing as the aggrieved sought to enact their own form of justice, producing further incentives for cattle raiding, resulting in the constant loss of life.

It should be noted as well, keeping people in prison seemed to be one way in which Payinjiar authorities tried to generate some semblance of community-level peace, as it tended to inhibit the reciprocal targeting of those charged with murder, with the release of murderers contingent on the payment of compensation. That being said, the
prison guards felt that they faced immense challenges in ensuring the safety of prisoners from revenging family members given the makeshift nature of the ‘prison’ (a disused shipping container). Prisoners also feared attack by the relatives of those they killed. This has compounded the already deleterious conditions of detainees who slept eighty-seven to a single container, with inmates forced to defecate and urinate inside the container with other inmates at night so as to avoid the risk of reprisal when venturing outside.

Generalised Insecurity

The proliferation of small arms and light weapons and the disintegration of rule of law also led to more generalised insecurity in Payinjiar, as armed youth predated on local community members. A local government official stated the problem for researchers quite poignantly:

“If we continue with…[this] life, this community will be so dangerous and even me, now I can’t do anything. Youth are killing themselves. It is very dangerous.”

Significantly, the White Army leaders expressed the same sense of helplessness when it came to managing the threats posed by the very armed youth they were supposed to control:

“It is good that we heard during the meeting we are in…that you have seen the prison. If you see that population, it is a hard thing, we can’t hide. We want to show you we have a problem as gogam.”

A collapsing war economy and increasing insecurity limited the youths’ opportunities for economic mobility, with many youth just trying to survive amidst widespread food scarcity. The fighting also interfered with normal trade routes going from Juba up the Nile to the port of Tayir and the rest of Payinjiar, as well as the safety of roads going to neighbouring areas where youth would formerly engage in the trade of cattle and other livestock for other goods. As traders in the main market in Ganyiel noted:

“The big threat to the business is the insecurity on the roads to the supply chain so when we try and bring some goods, we are not secure. People are disturbed on the roads. In all of the directions, we used to go to Rumbek on a short cut and take cows to sell there, but those roads are bad. The only road now is to Juba through the water.”

Traders also referred to having been subjected to taxes on roads and waterways when trying to bring goods into and out of Ganyiel, either via land or river. They also feared being killed by the authorities levying these fines, said to be the SPLA. Coupled with the current exchange rate of the dollar to the South Sudanese Pound (SSP), which “has been in freefall since…[South Sudan] floated its currency against the dollar in December…[2015],” this resulted in sky-high prices for the few goods that made it to the market in places like Ganyiel. This meant that many people, including the armed youth/White Army, could not afford certain good such as food, clothing and other items. The consequence as articulated by the traders was that the armed youth were taking their goods and money by force. As a group of traders announced during a FDG:

“The enemy within is also targeting us, even in the market you can see a lot of youth is moving with guns, this causes fear amongst ourselves…it is very common that youth are stealing from us as traders…you go and they take by force…even though you belong to the same tribe. People are at war, they have guns and we don’t and if you say no they will kill you.”

Armed youth also presented a direct threat to women, facing acute sexual and gender-based violence protection concerns. During FGDs, for example, female research participants communicated that they felt insecure, particularly at night and near the water points, or boreholes. As a group of women asserted to the researchers:
“If at night, you go to fetch water a lot of youth standing there with guns…will not let the women pass there to get water. They prevent them because at night they [the armed youth] want to take showers, therefore, they don’t allow anyone to take water until they finish.”

They continued by saying:

Yes, we are very much scared. We are fearful for two things: They can shoot you if you are quarrelling with them too much, or they can rape you at night. This is why we let them have their time there at the water point. That one of rape…is common…they meet a lovely woman, or girl alone and so they can just rape.”

Knowing that the armed youth far out number local justice providers, including the payam administrators, the commissioner, the police, the SPLA-IO officials, and the gogam leaders, some participants noted that violent incidences and thefts were being recorded if the perpetrator could be identified and kept with local government authorities, until rule of law could be restored and justice meaningfully pursued.

“The Youth are Holding Guns”: Drivers of Localised Violence

Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons

Many Nuer in the area felt as though past disarmament operations in the post-2005 CPA period had been part of a government strategy to eradicate Nuer populations. And while it is likely that many civilians did not hand over all of their guns to government authorities pre-December 2013, it seemed that the White Army in Payinjiar was left at a significant military disadvantage. White Army members and their leaders in Payinjiar articulated that they would either leave with spears, or follow the few members of the White Army who actually possessed guns in order to capture weapons from the SPLA during the fighting in 2015. The White Army and youth participating in the defence of Payinjiar would defeat SPLA soldiers and seize the AK-model guns for themselves, passing on the heavier weapons to their SPLA-IO counterparts. A government official mentioned:

“The government launched an attack here and the youth went with spears and they came back with guns. You see this big truck here, it is from the government…It is the government who brought [the guns]. The youth get more guns and kill more soldiers and that’s how they get guns. Because you know the plan of the Government of South Sudan – they are targeting the civilians and cattle camps and those [White Army from Payinjiar] are good fighters and they will fight you and repel you and get everything they have.”

Certainly, the fact that Payinjiar remained in the hands of the opposition actually probably had less to do with the SPLA-IO proper and more to do with the efficacy of the White Army in defending their homeland from an encroaching enemy. That being said, it is worth noting that, despite the fact that the White Army is much more autonomous from the SPLA-IO, at least when compared to the gelweng’s much closer relationship to the SPLA, once the White Army had defeated the SPLA in the area they relinquished all heavy artillery to the organised opposition forces, explaining that they had little use for, or operational knowledge of such weapons. As one White Army member interviewed in one of the cattle camps remarked to the researchers:

“For us, we only operate the Kalashnikov. We don’t know what to do with the big one [being heavy artillery]. Then we give them to the SPLA-IO and the commissioner…We don’t have any use for them [since] we don’t know how to use them.”

There was some discontent towards the SPLA-IO, whom the White Army felt had not adequately supported them,
noting that the only thing they had heard from Riek Machar was that they should refrain from the use of violence against civilians, looting and pillaging, but delivered no other messages of support.

Preoccupied with community defence during the government offensive, cattle raiding was said to be relatively low in the 2015 dry season “because we…[didn’t] have more bullets.” After defeating the SPLA, however, the area was awash with weapons. As one leader of the White Army commented: “you kill two Dinkas and get a gun for you and your brother.”

Once in possession of new weapons, cattle raiding in retaliation for cattle looted by the Dinka gelweng both during and before the offensive became easier. Without the immediate threat of another government offensive after the signing of the ACRSS in August-September 2015, the White Army (now larger in number) could go on the offensive, rather than remaining on the defensive. One set of FGD participants noted:

“[Cattle raiding] used to be a routine story, but during the conflict…the guns increased in the hands of the youth and even a young aged person, a teenager is holding a gun and this has increased the problem compared to before…Now, people are doing nothing, so they are concentrating on the cattle raiding. It has become very high since the offensive because they [the youth] have lost a lot of resources and want them back.”

A local government official remarked:

“…[I]t was the attack that was launched in May 2015. It was the government…and organised youth [being the gelweng] [who came] to take the cattle at the same time. So they came together. When the fighting became hot, they have a mission. What is now increasing is cattle raiding…the cattle were not recovered within that fighting and more guns were got…now youth have guns and if they come for cattle, now you can recover.”

The diffusion of automatic weapons amongst Nuer youth enabled the continuation and escalation of local-level tensions between the two communities. As detailed in previous research on South Sudan, the uneven disarmament campaigns cited here amplified local tensions, which have since fomented, awaiting a moment to explode into the new phase of inter-communal violence over cattle in the area.

To remedy these tensions, many respondents, including the White Army leaders expressed their desire for community-based, or partial, disarmament. Fearful of a return to all-out war and sceptical of the ARCSS signed in August 2015, participants wanted to run payam-level disarmament campaigns, where youth would relinquish their guns to payam authorities to be kept in a specific (nearby) location. In case of another government attack the youth could simply go and reclaim their weapons to defend Payinjiar as they had done in 2015.

Breakdown in Rule of Law and Shifts in Authority

Localised violence would not be possible if it were not for certain structural factors have accompanied the current civil war and the decades of violence that came before it, including the environment of impunity, the disintegration of rule of law, and shifts in traditional authority. Unabated, the tit-for-tat violent escalation directed inwards at community members in Payinjiar, as well as outwards toward Dinka communities in Lakes state, only intensifies the local-level tensions. This seems to contribute to the cycles of violence that appear to be endemic in South Sudan. As mentioned previously, because the police and other security providers have a marked lack of capacity at least when compared to the sheer number of armed Nuer youth, the names of perpetrators are being written down so justice can be obtained at a later date. As one group of participants put it:

“We record the name. We cannot go to [the armed youth] because they have a gun and there will be a war within…therefore, once
This is further complicated by Payinjiar’s status as an SPLA-IO, or “rebel controlled” area, which in a practical sense means that police, judges and other law enforcement actors are no longer receiving salaries from the state, or equipment for doing their jobs. On account of massive insecurity and the razing of key urban centres, such as Bentiu town, people are also forced to rely on the customary ‘B’ courts, presided over by the traditional chiefs. Not only are these courts prone to being discriminatory towards women and other vulnerable groups, including youth, but they often lack the means for dealing with serious criminal cases, such as rape and murder. Under South Sudanese law, these are designated for referral to the statutory courts, which in places like Bentiu, had ceased to exist. Many of the ‘B’ court chiefs felt overwhelmed both in terms of caseload and their capacity to deal with more serious cases in the context of the current crisis, which severely limited their authority over armed youth.

As referenced earlier, South Sudan’s youth often occupy the tenuous space between ‘hakuma,’ or the formal aspects of government and the military and ‘home,’ being their family and traditional livelihoods, which in Payinjiar, is cattle keeping. The conflict has thrown this position into focus as political elites have competed for the allegiance of male youth, who form the recruitment base of their military efforts. Yet, as highlighted elsewhere, the primacy of the authority of political elites in South Sudan is often assumed. In both Akobo County and Payinjiar it was clear that the Nuer youth in the White Army wanted first to protect their county from the SPLA, and second, to avenge for the massacre of Nuer populations in Juba in the initial days of fighting. This has muddied the traditional distinctions between hakuma and ‘home,’ since hakuma barely exists as a reality in the everyday lives of South Sudanese youth, making youth vulnerable to new forms of predatory authority, but also resistant to the conventional pressures of traditional forms of authority. The chiefs, White Army leaders, payam administrators, local government officials, SPLA-IO authorities, parents and church leaders all expressed the difficulties they faced in controlling and regulating the behaviour of armed youth. As one woman remarked:

“The children who are young men don’t listen to their parents and don’t tell them about their cattle raiding plans. Before the crisis, young people listened to their parents more because parents were better able to provide for them and guide them. As soon as a young man gets his first gun, his relationship with his family and community changes. His priority has shifted towards his gun and his other youths.”

The chiefs charged with administrating the ‘B’ Courts in Ganyliel expressed the same sentiment of a loss of power and control over youth. Contrary to many people’s expectation that a chief’s authority within a community is natural or inherited, in fact the authority of the chiefs in South Sudan is performative, in that it is contingent on their demonstrated ability to deliver justice and other public services to their community. In this case, their inability to atone for the cattle stolen during and since the 2015 offensive eroded their standing in the community in the youths’ eyes:

“Youths are not listening enough to the chiefs. People only listen to you if you are able to solve their problem, but now we are not able to solve their problems because the government took their cows.”

As is often the case in times of crisis, when normal political and social order has been disrupted, other forms of authority can emerge or re-emerge with newfound significance. This seems to have been the case with Nuer prophets or “magicians,” who during this research appeared to be have assumed new legitimacy due, at least in part, to their responsibility for deciphering the bounds of violence and adjudicating between the claims of the same political elites vying for the allegiances of South Sudanese youth in the current conflict. While the prophets/magicians could be both “agents of peace,” as emphasised by Hutchinson and Pendle, they can also be catalysts for further violence.

Either way it seemed that they were one of the perhaps few sources of unity and cohesion among the youth in Payinjiar. Indeed, the magicians probably merited some level of credit in encouraging cooperation between different Nuer sub-clans in defending Payinjiar from the SPLA during the 2015 military offensive and may have actually been
critical to the areas continuing status as one of the few SPLA-IO strongholds in southern Unity State. At the same time, a number of community members felt that the magicians had a vested interest in the continuation of cattle raiding. As one SPLA-IO official stated:

“The magician’s power is mainly based on cattle because if his cattle are raided he gets aggressive and encourages the youth to go and get them.”

With so many cattle taken during the offensive, it was unsurprising that the magicians would want to reclaim their property. But, a number of people interviewed also felt that the magicians had a financial interest in cattle raiding, with some referring to them as “businessmen.” There was a sense that they had become less peaceful and that their material interests in obtaining cattle lost in the offensive outweighed their aspirations for cementing peace and preventing violence. According to some participants the magicians would give the White Army their blessing to go for cattle raids and in exchange youth would bring them back looted cattle. This might be an overly simplified understanding as the magicians and their family members communicated the same challenges in regulating the behaviour of youth as expressed by other participants, including the local government officials, the White Army leaders, the chiefs and parents. Many people admitted that the youth would only listen if what was being advised was in line with their own interests, whether that advise was coming from magicians, or elsewhere. Whatever their role in instigating violence, or propagating peace, the magicians evidently acquired new importance in the post-ARCSS context and should be considered as key stakeholders in cattle raiding and community (in)security.

Additionally, despite the declining moral authority of parents over their children, being able to provide for their own families, as well as marrying, remained critical for the youth that we spoke to. Many have been unable to afford
the increasingly exorbitant demands of parents for their daughters. In times of crisis, parents also often resort to so-called ‘negative coping mechanisms’, engaging in the exchange of their daughters for much needed resources,

causing bride prices to soar even more. While bridewealth might not be the sole cause of cattle raiding, as bridewealth practices have been around far longer than the escalation in violent cattle raiding witnessed presently, the need to pay bridewealth was not far from many youth’s minds. As members of a cattle camp, themselves put it:

“…[T]he root cause of the cattle raiding is that both of us are interested in cattle – we use cattle for marriage and for resources – therefore, we fight over it.”

Cattle lost during the 2015 SPLA offensive also mean that Nuer youth in Payinjiar no longer had the requisite resources for marrying. Moreover, as is the case in many other parts of South Sudan, the norm amongst men is polygamy with more wives equating to more status in the community. In Payinjiar, it was conventionally understood that three wives meant that you had really made it as a man. With bride price ranging anywhere from seventy to three-hundred head of cattle, it is unsurprising that youth might be prompted to join cattle raiding parties in order to mobilise the resources needed for marriage.

The Absence of Livelihoods and Opportunities for Youth

Along these lines, the absence of livelihoods for youth and macro, as well as micro-economic collapse clearly bore an impact on more violence and insecurity in southern Unity. Even before the war, only 35% of youth were earning an income and engaged in daily labour, with most youth working for local businesses, NGOs, or in government posts. As indicated before, the nebulous status of Payinjiar as “rebel controlled” meant that government jobs no longer existent and with the already mentioned insecurity on trade routes and roads and the freefalling SSP, business opportunities for youth became bleak. Prior to the war it was said that youth would engage in the trade of cattle for other goods in the local economy, however, the aforementioned insecurity on major roadways and trade routes has
made this difficult.

As was the case during the last civil war, engaging in agricultural production was also no longer viable. Many respondents felt that tending to the fields was too dangerous in the current context. Similar to other parts of South Sudan, there also appeared to be a sense in which large-scale farming beyond the subsistence level was not worth it in the case of displacement – a well-founded fear given the scorched earth policies of the SPLA observed elsewhere in southern Unity. Considering the widespread proliferation of small arms and light weapons in the area, it seemed to be far easier for youth to pick up a gun and use it to steal from their own, and neighbouring communities. The ensuing idleness of jobless youth was identified as one of the factors pushing them into cattle raiding and other criminal activities. As one community member noted:

“This are more youth in the area who have no jobs, therefore, they resort to the guns they guns [as a] form of easy investment. You can attack and get something quickly. Before they [the youth] used to be in police and army…and drivers and had some money and others joined companies…now those institutions are not in place and they become trouble makers.”

A chief likewise observed:

“…[P]overty forces youth to use guns to gain essential resources…also, fighting has meant that people have not had time to cultivate their land. Guns are the only means to obtain resources.”

Having had their cattle looted during the fighting, many participants recognised that youth had little choice but to engage in cattle raiding and other forms of violence, in the face of limited alternatives for economic advancement; almost all eighty research participants identified this as a major source of cattle raiding and crime. In addition, there were few schools in the area, particularly around the cattle camps, which tend to be situated on the outskirts of villages. Most cattle camp youth had not even made it past primary school, if they had to been to school at all.

“We Don’t Believe there is Peace”: Conclusions and Recommendations

Community Solutions to Community Problems

Demonstrably, it will be critical for international and national policy actors moving forward to consider the dynamics of localised violence and insecurity and the connections between national-level peace and peace at the local level. Without considering the factors that simultaneously drive aspects, such as cattle raiding, revenge killing and community predation at a micro-level, with those that drive the political competition between South Sudanese elites that continues to tear the country apart, there is a major risk of long-term failure. As underlined in other research, neglecting localised conflict and inter-communal tensions can significantly undermine peace settlements and the prospect for durable stability in places like South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. This analysis of cattle raiding and community insecurity in Payinjiar was one effort to support our understanding of the “everyday” perspectives of those living with violence in southern Unity State – rather than the national conflict between the SPLA and SPLA-IO, as is often the case in policy studies.

People in Payinjiar were justifiably doubtful of the sustainability of the ARCSS when Justice Africa and AMA conducted this assessment in May and June 2016 (and shortly thereafter proven correct in their misgivings, when Juba erupted in violence between the SPLA and SPLA-IO again in July 2016). This created a sense that community members such as those in Payinjiar and neighbouring Lakes State, had a responsibility and need for creating a local...
peace. As a local government official put it:

“The peace was signed last year and it is not a peace that we value much. We still suffer when the peace is signed. That is why we need to have our local peace and grass roots effort. This is why we have some Dinka here in Payinjiar.”

Many people at the local level felt that they had been failed by international efforts to broker peace in South Sudan. As members of a cattle camp remark to the researchers:

“Does the international community have no super power over South Sudan to stop them from doing the crime. The innocent people are dying with hunger, disease and all this and fleeing to refugee camps… You have seen that the government is launching an attack here in 2015. The heavy artillery used to target innocent civilians… We are tired of killing each other… [The] peace was signed in August and we have almost had a year. There is no achievement… We have no dialogue at the grass roots… What is the problem? The international community was very active to separate the Sudan…. Why is the international community not involved and active in solving the problem of South Sudan.”

In the same way that people supported community-level, specifically payam-level disarmament programmes, many participants felt that it was important that community peace be reinforced. The contours of what this local peace would look like and how it would be achieved seemed to revolve primarily around dialogue and communications with their “brothers in Lakes.” A local civil society activist from Ganyiel noted how:

“We need grass roots… to bring peace to South Sudan. If the international community starts from the grass roots it will be so good.”

As has been the case in other conflicts between opposing groups in the world, when national conflicts end, the grounds for a working cease-fire between political elites can only be made possible by grassroots efforts, in which people are open to communication.

Inclusion and Dialogue

Accordingly, efforts by national and international actors to mitigate insecurity and cattle raiding need to begin with dialogue. Most people that we spoke to as part of this assessment viewed this as starting, first, with the individual communities in Payinjiar to understand their aspirations and concerns as they were related to localised violence, after which the dialogue could be expanded to encompass a larger exchange with neighbouring communities in Lakes state – an exchange that many people felt should be mediated by an external and impartial body, such as an international NGO. Whatever the nature of the exact mediation, such initiatives need to be inclusive of all of the actors and stakeholders involved, including potential ‘spoilers’ – namely the armed youth and their community patrons, such as the prophets. As learned from past programming efforts in Lakes State by other organisations, specifically CEPO and Oxfam, “[w]hen working with communities in conflict, it is important to ensure those who are actually involved in the conflict are most engaged,” even if they have an incentive in the continuation of violence and insecurity.

This necessitates a more nuanced understanding of actors and interests in South Sudan. Past programming addressing similar dynamics in places such as Jonglei State were for the most part ineffective as the people, specifically the youth, perpetrating the violence were not involved in any of the local-level peace processes. This is by no means surprising. Programming in South Sudan tends to focus on the institutions associated with ‘the state’ despite the fact that the state does not exist as a tangible reality in most people’s lives; this is especially true in places like Payinjiar which are geographically and politically isolated and where people been placed under the control of non-state, or quasi-state actors - in this case the SPLA-IO. As such, local, as opposed to national actors need to be the primary targets and beneficiaries of any peace programming. This is particularly accurate if there is to be any sense of ownership over peace processes – without which people, including the armed youth, Nuer prophets and others embroiled in conflict...
might not be willing to follow up on agreements made on their behalf. Youth should be empowered as agents of change and peace, rather than admonished and alienated on the basis of their participation in violence. Many peacebuilding programmes also start with assumptions about who the ‘legitimate’, ‘peaceful’ and ‘neutral’ actors are in a given context, often elevating the position and status of church leaders, civil society activists, customary chiefs and local government in peace processes. This can be flawed for a number of reasons. Primarily, there is no such thing as an ‘apolitical’ actor currently in South Sudan, where everything from ethnic identities, to administrative boundaries to gender, have become deeply politicised as a result of the civil war. This is as true for more conventional spiritual leaders such as the church, as it is for less conventional actors like the prophets/magicians, who are often excluded by donors. Considering the role of the latter in interpreting the bounds of violence and safeguarding, as well as presiding over the youth perpetration in violence, there are strong reasons why they should be included in peace programming, whether as a stakeholder, or as a spoiler.

Further to this, the Church in South Sudan is often considered the paragon of neutrality, espousing views on reconciliation and forgiveness. Yet, as demonstrated in June 2016 by the New York Times debacle in which the news agency published an article citing that both President Salva Kiir and then First Vice President Riek Machar supported reconciliation and healing over the pursuit of justice, after which they were forced to retract, reconciliation and healing are not apolitical pursuits in South Sudan.

This can also be extended to the role of women. Women need to be empowered for peace and many participants that we spoke to, male or female, wanted exactly that. Yet, this cannot be accomplished through blanket conclusions about women’s perceived gender roles in society and their alleged victimhood, as opposed to agency, in South Sudan’s conflict. As illustrated, in past research, women can be agents of violence in the same way as men. In fact, in a Mercy Corps study it was revealed that female youth were more likely to support violence than their male counterparts (89% versus 87% for females and males, respectively). Likewise, efforts to include women in peace initiatives as part of a ‘box-ticking’ exercise rather than a genuine concerted project to capture their perspectives are equally ill-fated.

Support to Law and Authority

Southern Unity state’s already over-stretched and under-resourced justice system has been all but devastated by this war. The few courts have been destroyed, and their staff unsalaried or missing. The result has been that revenge killing and cattle raiding have increased drastically due to the lack of accountability, and moreover this is further fuelled when those accused are incarcerated in the local prisons, where we see a self-sustaining cycle of violence developing.

(Re)building a functioning justice system in southern Unity – as well as the rest of the country – might be a long-term goal for development actors and local government. At this stage, given that active hostilities in the region have not ceased, rebuilding physical infrastructure is premature. In the short-medium term however, a more viable option would be to establish a mobile court, to travel in the region trying cases, as well as strengthening the capacity of local actors to generate peace and prevent violence, while at the same rectifying practices that victimise vulnerable groups, such as sexual violence survivors and youth. As was noted earlier in this report, the inability of local authorities to deliver any kind of justice, incapacitated as they have been by this conflict, has meant that the youth no longer listen to them. Thus, if the local authorities ability to deliver even the most basic public services was discreetly and modestly supported, their capacity to regulate and manage the youth would likely improve.

Diversifying Livelihoods

As discussed in the preceding section, employment for rural youth has always been an issue in South Sudan and insecurity associated with the current conflict has only further eroded the already limited livelihoods opportunities that existed for them. Even in engaging in trade and agricultural production was not viewed as an option given the...
violence on major roadways and trade routes that inevitably disrupt the prospects of youth earning a living outside of the cattle camp. Still, the ensuing “idleness” of youth was viewed to be one of the major factors pushing them into cattle raiding and other violent behaviour. One option along these lines would be to focus on education targeted at cattle camp youth. Many of the armed youth that we spoke to had not made it past primary school due in large measure to the absence of schools near the cattle camps on the outskirts of villages and the need to defend cattle from rival groups. In fact, many respondents had suggested the introduction of cattle camp-based schools, so that male youth would have the chance of attending school without shirking their responsibilities associated with defence and caring after family cattle. Vocational training and continued education in the form of adult literacy classes would be one way in which to engage youth and combat the “idleness” cited as a source of violence.

Exploring alternative livelihood opportunities will also be important. Though the limited amount of cash in circulation in the main markets in Payinjiar make it difficult to see what kind of targeted interventions could actually produce real opportunities for youth outside of cattle raiding, proper supply and demand and value chain analysis can help identify areas, or gaps in services and goods that could feasibly be filled by youth. Too often, past approaches to youth livelihoods have suffered from a lack of sustainability because organisations go in and train people on what they think youth need, or want. For instance, vocational training for tailors when no tailor jobs exist. Emphasising soft-skills development, alongside literacy training, as well as possibly small and medium enterprise SME might be a viable option until insecurity lessens sufficiently to make past livelihoods such as trading and farming an option for youth again.

Lessons from Past Initiatives

In parts of South Sudan, often with pressure from local and international actors, local authorities have tried to impose a bridewealth cap – that is, a limit on the number of cows that a girl can be married off for – or even its full abolition. Leaders of such initiatives hold the view that this will reduce the demand for massive cattle herds, and the raiding that this fuels. However, bridewealth reduction or abolition in itself will not curb practices of cattle raiding; rather, the reliance on female youth as a source of income would. As such, these initiatives have had little success, even where the local authorities have been compliant in trying to enforce them. Since an educated girl in South Sudan is principally considered ‘valuable’ insofar as she can accrue bridewealth for her family, placing a cap on bridewealth can also have the unintended consequence of generating a disincentive for educating young women. As we have discussed in this report, the drivers of cattle raiding in South Sudan often lie in the structural conditions created by protracted conflict and the attendant underdevelopment and absence of rule of law, and it is these that should be addressed.

Communications, which are part of dialogue, are essential to peace. Indeed many, if not the majority of the respondents in this assessment, expressed the need for communications equipment, such as radios, or satellite phones (Thurayas) since such equipment would facilitate a rapid response to cattle raiding, by enabling local justice and security providers, including the commissioner, the payam administrators, the chiefs and the White Army leaders to intercede youth travelling to neighbouring communities on raiding parties. This is likely a reflection of past NGO programming in the area, which incorporated radios and satellite equipment, in the absence of a working cellular network, to promote exchange between authorities in Unity and Lakes States. As a local government official declared:

“There is a need to set up communications equipment like radios. This is the solution that can solve this problem because for them they know people here who went for cattle raiding…if they have radios in hot spot areas then we hear people are going into this area and the people can take cattle and return it to the owner.”

Such initiatives have to assume that the actors to whom the communications equipment is given – chiefs, for instance – are neutral. In the current political context, where southern Unity is under a rebel military administration, community authorities are unlikely to be truly ‘neutral’, and their selection for the program is unlikely to be perceived as apolitical. At best, this is only a bandage fix for the larger structural problems of underdevelopment and the absence of peace,
which have made communications, or the lack thereof, a problem in the area. Not only is there no cell-phone tower, but more importantly, there is a lack of security on the roads and absence of centralised authority to monitor border areas between Unity and Lakes – something that cannot be resolved through the distribution of communications equipment, at least not in the long-term. The drivers of cattle raiding are not founded in the lack of equipment and “instead need to be posited within the context of the general breakdown of rule of law and the collapse of the norms and social order in many South Sudanese societies.”135 At worst, international interveners risk their neutrality, supporting the communications capacity of a party to the conflict.

Disarmament

Lastly, a comment should also be made with respect to disarmament. For many onlookers the automatic and unambiguous response to the proliferation of small arms and light weapons and the problems that they cause should be some sort of totalising disarmament process. A strong word of caution is in order, however. As discussed in the preceding sections of this report, the uneven disarmament campaigns of the pre-December 2013 exacerbated local-level tensions by tipping the balance of power in favour of communities aligned with a certain set of political elites in South Sudan’s conflict, which has had the effect of undermining both national and local-level peace. Disarmament is an inherently political exercise in this context.

In the short to medium term, a full disarmament campaign across southern Unity should not be attempted. The risks of increased vulnerability of the local communities and mass bloodshed are too high. At most, a partial, voluntary disarmament could be attempted, incentivised with the opportunities of an alternative livelihood opportunity. Until countrywide stabilisation is achieved however, anything more ambitious than this should be put on hold, and instead, a means to ensure that the weapons are not used for offensive purposes or community abuses should be pursued, for instance through community policing programmes. As this report has sought to illustrate, the norms by which state building and associated security reforms including DDR are envisaged – namely the perceived dichotomy between civilians and combatants, and the conception that the state is the ideal provider of security (not the cause of insecurity) – are fundamentally inapplicable in this context. The reality of the situation, whereby the lines are far more blurred and the task of providing community security has long fallen to non-state actors, must be taken as the starting point when developing any disarmament campaign or security initiative.
1. FGD, Chiefs, 1 June 2016, Unity State.
4. As was the case in the immediate post-2011 independence period when there was an escalation of cattle raiding and conflict in Jonglei State between sub-clans of the Nuer and other groups, including the Murle.
9. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
25. Ibid.


30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.


37. Ibid.


42. Ibid.


50. Ibid.


62 Ibid.


67 The Bul Nuer, who hail from Mayom county in the north west side of Unity state, bordering Warrap state, sided with the SPLA early in 2015, most likely due to the complex history of kinship, cattle exchange and political interactions which has drawn Bul Nuer closer to the SPLA than to other Nuer groups.


71 Ibid.


73 Ibid.


75 Ibid.


79 FGD, White Army, 1 August 2015, Jonglei State.

80 Ibid.

81 FGD, White Army Officers, 31 May 2016, Unity State.

82 FGD, Cattle Camp, 1 June 2016, Unity State.

83 Ibid.


85 Focus Group Discussion, Cattle Camp, 4 June 2016, Unity State.

86 Ibid.

87 FGD, White Army, 1 August 2015, Jonglei State.

88 Ibid.

89 FGD, Cattle Camp, 4 June 2016, Unity State.

90 Interview, Local Government Official, 30 May 2016, Unity State.

91 Mercy Corps. Youth at the crossroads: Pursuing a positive path in South Sudan.
92 Interview, Local Government Official, 30 May 2016, Unity State.
93 FGD, White Army Leaders, 31 May 2016, Unity State.
94 FGD, Traders, 7 June 2016, Unity State.
96 Ibid.
97 Interview, Local Government Official, 30 May 2016, Unity State.
98 Ibid.
99 Ibid.
100 FGD, White Army Officers, 31 May 2016, Unity State.
101 FGD, Traders, 7 June 2016, Unity State.
102 Interview, Local Government Official, 30 May 2016, Unity State.
104 FGD, Traders, 7 June 2016, Unity State.
106 FGD, IDPs, 1 June 2016, Unity State.
108 Ibid.
111 FGD, Cattle Camp, 1 June 2016, Unity State.
112 Mercy Corps. Youth at the crossroads: Pursuing a positive path in South Sudan.
114 Ibid.
116 FGD, Traders, 7 June 2016, Unity State.
117 FGD, Chiefs, 1 June 2016, Unity State.
121 Interview, Local Government Official, 30 May 2016, Unity State.
122 FGD, Cattle Camp, 4 June 2016, Unity State.
123 Interview, CS Representative, 2 June 2016, Unity State.
124 Ibid.
Ibid.
Mercy Corps. Youth at the crossroads: Pursuing a positive path in South Sudan.
Interview, Local Government Official, 30 May 2016, Unity State.