INTERRUPTING GANG VIOLENCE: LESSONS LEARNED FROM JUBA IDP CAMP, SOUTH SUDAN



Nonviolent Peaceforce

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Youth Protection Teams Soccer Match Juba IDP Camp, October 2022, ©NP

Background

Intergroup and gang violence is a major concern for South Sudanese communities, particularly those who reside in internal displacement camps. Following the withdrawal of the UN Mission in South Sudan as security actors from sites since 2020, youth groups – which self-identify as gangs – have emerged in greater numbers and become a major safety concern for communities. Violence including physical attacks resulting in injury and death, rape and sexual violence, looting and other forms of harassment have increased as gangs have gained membership numbers and strength.

The severity of this violence and its impact on civilians must be taken seriously as part of a holistic and proactive protection response. As South Sudan continues to emerge from decades of civil war, understanding root causes, interrupting violence at the community level, and providing opportunities for social repair and trust building is an essential component of building sustainable peace.

How to create the connections and conditions for this peace is a challenging question for local communities, humanitarian organisations, and the international community more broadly. This analysis provides a case example of one ongoing and promising engagement aimed at reducing gang-related violence, and explores the lessons this holds for violence prevention and peacebuilding moving forward.

Gangs in Juba IDP Camp

This report focuses on a case study of Juba IDP camp (the former UNMISS Protection of Civilian site), which has been significantly impacted by gang violence, particularly since 2020. Between 2020 and 2022, over 90% of violent incidents reported in and adjacent to Juba IDP camp were linked to youth gangs. Between 2018 and 2023, 28 gang members and 11 other civilians were reported to have been killed, while over 600 people were severely injured because of gang violence. At the peak of membership in 2021, NP estimates that almost 1200 young people belonged to the gangs.

The vast majority (over 90%) of gang members are children under the age of 18. The recruitment of children into gang groups emerged as a serious child protection issue within the camp, exacerbated by the simultaneous withdrawal of all dedicated humanitarian organisations with a child protection mandate. Though the majority of gang members are boys, girls are also joining groups in increasing numbers. Gang leaders actively target girls as part of their recruitment processes.

The driving factors cited by gang members for participating in these activities largely relate to survival in a context of widespread deprivation. Many gang members lack family support networks, access to education, or opportunities to work to support themselves, and use the gang as a social and financial support network. Shared one gang leader, **"You have to go and struggle. You move in a group and hustle someone, attack or rob someone to get what you want. You don't have anything, so you just go and rob to get something to eat."** Gang violence was also related to disputes between gang groups, including over interpersonal and romantic relationships, clan disputes, and abuse of drugs and alcohol.

Impacts on communities

Gang violence is cited as a major safety and protection concern among the community in Juba IDP camp. Physical violence leading to injury and death, theft, the smuggling of drugs and alcohol, rape, and other forms of physical and sexual violence have had deep and lasting impacts on community members. Female-headed households, elderly people, and people with disabilities are often targeted for gang violence. Many households started to equip themselves with harmful objects in their own shelters due to break-ins, increasing the number of small arms and light weapons within the camp. The proliferation of weapons and the persistence of fear and violence within the camp has long-lasting impacts on peacebuilding efforts over the long term.



Youth Protection Teams peace messaging mobilization. Juba IDP Camp, October 2022, ©NP

Attempted Responses

Despite the major safety threat posed by gang violence, attempts to reduce violence through police presence and targeting of gang groups and curfews have not resulted in safe or sustainable reductions in incidents. The primary formal security actor in Juba IDP camp is the South Sudan National Police Service (SSNPS). Though they do not have a static presence inside the camp, they are stationed at a nearby road checkpoint, and come to the camp to intervene during incidents. The police themselves highlighted the violence with which they would use to respond to gang violence: "**We police used to come to treat them, to harass them, to beat them but they would not understand us. They were still doing the crime, killing themselves. The cause of this is hunger, because they have no property or support from their family. If you have something, you will not go out and make the crime, you will listen to your father and go to school and support your family."**

Though periods of increased police presence in the camp had resulted in temporary reductions in violent incidents, these impacts were not proven sustainable. Punitive responses also frayed social relationships between community leadership and gang members further, due to accusations, arrests, and police violence. **"People tried to bring police to the gang, the community leaders. Tried to convince us but it wasn't working. They bring the cops to come and chase us and shoot bullets at us. The cops are shooting the gang. So the gang and the cops are no longer friends, the cops are a threat,"** shared Christian, a leader of a gang in the IDP camp.

The Camp Management Committee (CMC), the community governance body, had also struggled to manage increasingly violent activities of gang groups and their impacts on other community members. The CMC works alongside a Community Watch Group (CWG), a group of community members who seek to manage threats in the camp, often through the use of violence themselves.

When the CMC introduced a curfew in an effort to reduce gang violence impacts, community members not participating in gang activities were often targeted by the CWG when using latrines and other facilities after curfew hours. Trust between the CMC and gang groups was virtually nonexistent: **"They commit false things, say things about the gangs. They don't like the gangs. That's why the gangs dislike the community. They bring the cops to the gang, they call the police to come and arrest us."**

Unarmed Civilian Protection Responses to Gang Violence

Noting the limitations of a punitive and retributive response to this violence, NP has pursued an engagement strategy with gang members, police, and community members, that has resulted in significant reductions in violent incidents within the camp.

Through use of unarmed civilian protection (UCP) strategies – where civilians themselves practice nonviolent methods to prevent and interrupt violence – significant positive trends are being observed.

NP staff began through proactive engagement with youth themselves, focusing on gang members during regular patrols and protective presence activities. Over time and through multiple interactions, NP staff established relationships and trust with gang groups over the course of 2020-21. This trust eventually resulted in gang groups engaging with NP activities directly, including focus group discussions on root causes and drivers of gang violence, training on conflict mediation, GBV prevention, positive masculinities, and child protection.

"We brought them together, because it's not only one group, but more than 10 groups who are fighting among themselves," explained Nyatuel Chuol, the Deputy Team Leader in Juba IDP camp. **"We identified those groups that have conflict among themselves. We mediate them, and then there is a process of building trust among themselves. They come together as one."**

Gang members consistently highlighted the difficulty of their relationships with community leadership and police. They expressed exclusion and being treated as criminals, highlighting cases where they had been accused and punished for violent incidents in which they said they were not involved. NP facilitated a comprehensive dialogue between community leaders and IDP gangs — the first-time gang groups were able to have a face-to-face meeting with leaders to discuss their own issues. **"Now the community and the gang have a connection,"** shared one gang member.

Through the dialogue, NP was able to build trust and the relationship between the gang groups and community leaders. Both parties came to an agreement to continue their regular engagement meetings, and gangs expressed their willingness to support community leaders to maintain the overall safety and security of the camp. Gang leaders themselves expressed willingness for voluntary disarmament as part of their engagements.

After the dialogue between the gangs and community leaders, gangs requested that NP facilitate a dialogue between them and the SSNPS. When NP reached out to the police commander, he refused to have a meeting or any dialogue with the gangs, stating that such a dialogue was against their policy.

Recognizing that SSNPS did not recognize the importance of dialogue, the NP team decided to have a training on UCP with members of the police force. After participating in the training, SSNPS agreed to have a meeting with the gangs to hear their grievances. During the meeting, the gangs shared their frustrations with the police for arresting them and firing guns at them without first hearing the reasons why they were fighting amongst themselves. The police commander became emotional, apologised for wrongdoing, and asked for forgiveness. After the new understanding found during the meeting, the police commander and gang leaders exchanged cell phone numbers and both groups agreed to work together to address violence.

Recently, the gangs and police conducted a mass peace campaign which was successful and increased trust among stakeholders and community members. The two groups continue their engagements independently of NP staff interventions, and both parties have highlighted the improvement in their relations. **"We play football together. Before we weren't friends, if we saw the police that was a threat. But now we are free to go to the police if something is disturbing us. Before we didn't listen to the community, and now we share and they share what they want to tell us,"** shared Christian.

Police officers also highlighted the UCP strategies as effective in repairing relationships with the gang groups, reducing violence, and improving trust with community members: "it brought trust building between we police, the community, and the gang group. Before NP's intervention, the police were deeply concerned by the crimes committed by gang groups and their fighting amongst themselves. They now share that NP's efforts brought trust between the community and gangs. "We meet with the gang group through UCP, and by that it is very impactful, we talk together, meet together. And also they get the chance to move in our area, past the checkpoint. Before this time it is very difficult."

Impact

Though violence remains a difficult reality in Juba PoC site and protection work with all community members remains ongoing, the efforts of the NP team have had a lasting impact on gang membership and gang violence rates. Even during recent escalations of intercommunal violence between Rubkona and Leer communities, people were not drawn into these conflicts based on gang affiliation. Gang membership, and violence between gang groups, has remained consistently low, and reported incidences of sexual violence by gang members has also reduced.

Positive impacts can also be observed, within the community with many former gang members rejoining the community and disavowing their previous connections to gangs. Interactions between current and former gang members with community leaders, police, and other community members have reduced dependency on violence as a first response, decreasing death and injury among community members.

Gangs are now reporting disputes to community leaders and talking with the community freely. The decrease in gang-associated violence has allowed community members greater freedom to move about the camp, particularly in the evening hours when movement was previously heavily restricted. Former gang members are now conducting business ventures, such as driving boda-bodas, selling clothes on the roadside, and running cell phone charging stations, to generate income for their food, education and other needs.

Future Challenges

Many challenges continue to persist including the recruitment of children into gangs due to gaps in child protection programming and the absence of livelihood opportunities for the youth. Without opportunities for employment, education, or productive engagement with the community, may youth will continue to rely on gangs as a source of community and social support. Gang members also continue to struggle with substance abuse. Continued dialogue between gang members, youth, police, community leaders, and community members is necessary to address these challenges.

During the second week of November 2023, there was a mass arrest of youth thought to be associated with gangs. A total of 300 youth were arrested throughout Juba with more than 100 of these youth specifically from Juba IDP camp. Community members shared that youth were targeted for this arrest based on their physical appearance with those wearing their hair in dreadlocks, carrying knifes, or wearing a style of clothing associated with gang membership being arrested without direct proof of gang involvement. This has caused a state of fear among youth in the IDP, which is further exacerbated by the presence of ununiformed police. There have been no reports of gang-associated crimes since the arrest and youth who are now in custody are awaiting individual decisions from authority on whether they will be forcibly sent to police training centers or returned to their communities.

This action was orchestrated by SSNPS at the national level, not the SSNPS forces stationed at the checkpoint outside of Juba IDP camp with whom NP had facilitated dialogues. It is likely to have a substantial long-term effect on the relationship between youth in the Juba IDP camp and forces stationed near the camp. This demonstrates the importance of continued relationship building with SSNPS as a whole, beyond those stationed near Juba IDP camp.

Key lessons:

1. **Relationships and credible messengers are essential**
2. **Engagement with harm-doers and armed actors is critical**
3. **Moving at the speed of trust**

Relationships and credible messengers are essential

The effectiveness of this intervention hinged on long term efforts of NP staff to build relationships with different stakeholders in Juba IDP camp. Many NP staff are long-term residents of the site itself, and well placed to navigate complex relational dynamics that accompany this kind of violence. As credible people within the camp, they are able to identify possible entry points for action, and have sensitive and difficult conversations with stakeholders, where other actors may not. Focusing on the quality of relationships and those who have credibility within their communities is an essential component of this kind of protection intervention.

Engagement with harm-doers and armed actors is critical

Engagement with those who are committing violent acts – in this case, both the gang groups and the police – is often avoided by protection actors in their programmatic responses. Focus is often on reducing vulnerabilities and increasing capacities of those who are subject to harm, and though also important, this overlooks a key element of violence reduction. Engaging with harm doers, seeking to understand the root causes and drivers of their action, and inviting them to be partners in possibility resolutions to conflict, is a crucial element of creating conditions for sustainable peace.

Moving at the speed of trust

Sustainable violence prevention and reduction – particularly in settings that have experienced long-term violence – does not happen overnight. Building trust over time with all stakeholders to a conflict and being patient for entry-points for peacebuilding to emerge, is essential to conflict-sensitive violence interruption and peacebuilding efforts.



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