

Sustainable Peace, Social Cohesion and Women's Participation: The success of the East Mundri Peace Forum.

- On Reconciliation, Forgiveness and Social Cohesion in East Mundri. -



Photo: Peace conference for Mundri East Community at Mundri town-Organized in coordination with church leaders and Yambio UNMISS Civil affairs.26th November 2020

On the 26th of November 2020, as a result of persistent urging and coordination efforts by Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP), the “Community Leaders Forum to Promote Peace and Social Harmony in Greater Mundri” finally happened. The conference, referred to as the Peace Forum, was a gathering of leaders from Mundri East to discuss the ongoing security concerns and how to address these issues as a broader community. The initiative was the brainchild of the Leaders from the Episcopal Church of Sudan, NP, and the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). It is a breakthrough forum for reconciliation and forgiveness in the Greater Mundri region.

NP had been negotiating with the Church about the importance of this forum and the need for its implementation since the end of 2019. After each failed attempt, NP urged the Church to restart the process and continued working with the church to ensure that the Peace Forum ensued. NP played many roles in supporting the organisation of this forum, from communicating and negotiating between the Church and UNMISS, planning the programme, and providing assistance and consultation on the logistics, to mobilising the

relevant people whose attendance was crucial. NP's dedication to serving communities in the Greater Mundri Region and perseverance paid off – the Peace Forum was a great success.

The forum was established due to the violence in East Mundri that has been ongoing since 2015. The conflict that started in 2015, has been largely resolved in the rest of the county – except for East Mundri. Clashes and violence between SSPDF, IO and the National Salvation Front (NAS) have fostered a deep sense of hatred and inter-communal violence. This is why the forum was aimed at encouraging forgiveness and reconciliation – to foster social cohesion between the civilians in the region. NP was the first INGO to re-enter the East Mundri region in 2017 and re-established relationships with the local communities. The result of this has been the reinvigoration of NP's Women's Protection Teams (WPTs) and a commitment to the Peace Forum. Since October 2020, the region has been in a state of precarious peace, although still volatile and considered an Opposition held region by the government. East Mundri continues to face violence, looting, robberies, criminal activity, and other security concerns.

The forum drew participants from Mundri, Jambo, 'Buagyi, Lanyi, Lozoh and Lui – all communities in the East Mundri region. Over the past few years, East Mundri has been challenged by ongoing conflict, looting and other forms of violence. The community of Wiroh, one of the areas most affected by violence, was invited to participate in the

forum, however, due to limited freedom of movement, participants from Wiroh were unable to attend. Despite this, their concerns were still aired in the forum as the inability of the Wiroh community to attend the forum was evidence of the greater security concerns of the region.

In addition to NP's role in establishing the forum, many of the participants interacted and engaged with NP in the past through awareness-raising, training and workshops. As such, many participants vocalised the concerns of their communities using the skills and community-based mechanisms NP interventions had formed. Six members of NP's WPTs were present, representing Mundri, Lozoh and Lui and many of the youth present are part of NP's Youth Protection Team (YPT). Of the 40 participants who attended (due to COVID-restrictions the number of participants was limited), 15 women and five youth leaders attended and participated. The participants comprised of local chiefs, church leaders, three IO officers, YPT and WPT members. The community decided that SSPDF leaders would not attend as this was a community forum and they are (currently) not considered as part of the community. NP acknowledged the challenging nature of including all armed actors in community-based reconciliation and forgiveness efforts as it remains a complex situation. Consequently, NP agreed to conduct further discussions with community members as well as armed actors to explore an inclusive approach, supported by the whole community to encourage sustainable peace. The NP team provided technical support, as well as helping UNMISS and the church with co-ordination and ensuring the forum ran smoothly. The team also worked with the Church on the programme and provided advice and facilitation skills.

"This forum is very much needed as these communities require peace and harmony because they are socially, mentally and economically traumatized." The Executive Director of Mundri West County and guest of honour.

Not only did the forum create a space for local leaders to discuss the ongoing security concerns in East Mundri, the participants were there to discuss how their communities can move forward through forgiveness and reconciliation. One of the most significant aspects of the forum was its focus on healing the relations between the communities in the East Mundri region through forgiveness and reconciliation to encourage social cohesion. It brought together different sectors of the community to discuss their painful experiences to start the reconciliation process and overcome the hatred and inter-communal violence that has been rife since 2015. Participants were relieved at the chance to vocalise their pain and come together to discuss how they could work collectively to rebuild their communities and reconcile with the past.

"Greater Mundri would have developed if there was no violent conflict in the region. The perpetrators of this violent conflict persistently oppress us and mistreat." A 50-year-old chief of Jambo

11 resolutions were put forward as a starting point to ending violent conflict in East Mundri, and the participants encouraged NP and UNMISS to pursue these forums in other communities and at multiple levels – including the national level. These resolutions included urging armed actors to stop sexual gender-based violence against women, the demand for free movement of civilians in the region, working with armed actors to encourage the use of nonviolent

approaches for resolving violent conflict, the formation and training of peace committees in East Mundri to monitor and report violence happening at a grassroots level, and lastly, to organise a Peace Forum for the signatory parties to promote peace and harmony in the region.

"I was born in conflict, grew up in conflict, lost my dear ones for conflict, continue to stay in conflict. I hope after this forum, my family and I will live the best life that we want. Let us together find the best way to end this conflict."
Unice, WPT chair lady Mundri.

Since their establishment, the WPTs have grown in confidence and numbers and, with the assistance of NP, have had a widespread and positive impact in their communities. Many of the concerns voiced at the forum were based on NP interventions and the WPTs attributed this to NP efforts in mobilising and facilitating ways the team can improve the quality of life for women and girls. Many women of the WPTs expressed their gratitude to NP as by attending the workshops and training women felt empowered and enabled to participate in those kinds of decision-making processes. Consequently, women and girls participated during the forum where the WPT members refused to be silent on the violence women suffered during the conflict and the ongoing violence against women. In addition to their personal stories, they advocated for more women's presence and participation in higher-level decision-making processes

"I am asking the local authorities and humanitarian partners to consider women for

high-level forums both within and outside the country so that women can be able to raise their voices against what is affecting them, even if women are not educated, their voice could be translated for everyone to hear, this can end women's suffering." Aya, Lui WPT member

Having attended many NP trainings, the WPT members, YPT members and other participants discussed the importance of social cohesion for a peaceful community drawing on skills developed during these trainings. The social cohesion aspect of the forum is testament to NP's work in these communities. Since the forum and with the assistance of NP, leaders who were present at the forum have started disseminating the information and progress made during the forum to the East Mundri community. In the programmes that occurred since the forum took place, NP teams have received positive feedback from community members in Lui, Langyi and other communities about the success and value of the forum. The Peace Forum was a successful start in the process of reconciliation and forgiveness in the East Mundri region, and NP will be right there working with local actors and leaders to continue facilitating and assisting these initiatives to create sustainable peace.



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