

INTERGENERATIONAL VIOLENCE IN SOUTH SUDAN: SNAPSHOT ON PIBOR



Nonviolent **Peaceforce**

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Background

The Greater Pibor Autonomous Area (GPAA) of South Sudan has been deeply impacted by decades of violence. Armed conflicts at the national, regional and local level have catalyzed the use of violence as the primary method for resolving disputes and deteriorated longstanding social structures. Tension among community members has escalated along generational lines defined by traditional 'age sets', often resulting in widespread intra-communal violence.

Previous interventions have proven to be impactful but greater resourcing and analysis is needed. There is opportunity for local and international partners to collaborate in addressing the root causes of conflict and creating an environment where peace can flourish.

Methodology

NP's ongoing protection work in communities is informed by ongoing context analysis that also informs this report. NP has had a team in Pibor since 2020 and previously from 2012-2013. During this time, NP has worked closely with communities to discourage violence between age sets and support peaceful resolution of conflicts. In addition to this ongoing analysis, this report is informed by 22 Key Informant Interviews with a range of stakeholders including political leaders, women, and youth conducted in December 2023. NP South Sudan has operations in Bentiu, Leer, Tonj, Mundri, Juba, Yei, Pibor, Walgak, Lankien, Ulang, and Malakal, and has been working with communities in South Sudan to implement unarmed civilian protection strategies since 2010.

What are age sets?

The Murle community in the Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA) have a cultural practice of dividing themselves into peer groups along their generations, known as 'age sets'. This practice relates to communal protection: One age-set is the community's primary protector, and the younger age-set challenge them to hone their skills and abilities until they prove themselves capable of becoming the primary protectors of their communities. Once the younger age-set proves themselves, they assume the role of protectors and the older age-set moves on to fulfill other roles in the community. Age sets are an important identifier among the Murle, and individuals from each age set grow old and transition through the passages of life together.

Age sets also have the potential to provide positive benefits such as protection, unity (among members of the same age set), and a workforce that can be quickly mobilized. For example, age sets are often employed to dig boreholes in drought, help elders, demonstrate how younger community members should show respect towards their elders, and create guidelines for how youth should behave in social settings.

Traditionally, younger age sets have tested their skills and development by wrestling older age sets or fighting them with sticks once a year, under the supervision of chiefs. As violence has become normalized and firearms easily accessible due to long periods of conflict in South Sudan, conflict between age sets has become more frequent and violent. This has resulted in greater risk of violent harm to participants and reinforces friction between groups, rather than interdependence. Guns are now used instead of sticks and small disputes between two individuals from different age sets, or between the same age sets from different communities, often resulting in escalating and more deadly violence. This means, for example, that a simple dispute in the market between two individuals can quickly spiral into deadly violence.

Recent Conflict Trends

Throughout the past several years, conflict between individuals from differing age sets has repeatedly escalated to broad conflict between age groups – placing the entire community at risk of violence. Disputes between the Kurenen and Lango age sets¹ have been particularly heightened, leading to a deadly ambush in Kavachoch and consistent fighting in Kelero Boma throughout 2023. Flooding in Pibor, along with land disputes, food shortages, and loss of cattle due to raids further complicated the situation. Tensions between Botonya and Thithi age sets also remain high due to a dispute in August 2023 over the chief's 15-year-old daughter who was promised to be married to a Botonya age-set member who wanted to take her by force. The dispute resulted in the paramount Chief of Pibor having to be rescued by other chiefs from an assault attempt by Botonya age set members.

In addition, new age sets forming or coming of age feel pressures to prove themselves. The youngest age set, known as the Thubezwa, seeks to be respected and have a seat at the decision-making table. These youth were raised during periods of intense violence and often reject traditional leadership and social structures. The possibility of new, or “sub” age sets forming from members of existing age sets that feel overlooked or mistreated also poses a threat. These sentiments are often expressed by those who are on the younger end of an age set and feel as though they are treated like children by their peers, rather than as equals. According to tradition, and new age set that splits off from an existing group is shunned and faces increased pressure to prove itself as a legitimate actor.

Protection Needs and Risks

Analysis of the context in which intergenerational violence is occurring reveals several pressure points that increase release on violence and fracture relationships between age sets. Identifying these pressure points is the first step in crafting thoughtful and timely interventions to address root causes of this violence.

- **Estrangement of youth** – Youth are separating from traditional social structures and often distrusted by older age sets. Current seasonal migration patterns, mean young men are separated from their families and communities early on and this “defection” from the respectively older age set is seen as a threat in a way that has not been the case in the past. When peace processes or attempts at mediation occur, youth are often not included due to their physical or social separation from community leaders. This exclusion then leads to the continuation of violence as youth are unaware of or did not consent to negotiated agreements.
- **Gender relations and violence** - Youth from younger age sets must ask their elders permission to dance, date girls or marry those who have been promised to them. Youth must also conduct cattle raids to gain the number of cows required to marry. Raids are often violent and start cycles of revenge between groups. Many disputes between age sets have begun with individual conflicts concerning courtship, marriage agreements or violence against women.
- **Livelihoods** – The GPAA was very dependent on animal products before South Sudan’s civil war (2013-2018). During this conflict, large quantities of livestock died, limiting a crucial source of livelihoods. Pastoral and agricultural pursuits have also been challenged by extreme flooding and changing weather patterns caused by climate change. This has spurred increased competition over resources and increased levels of violence.

NP Pibor team traveling on Pibor River . Pibor, December 2023, ©NP



- Political disenfranchisement - Pibor is not well connected or represented at the national level, nor is it well connected to international partners. The GPAA was only created as a distinct administrative area in 2020 with political motivations for its creation. The creation of GPAA as a distinct administrative area, has not led to a marked improvement in the political enfranchisement of the Murle inhabitants. Youth do not feel as though there is anyone taking note of their struggles or working to help them build a better future. This failure of leadership at the national and regional level has led to a broader questioning of leadership structures and exacerbated feelings of isolation and hopelessness that often feed into the conflict between age sets.
- Small arms and light weapons – Since the 2013-2018 Civil War, small arms and light weapons are readily available in the GPAA.² This has caused a severe escalation in the violence resulting from longstanding conflicts and cultural practices. The prevalence of these weapons has also threatened community structures as it is easier for armed individuals to ignore instructions from community leaders and avoid consequences due to the power that arms provide.
- Geographic Isolation – Many communities throughout the GPAA are isolated and impossible to access during the rainy season when waters are high. This isolation is a barrier to inclusive peace dialogues because groups are often unable to travel to negotiation sites due to constraints caused by weather or lack of infrastructure. Community tensions also often escalate between members of different age sets when they are isolated in small communities for extended periods of time, leading to competition between groups for resources and increased opportunities for small conflicts to escalate.

Protection Strategies

Existing protection gaps can and must be addressed through strategic, community-led action. Local investment and leadership in these actions is critical to ensure that conflict transformation is sustainable over time and in the potential absence of external actors. As international actors seek to support community partners in addressing the root causes of conflict and creating an environment for peace to flourish the following actions should be prioritized:

1. Engage Youth – Direct engagement with youth is the best strategy to deter violence and equip them to have positive impacts on their community through peacebuilding and protection efforts. Youth have a tremendous capacity to impact their community and set a new peaceful path for their future.

Spotlight on NP's engagement with youth and women:

NP has repeatedly witnessed the impact of youth and women on intergenerational violence through its Youth Protection Teams and Women's Protection Teams. NP currently supports 30 Youth Protection Team members (YPTs) formed with leaders from different age sets on the same team have led to a significant reduction of violence between age groups and increased the frequency and space for dialogue between group leaders. YPTs have established Early Warning, Early Response committees in Lekuangole, Gumuruk, and Pibor counties of GPAA which involve representatives from all the age sets across different Bomas and Payams of every county.

"We lost many members from our age set to this intercommunal fight – now we want to promote peace in the age set and in our communities" – youth in Lekuangole

Recognizing the leadership role women play in advocating for peace and safety in their communities, NP has also trained and supported 30 Women's Protection Team (WPT) members who coordinate two activities each week involving awareness raising on GBV, child protection, and conflict resolution. The WPTs are prepared to respond quickly to conflict between age groups. When conflict occurs, the women split into two groups with one half speaking to the younger age set and one set speaking to the older. The most influential women also go to the government and traditional leaders to make them aware of the conflict.

2. **Meaningfully Engage Women as Important and Powerful Stakeholders** – Women hold widely respected and valuable roles in their communities. As mothers, sisters, daughters and wives, they have unique influence over their family members and significant capacity to positively influence their communities towards nonviolent conflict resolution. The impact of violence on women must be highlighted and their power as leaders in the community supported. Women have the capacity to prevent violent action by utilizing their respected status and calling attention to the destruction that violence causes in their communities.
3. **Adopt a Forward-Leaning Approach Across the Humanitarian, Development and Peacebuilding Nexus** – Many youth in GPAA turn to violence and raiding because they do not have opportunities for education or employment. There is a strong need for humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding partners to engage in a coordinated and holistic way that addresses immediate and long-term needs while also being mindful of underlying conflict dynamics. This triple-nexus approach is crucial to improving the international response which has thus far been siloed and risk-adverse.
4. **Partner with Local Leadership** – Traditional chiefs and other local leaders are well respected throughout the GPAA. In an area that has become deeply disenchanted by state and international authorities, the local leaders continue to be trusted and hold significant power over the actions of those in their communities. The respected roles of traditional chiefs and mothers allow them opportunities to have a strong positive influence on youth and continued relationship building between age sets and local leaders is crucial to addressing conflicts in a peaceful manner rather than resorting to violence
5. **Act Proactively to Address the Prevalence of Small Arms and Light Weapons** – The prevalence of small arms and light weapons throughout GPAA highlights the need for effective conflict resolution that does not depend on the use of violence. NP has facilitated extensive de-escalation and UCP training for community members to present nonviolent alternative for the resolution of conflicts. Despite these efforts, the SALW training implemented by NP has had more impact in towns and Payams surrounding the counties in the GPAA than in remote territories. For this reason, it is essential to continue working on training in this matter, with a special focus on remote bomas in the GPAA. The designation of weapon-free zones in common community spaces such as markets could also be effective in preventing the use of small arms and light weapons in intergenerational conflicts.
6. **Identify Context-Specific Barriers to Inclusive Dialogue** – Dialogues between age sets must be strategically inclusive, ensuring that actors from all relevant regional and social groups are included. Any agreements reached between groups must be effectively communicated to all members of each group with specific plans to ensure that those living in cattle camps and other remote areas are made aware of and involved in dialogues and agreements.

Case Study

In July 2023 the WPTs of Akilo Boma were involved in the pre-dialogues between Lango and Kurenen age sets. The women were part of the peace committee formed by the community to oversee the peace process. The women engaged the youths and encouraged them to participate in the dialogue. Many expressed their views to the youths that as mothers, they are affected by the conflict. They advised the youths to stop the violence and co-exist peacefully as brothers. Later that month, NP supported YPTs to lead a workshop in Pibor town. Youth from ten Payams in Pibor came together to discuss the effect of age set fighting. Among other things, local solutions such as traditional stick fights were encouraged to mitigate the risk of youths fighting with guns. Key age set leaders were also identified and engaged in local peace initiatives to influence their peers.

“When you come to town, you can see many different age sets together, before you could not see this” – youth in Lekuangle

Appendix

Age-Set Name (plural/singular)	Birth Years	Approximate Age	Associated Colors	Associated Animals
Mara/Maren	1930-1940	80s-90s	Yellow/Pink/Gray	Dove/Pigeon
Dorangwa/ Dorong	1940-1950	70s-80s	Red/Blue	Impala
Muden/ Mudech	1950-1960	60s-70s	Gray/Yellow	Rat
Thithi/ Thithoch	1960-1970	50s-60s	Green/Blue	Heron
Bothanya/ Bothot	1970-1980	40s-50s	Black/White	Grouse, Crow, Ostrich, Duck, Goose
Lango/ Langoch	1980-1990	30s-40s	Yellow/Black/Red	Lion
Kurenen/ Kurech	1990-2000	20s-30s	White/Red/Black	Giraffe, Scorpion, Chicken, Bees
Thubezwa/ Thubez	2000-2010	Teens-20s	Black/White/Yellow	Guinea Pig, Leopard