



Case Study

Spotlighting Unsung Community Heroes: A Snapshot of Violence Reduction through Community-led UCP Initiatives in Kuernyuon, Jonglei

South Sudan

Introduction

In the heart of South Sudan – where years of cyclical violence have overshadowed hopes for peace – the community of Kuernyuon in Buong Payam, Jonglei State, has emerged as a quiet yet powerful example of resilience and transformation. Through the leadership of local actors and the support of Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP), a shift is taking place – one that demonstrates how community-led, nonviolent strategies can effectively reduce violence and promote peaceful coexistence.

Since 2021, with support from the Reconciliation, Stabilisation and Resilience Trust Fund (RSRTF) – a joint consortium project funded by different external donors – NP has been implementing Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP) initiatives across greater Jonglei. In this context, the community of Kuernyuon, once plagued by child and women abductions and frequent cattle raids from neighboring communities, has begun a new chapter. Through grassroots peacebuilding efforts, they are redefining safety and community protection.

Despite the politicization of conflict in Jonglei and the persistence of narratives that portray violence as inevitable – often rooted in ethnic identity or livelihood struggles – Kuernyuon’s experience offers a different story. It highlights the transformative potential of UCP in disrupting cycles of violence and advancing sustainable peace through locally driven, nonviolent strategies.



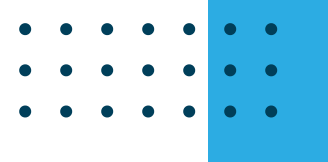
Context

Kuernyuon village sits just 3 kilometers outside of Walgak, one of the larger towns in the Greater Upper Nile region of South Sudan. Situated along the main road connecting Akobo and Nyirol Counties, the Kuernyuon community has experienced an upsurge in livestock raiding and abductions of women and children. Due to its strategic location, the village is vulnerable to attacks by armed groups from the Murle tribe, which crosses from the Greater Pibor Administrative Area to steal cattle and enact revenge killing.



For many, cattle are a principal source of wealth and prestige, and are, therefore, a major driver of conflict in South Sudan. In Kuernyuon (and the wider area), women and girls are being abducted and auctioned off into marriage in exchange for cows. Abductions most often occur while women and children travel between the two Counties and have increased in their frequency since 2021.

More recently, the Kuernyuon community has seen an increase in the number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) fleeing the neighboring Nasir County following recent clashes between White Army and the South Sudan People's Defence Forces (SSPDF). The ongoing displacement crisis has had a significant negative impact on the community, contributing to a culture of fear and grief.



Community-led Protection in Action

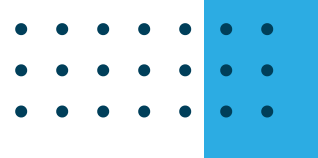
In response to increasing threats and insecurity, NP has worked closely with local leaders, elders, women, and youth to establish an Early Warning, Early Response (EWER) Committee within the Kuernyuon community. This committee has become a cornerstone of local resilience — equipping community members with the tools to monitor threats, share timely information, and coordinate rapid, nonviolent responses to violence.

The committee was established back in 2023 when, after receiving repeated reports of abductions and retaliatory attacks, the NP team organized a meeting with local chiefs and community members to discuss existing self-protection strategies. Previously, residents had relied heavily on armed youth groups to protect cattle and vulnerable populations, which often led to armed clashes.

Following a series of UCP trainings provided by NP – in risk mapping, rumor control and conflict management – community leaders themselves requested support to form a more structured, nonviolent protection mechanism. The idea to establish an EWER committee originated directly from these discussions. It reflected a growing recognition that security could be enhanced through collective, unarmed, community-based strategies.

EWER Committee Composition and Support

GROUP	Role in EWER Committee
YOUTH	Selected for their attentiveness and mobility; especially those used to grazing cattle.
WOMEN	Six actively recruited for their motivation and commitment to community safety.
ELDERS AND CHIEFS	Provided legitimacy and advisory support; reinforced local leadership buy-in.



NP Training and Support Areas

Conflict and risk management	Equip committee members to assess and manage emerging risks.
Community security strategy development	Support creation of localized, sustainable security strategies.
Hotspot mapping and patrol planning	Identify high-risk areas and coordinate protective patrols.
Risk mitigation and nonviolent protection	Promote preventative, peaceful approaches to conflict and violence.

Through these initiatives key risk zones were identified, focusing on areas where women and girls were most vulnerable to abduction – such as water points, routes to markets, and village frontiers. The community's local knowledge, combined with NP's facilitation, led to the prioritization of these areas for targeted interventions.

One of the most notable outcomes of the EWER committee's work was the formation of a Community Watch Group. Comprising trained EWER volunteers, the group began conducting regular rotational patrols across identified hotspots. Patrols were organized in shifts to ensure a consistent protective presence throughout the day. Their presence alone acted as a deterrent, dissuading would-be perpetrators from perpetrating acts of violence. The watch groups accompanied women and children traveling to the market and nearby towns, reducing the risk of abduction. In one instance, women reported being escorted in groups up to Wau (7 km away), reducing fear and encouraging safe mobility.

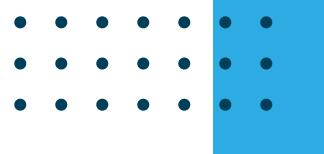
This community protection mechanism differs from conventional watch groups in several ways:

- It is unarmed by design, minimizing the potential for escalation of violence.
- It is community-led, rather than external imposition. While trained and supported by NP, it remains rooted in local initiative.
- It was established through a consultative process, initiated only after NP built trust and received community consent.



“Before joining the EWER committee, I believed violence was the only way to protect our people. But through NP’s support, I’ve come to see that peace is stronger than retaliation.”

– Leader of the EWER Committee, Kuernyuon



Tangible Results and Impact

The impact of these community-led interventions was both immediate and measurable. More specifically, the presence and influence of the EWER Committee and Community Watch Groups have resulted in:

Reduction in Abductions: Patrols now regularly escort women and children from Jonglei, to Wau, significantly lowering the likelihood of attacks. As a result, abduction cases fell from an average of 3 per month to zero, marking a dramatic shift in local security.

Improved Safety Awareness: The EWER Committee's outreach efforts, including awareness sessions and route analysis, have empowered community members with knowledge of high-risk areas. Community mobilizations for revenge attacks sharply decreased, replaced instead by nonviolent dialogue, internal accountability, and collective decision-making.

Real-Time Information Sharing: The community has developed informal yet effective communication networks, using trusted gatherings such as Sunday church services to disseminate safety updates, flag risks, and mobilize local resources for protection. There is a clear shift in community mindset where unity and vigilance began to replace cycles of fear, blame, and retaliation.

Replicable Patrol Model: The rotation system developed for community patrols not only allows for broader participation but also ensures sustainability by preventing burnout.





Cultural and Social Transformation

Beyond improving security, the initiative catalyzed a profound cultural shift within Kuernyuon:

- **Community Ownership:** Community members began taking greater responsibility for their own protection. Chiefs and elders are now more actively involved in protection planning, while women and youth have emerged as key actors in security, advocacy, and response efforts.
- **Women and Elders as Agents of Change:** Women and elders have taken on visible and influential roles in community advocacy, patrols, surveillance, and conflict resolution. Their participation has reshaped traditional norms and demonstrated the capacity of inclusive leadership.
- **Youth Rejection of Retaliatory Violence:** Perhaps most notably, youth have begun to reject the logic of revenge. In early 2024, when young men considered mobilizing against GPA (a neighboring area) following a provocation, community leaders and NP-trained actors intervened. Drawing on the conflict management tools they had learned, the youth instead chose dialogue and de-escalation over retaliation.
- **Normalization of Peaceful Dispute Resolution:** There is now a growing norm of resolving disputes through consultation and compensation rather than violence. Ongoing consultations with neighboring villages, including during community forums, reflect this shift. Before acting, people now gather to discuss and reach consensus – a marked change from past practices.
- **Evolving Gender and Leadership Norms:** As women and youth take on prominent roles in peacebuilding and early warning systems, the community is undergoing a broader cultural evolution in leadership structures and gender roles. Protection is no longer solely seen as a male domain; it is a shared responsibility.

Conclusion

The journey toward peace and stability in South Sudan remains complex, yet the story of Kuernyuon stands as a powerful testament to the impact of grassroots peacebuilding and community-led protection.

Through unwavering commitment and the embrace of nonviolent strategies, the community has not only addressed immediate threats but also laid the groundwork for lasting peace and resilience. The leadership of Kuernyuon's EWER Committee and Community Watch Group demonstrates that even in the most challenging environments, peace is possible when communities are empowered, trusted, and supported. This success story affirms the transformative potential of UCP in Jonglei and across South Sudan. By harnessing local agency and cultivating a culture of nonviolence in a region often defined by conflict, Kuernyuon offers a hopeful model for others. As NP continues to partner with communities, this experience underscores the need for sustained investment in grassroots protection, early warning systems, and inclusive peacebuilding - placing communities at the center of the change they are driving.

