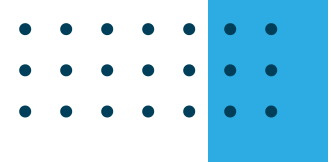




Case Study

Steps Towards Ending Age Set Fighting and Advancing Peaceful Co-Existence in Pibor Town

South Sudan



Introduction

The Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA) of South Sudan has been deeply impacted by decades of violence. Armed conflicts at the national, regional, and local levels have normalized violence as the default means of resolving disputes, eroding longstanding social structures and fueling intercommunal tensions. Among the Murle community, traditional 'age sets'—generational cohorts with defined social roles—have historically functioned as protective and cultural institutions. However, in recent years, these systems have become flashpoints for intra-communal conflict.

Age set fighting, once a culturally sanctioned form of competition, has evolved into increasingly violent confrontations triggered by cattle theft, access to weapons, leadership rivalries, and marginalization. The resulting violence has led to fear, displacement, and segregation within Pibor town, exacerbating divisions along generational lines.

While previous interventions have had some impact, greater resourcing and analysis is needed. There is an urgent opportunity for local and international actors to collaborate in addressing the root causes of violence and building lasting peace.

Between 2020 - 2025, Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) has worked in Pibor to rebuild trust, unite communities, and reduce violence. This case study outlines NP's approach to preventing age set violence and rebuilding community trust.

It explores the impact of Youth and Women Protection Teams, local partnerships, and community dialogue, offering a powerful example of civilian-led protection and peacebuilding. The impact case study captured here demonstrates the power of community-led protection efforts in one of South Sudan's most conflict-affected areas. to preventing age set violence and rebuilding community trust. It explores the impact of Youth and Women Protection Teams, local partnerships, and community dialogue, offering a powerful example of civilian-led protection and peacebuilding.

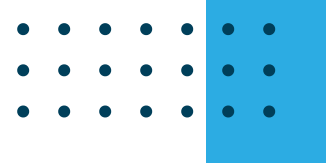
The [Murle community](#) in the Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA) have a cultural practice of dividing themselves into peer groups along their generations, known as 'age sets'.



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'. GPAA consists of eight main age sets: Mara, Dorongwa, Mudén, Thithi, Bonthothnya, Lango, Kurenen, and Thubezwa, each represented by distinct symbols and colors.

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.

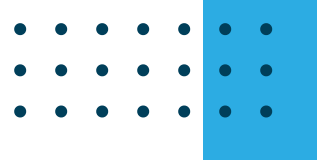
Age sets are an important identifier among the Murle, and individuals from each age set grow old and transition through the passages of life together. Age sets also have the potential to provide positive benefits such as protection, unity (among members of the same age set), and a workforce that can 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.

Community-Centered Protection: What We Did and What Changed

Since 2020, NP has implemented protection programming in GPAA with a focus on reducing age set violence in Pibor town. The program began in response to escalating intergenerational violence and community fragmentation linked to age set rivalries.

Between 2020 and 2025, NP has implemented protection programming in GPAA in response to the alarming escalation of age set violence and fragmentation across the area. The strategy integrated community-based patrols in hotspot areas, risk identification, and sensitization on key issues including small arms, abductions, and conflict mitigation. A cornerstone of NP's approach has been the creation and support of local protection structures: Community Protection Teams (CPTs), Women Protection Teams (WPTs), Youth Protection Teams (YPTs), and Early Warning Early Response (EWER) committees. These teams were trained, mentored, and equipped to play direct roles in identifying and mitigating risks.



The YPTs were established in Pibor, Gumuruk, and Lekuangole counties, comprising 30 members from Kurenen, Lango, and Botonya age sets, and they acted as bridges between NP and the wider community. NP built their capacity through training, mentorship, and awareness sessions on peacebuilding and social cohesion, while also promoting the positive role of youth. NP also facilitated their collaboration with local authorities to ensure they could operate independently under principles of nonviolence and neutrality.

NP engaged in a range of complementary initiatives including child reunification efforts, strengthening of EWER mechanisms in high-risk areas such as Lekuangole and Gumuruk, and facilitation of sustained dialogues between conflicting groups. This included training for traditional and local leaders in peaceful conflict resolution and backing community-led peace initiatives.

Conflict analysis meetings provided space for communities to explore root causes of violence, understand their impact, and propose peaceful solutions. Dialogues and consultative forums allowed different age sets to articulate grievances and fears. These processes led to significant community-driven resolutions, such as the designation of weapon-free zones and the drafting of bylaws regulating gun use in Pibor town.

The YPTs became agents of transformation. Through training, mentorship, and support from NP, these youth facilitated community dialogues, mediated disputes, and organized awareness events. A landmark achievement was the July 2024 peace conference, which brought together diverse youth groups and authorities to establish weapon-free zones, bylaws on gun use, and youth-led patrol initiatives.

“It is essential to continue supporting EWER Committees in border areas like Gumuruk. We are the first ones to see the signs of conflict before it starts. Without us, communities are left blind to early warnings.”

Khamis, EWER Committee member in Gumuruk, GPAA, South Sudan

NP also played a central role in reuniting abducted children with their families and accompanying them safely home. As part of its Early Warning and Early Response (EWER) work, NP strengthened the capacities of local committees to detect risks, respond to threats, and carry out early evacuations in high-risk border areas in Lekuangole and Gumuruk counties.



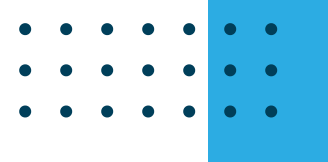
During YPTs led workshop in Pibor town, South Sudan ©NP

In parallel, NP supported peacebuilding through sustained dialogue facilitation between conflicting groups, training for traditional and local leaders in peaceful conflict resolution, and backing community-led peace initiatives. Over time, this integrated approach helped reduce violence, restore freedom of movement, and rebuild trust across divided neighborhoods and communities.

The impact of NP's engagement was visible and far-reaching. In areas once segmented by violence, freedom of movement was restored, and women and girls could safely access public spaces and essential services, including access to firewood collection sites and food distribution centers. Traditional practices such as communal dances and slaughtering have resurfaced as

“When women are involved in protection and conflict prevention, it changes the way the community sees us. We are no longer just mothers or wives, we are peacebuilders too.”

Mary, EWER Committee member



powerful symbols of renewed unity. In a remarkable collective decision, Pibor town and its surrounding areas were declared weapon-free zones by community agreement. Even more impressively, this agreement has been successfully upheld for the past one year, demonstrating a sustained commitment to peace and stability.

“No one believed youth from different age sets could work together. But here we are Kurenen, Lango, Botonya all in one team, protecting our people with no weapons, just commitment.”

Maria, YPT member, GPAA, South Sudan

Age set leaders evolved into peace ambassadors who now resolve disputes, track threats, and promote reconciliation through cultural expression. The YPTs, in coordination with the WPTs, conduct regular patrols and provide protective accompaniment following tensions. Their presence and leadership have created a visible deterrent to violence.

NP’s nonpartisan and inclusive approach built trust across divided communities and secured sustained local buy-in. Local leaders affirmed the transformation as he stated: “Previously, people lived in fear of harassment. Today, the youth lead peace dialogues and ensure weapons are not carried into town.”

“It was because NP strengthened our Youth Protection Team (YPT) that we were able to stop the gunfight. We didn’t just talk, we acted. We followed the fighters into the bush, and they listened to us.”

Juma, YPT member, GPAA

Together, NP and the communities of GPAA demonstrated the power of coordinated, community-centered approaches to conflict prevention and protection. This model of engagement—grounded in local ownership and bolstered by consistent support—has laid the foundation for lasting peace and social cohesion in one of South Sudan’s most challenging environments.

Challenges and Solutions

Operating in the GPAA presents a set of persistent and multifaceted challenges. Seasonal flooding during the rainy season often renders roads impassable and isolates remote communities for extended periods. In many locations, the lack of telecommunications infrastructure makes real-time communication and coordination difficult. Environmental hazards such as bee infestations along riverbanks and dense vegetation create additional physical risks for field staff.

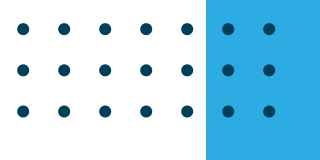
Security conditions fluctuate rapidly, with periodic clashes between armed groups and persistent threats of abductions or cattle raids. These dynamics increase the difficulty of maintaining continuous presence and ensuring safe access to communities in need.

In response, NP adopted flexible, context-specific strategies to sustain operations and outreach:

- **Pre-positioning of Teams and Supplies:** Ahead of the rainy season, NP strategically stationed staff and pre-stocked materials in vulnerable areas to ensure uninterrupted presence during periods of isolation.
- **Alternative Mobility Solutions:** Field teams employed canoes, bicycles, or long-distance foot travel to reach otherwise inaccessible areas.
- **Community Relay Systems:** In places without network coverage, NP established local relay systems using trusted community members to share protection alerts and relay messages.
- **Strong Local Partnerships:** NP's deep-rooted collaboration with local leaders, chiefs, and youth groups facilitated safe access to conflict-prone zones and boosted community acceptance.

Despite these challenges, NP's agility, commitment to nonviolence, and reliance on community-driven mechanisms enabled it to remain present, relevant, and effective in advancing protection objectives across GPAA.





Lessons Learned

The transformation in Pibor reflects the strength of community-led peacebuilding. NP calls for continued support to expand this model to surrounding bomas, with greater investment in youth leadership, intergenerational dialogue, and local protection infrastructure. With the right resources and partnerships, the momentum in Pibor can be a blueprint for peace across GPAA and similar conflict-affected areas.

NP's experience in Pibor has yielded valuable lessons for practitioners, policymakers, and community actors working in conflict-affected contexts:

- **Engagement of Key Leaders is Essential:** Involving influential age set leaders in the design and implementation of peace efforts was critical. Their participation in Youth Protection Teams created vital channels for influence and helped reinforce social cohesion across generational divides.
- **Women's Roles are Multifaceted and Powerful:** Women Protection Teams demonstrated that women- especially mothers and respected community members- can play transformative roles in mediating conflict, calming tensions, and restoring a sense of safety. Their leadership was particularly effective in preventing revenge violence and supporting community recovery.
- **Neutrality Builds Access and Trust:** NP's nonpartisan and impartial approach was consistently cited as a key factor in gaining community trust and enabling sustained presence across all age sets and locations. This credibility was essential in navigating inter-age set tensions and securing cooperation from local authorities.
- **Youth are Central to Lasting Change:** When empowered and supported, youth are capable of leading positive social change. YPTs not only reduced direct violence but also actively promoted peace through dialogue, culture, and civic engagement. Their leadership was a catalyst for intergenerational healing and trust-building.
- **Community Ownership Ensures Sustainability:** The most successful interventions were those that were rooted in local knowledge, driven by local actors, and reinforced through inclusive decision-making. Long-term peace will depend on deepening these local capacities rather than relying solely on external actors.
- **Flexible, Context-Specific Approaches are Critical:** GPAA's volatile environment demanded adaptive strategies. Whether through seasonal pre-positioning, relay systems in network-deprived zones, or cultural messaging through dance and song, NP's success hinged on its ability to tailor interventions to evolving needs.