

Conflict Dynamics in Leer County, South Sudan: Issues, Barriers and Opportunities Towards Conflict Transformation.

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1. Background

South Sudan has gone through decades of conflict. Whereas the longstanding conflict with the north has not been totally resolved, a number of internal dynamics have emerged in the last couple of years that threaten to destabilize the new nation. The ongoing conflict between the Government led SPLM and the SPLM-IO, has brought to the fore, hitherto underlying dynamics that have not had a chance to be resolved owing to the longstanding conflict with the north. Low levels of literacy, ethnic polarization, militarization of the population with easy access to arms and disputes over the distribution of benefits of the extensive oil resources coupled with an unpredictable climate change have all conspired to create a volatile environment.

Leer County in the current Southern Liech State curved from the former Unity State has been one of the hotspot of this conflict. Leer County has experienced serious conflict between government and opposition forces with grave consequences to the local populations. The political class has exploited this situation to align themselves accordingly, dividing the opinions of the population to gain support whenever it is convenient for personal gain.

Leer County has experienced massive human displacement, loss of lives and destruction of property. Fighting has continued until mid June this year and according to UNOCHA humanitarian snapshot released in June, where it was reported that population had to move to temporary protection area (TPA) in Leer for protection. A temporary civilians protection site run by UNMISS. According to the South Sudan Health Cluster Security Assessment report,¹ a number of people estimated at hundreds were displaced to neighboring counties including Panyijar, Rubkona in Bentiu, Old Fangak in Jonglei, Malakal in Upper Nile and Juba in Central Equatoria State and Koch. As result of the conflict that has engulfed the entire country, more than 2.5 millions South Sudanese took refuge in neighbouring countries. 1.84 millions are internally displaced with over 202,043 are currently hosted in protection of civilians sites (POCS)

¹ This Security Assessment report prepared by the South Sudan Health Cluster was current

The conflict which started in December 2013 and which resulted in the recent signing of a peace agreement between the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and the Sudan People's Liberation Army-In Opposition (SPLAM-IO) made worse a context that was already jittery to begin with. The community in Leer, like other locations in South Sudan is predominantly pastoral, located within a swamp that is often an oasis of pasture land in drought periods. As a result, livestock movement from one area to another looking for grazing areas has forced pastoralists to converge in Leer County during drought period. Because of this, and due to lack of enough resources to meet the need of pastoralists, it creates conflict among the communities over the resources. The existing competition over resources provided a fault line on which actors in the ongoing political conflict are able to align themselves accordingly. These conflicts while normal in the past, has taken a different flavor given the high stakes political game at play at the national level.

1.1. Study objective

This report is the product of community consultations conducted in Leer County South Sudan in the months of September and October 2018. The objective of these consultations was to generate community-led opportunities for change, which will feed into 3 payam-level community dialogues. As part of these community consultations, set of methodologies including KIIs, FDG and community dialogue forums were conducted to establish key influencers and their sources of influence locally.

The objective of this study was to provide a clear understanding of conflict dynamics, spanning key issues, actors, institutions and opportunities for community engagement to foster lasting peace in Leer County. The report sought to identify opportunities for engagement with key actors and institutions in a bid to lay the foundation for lasting peace in Leer.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Background

Leer County is one of the nine counties of the former Unity State. It is situated in the southeast part of Unity State, approximately 135 km from the state capital, Bentiu. It consists of 16 payams and 48 bomas. It is the most densely populated county in Unity State, with an estimated population of 53,022 and an area of 1,612 Square kilometers². The county borders Koch County to the North, Mayendit County to the East, Payinijiar County to the southeast and Jonglei State to the East. The border between Leer and other counties is not yet demarcated. At present it is one of the three counties of the newly formed Southern Liech State.

There are flood plains to the south of the county, which is generally flat and below 320 meters above sea level. Leer is inhabited by major ethnic group, known as Dok -Nuer clan, and its major population centres are Leer town, Thonyor, and Adok towns, a large number of the people in this county are internally displaced, while others are island dwellers and pastoralists.

The county can be divided into two risk areas, medium and low, in terms of risk associated with conflicts and natural disasters. The southern and eastern part of the county is flooded during the rainy season. Road communication is totally disrupted during this time but other states and Payams can be accessed via river ways. It rains from May to October, reducing accessibility in affected Payams. Some parts of the county, especially the eastern part of Leer and the islands, are also not accessible during the rainy seasons. Tributaries of the Nile River make some Payams inaccessible.

Leer is a 1.5-hour flight from Juba or a two-day bus drive from Juba, the capital of South Sudan. The roads are not accessible in the rainy season, when the only means of travel is by boat on the River Nile to Juba or most neighbouring counties. There are no commercial flights to Leer, only aircraft operated by WFP-UNHAS. Missionary organizations like the Mission

² GOSS (2010): South Sudan Population Census

Aviation Fellowship (MAF) fly in to support the work of humanitarian workers and to support the Christian churches, which is growing rapidly. Leer County has been described as "a sprawling, flat, marshland littered with oil fields.

2.2. Administrative structure

Leer County is administered by a county commissioner who is appointed by the State governor, this commissioner then appoints a deputy commissioner and Payam administrators with recommendation from each Payam traditional chief/village elders to assist him in administrative issues or providing basic services to the population under his jurisdiction.

2.3. Geography & Natural Resources

Leer falls under the Nile Sobat livelihood zone, which is characterized by heavy black cotton soils, rolling landscape and plentiful water resources. The land tends to take on swampy characteristics during the rainy season. Flooding often makes parts of Leer County inaccessible (such as Guat payam), and also disrupts agriculture though the soil is favourable for agriculture. The County's eastern edge, bordered by the River Supiri, is particularly prone to flooding.

Leer is also an oil-producing county in Unity State. Its main oil field, Thar Jath (which also straddles part of Koch) began production in late 2006. By 2013 the field was producing up to 10,000 barrels of oil per day, according to the South Sudanese government. However many locals say they have not seen the financial benefits of this oil wealth. Owing to the importance of oil to the national economy, the area is heavily militarized and there is a large SPLA base in Thar Jath and SPLA- IO base too.

2.4. Economy & livelihoods

In a 2013 IOM survey, residents responded that their main livelihood activities were farming (35 percent), livestock (34 percent) and fishing (29 percent). The Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET) reports that residents in this region rely chiefly on goat rearing and sorghum production for their livelihoods. In addition, households also raise cattle and sheep and cultivate other crops such as maize, okra, pumpkin and cowpeas. Farming takes place on a subsistence level and less well-off households purchase about five and a half months of their staple cereals

from the market. Sale of charcoal, firewood, grass and casual labor are also common means of livelihood.

2.5. Major conflicts and impacts

The County has seen major displacement as a direct result of fighting, though verification and comprehensive data has been difficult to obtain owing to the area's insecurity. As the conflict unfolded, almost all of the County's population fled into the bush in the early months of 2014. Many Leer residents also sought refuge at the Bentiu UNMISS base (POC), often making the roughly 120km journey by foot. By December 2014 approximately 20 percent of site's IDPs were from Leer (8,831 individuals). Others made their way to the County's eastern port of Adok, on the River Nile, where they took canoes or homemade rafts across the river to Jonglei State and south to Panyinjiar County.

Leer also received IDPs from neighbouring counties during the fighting, with approximately 40,000 IDPs fleeing to Leer following fighting in January 2014. Humanitarian agencies believe the County was hosting some 67,850 IDPs by December 2015. It is unclear how many displaced people have returned from hiding. As of March 2016 Médecins Sans Frontières said that Leer Town was still mostly deserted and civilians still live in fear of armed violence.

Both main warring parties have been accused of committing serious human rights violations during their operations in former Unity state, with some of the most egregious attacks reportedly having taken place in Leer. Most of the town had also been destroyed, including the hospital.

According to a UN report, between April and September 2015, an estimated 1,000 civilians were killed, 1,300 women and girls were raped and 1,600 women and children were abducted in Leer, Mayendit and Koch counties alone. Those estimates are believed to be significantly lower than actual figures. Verification of incidents is difficult because Leer (and other southern Unity counties) was cut off to humanitarian agencies for months at a time, due to fighting. Humanitarian agencies were forced to evacuate from Leer County in May 2015 due to conflict and only able to return after sometimes when calm returned to the county.

2.6. Conflict management.

Adok- Nuer clan like other Nuer Communities is ruled by traditional courts, a head chief and a sub-chief /respected elders of a certain clan. The chiefs, sub-chiefs or elders in the communities must endorse the case among conflicting parties for fine, release or arrest of culprit/evil doers. There are also a number of local organizations' and actors that engage in peace building in Leer such as Local peace committees, traditional and religious leaders have played, and can continue to play, a role in helping resolve inter-community, intra-community and cross-border conflicts. But funding has been largely diverted to humanitarian needs during this current conflict.

According to Community consultative reports conducted in Unity State in May 2012, and compiled by South Sudan for Community security and small arms control, South Sudan Peace and Reconciliation Commission (SSPRC) in Partnership with UNDP South Sudan; most of the major conflicts or insecurity issues in Leer County were found to be caused by Competition over water and pastures, border disputes, attack by Rebel Militia Groups (RMGS), and food insecurity caused by the recurring national or local county conflicts.

The South Sudan government as one of the local peace actors in the area, launched a national dialogue in 2016 for addressing the current conflict in South Sudan, and this was to be carried out at national, state and county levels including Leer County in Former Unity State. The objective of this National dialogue was to engage as many South Sudanese as possible, inside the country and abroad, in a determined effort to end the violence that is devastating the country and turning its social fabric apart. The longer-term objective is not only to end the war, but also to promote a culture of peaceful engagement through dialogue to address the structural sources of conflict at all levels and to institutionalize the process of restoring sustainable peace, security, stability, and development in the country.

3. Methodology

The consultative assessment sought to map out issues, barriers and opportunities towards conflict transformation in Leer. This assessment sought to understand the political economy of conflict in Leer by examining the issues, actors, incentives and institutions that perpetuate conflict. The results helped in identifying opportunities for engagement that will transform this context.

The assessment was a qualitative study that utilized literature reviews, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KII's) to piece together the underlying dynamics that perpetuate conflict in Leer County.

Data collection tools were developed and reviewed together with GIZ before being deployed in the field for data collection. A training session was conducted to ensure the field understood the project, the scope of the consultations and use of the tools. The tools developed for this assignment and attached to this report as an annex include:

1. Focus Discussion Guide
2. General Key Informant Interview Guide
3. Government Key Informant Interview Guide

A total of 4 FGDs were held, 2 (separately male and female) in the three payams of Leer Town, Thonyor and Tochrish. A total of 21 Key Informant Interviews were conducted both in the field and in Juba. These are shown in the table.

Key Informant	Number Interviewed
Government Officials	2
Politicians	2
Traditional Leaders (Paramount Chiefs)	2
Elders (Opinion Leaders)	3
Youth Representatives	3
NGO staff	2
Women	2

Herdsmen	4
Church leaders	2

Field data was analyzed and triangulated by making comparisons between multiple key informant responses, comparison with existing literature as well as field observations.

4. Findings

The war that broke out in December 2013 seems to have cast a shadow on the lives of many people in Leer. Based on feedback from Focus Group Discussions, respondents spoke nostalgically of the progress that had been achieved since the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005: increased availability of water, health services and educational opportunities (including for adult learners); access to news through local radio; increase in trade opportunities, telecommunications services; an improved road network among others.

All this came to a sudden halt following the outbreak of the new conflict in December 2013. There are widespread reports of killings of relatives and friends in both Leer and Juba, the capital city of South Sudan. There are feelings of alienation by people within the army, besides attacks by what is referred to as 'government sponsored militia'. Naath FM, was destroyed and with it the opportunity to receive locally relevant news. Many people lost property including cattle, the source of livelihoods and there is a general perception that the government's capacity to enforce the rule of law is severely damaged.

4.1. Socio-Economic Context

The Nuer people, who inhabit Leer, are ruled by a governance system that links traditional chiefs with the federal government structure. Paramount chiefs who derive leadership legitimacy from local customs and traditions head the sub-clans. While it is difficult to ascertain proportions, majority of the population profess the Christian faith (mainly Catholics and Presbyterians), alongside traditional African practices. Respondents indicated that faith plays an important role in peace building and community unification efforts.

The current conflict fundamentally altered livelihoods in Leer. For a location known for its pastoralism, most people lost their livestock, which are allegedly looted by militia groups during the recent war. They are now trying to find alternative means of survival. Memories of the lost livestock wealth left an unresolved hunger for vengeance and this is nearly visible when fingers are pointed towards people who they consider as being responsible for the loss – they describe them as enemies.

As a result, many people live on desperate times. There is an acknowledgement among many that lack of food and a means for self-sustenance among families is a key cause of reported internal conflicts in Leer.

Leer has seen its share of the conflict. Since 2013, schools have been closed, health centres burned down and medicines looted. NGO staffs providing medical services have lost their lives³.

4.2. Conflict Dynamics

Conflict dynamics in Leer can be grouped into 5 broad themes. These include Politics, governance, resources, culture and intimate partner violence. There is divided opinion as to whether inter-clan ethnic issues are a source of conflict in the current context. It however seems that whereas clan differences might be explosive in a different time, they have been masked by the presence of more pressing conflict drivers including politics, the national conflict, deprivation, lawlessness and the attendant consequences. The section below outlines our findings from the study on the major conflict themes.

4.2.1. Political Conflict

Politics, government and the military are conjoined triplets in South Sudan, and this is clearly demonstrated in Leer. The actions of the army are therefore seen to be (and legitimately so) as having the sanction of the government and by extension national politicians who control the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), which is the political wing of the government.

The national conflict between the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and the Sudan People's Liberation Army - in Opposition (SPLA-IO) has played out to the detriment of many people locally in Leer. There are feelings among locals that government forces have punished them for being ethnically associated with the leader of the SPLA-IO, Dr Riek Machar, given that the former Vice President is originally from Leer, the bulk of his support base is also from Leer and the larger former Unity State.

³ Includes ICRC and MSF staff killed during the conflict in Leer

Locals blame the military for the loss of lives of many people locally (including civilians), with perceived targeting of people associated with the SPLM-IO. Many people report having lost property and livelihoods especially livestock and other movable assets during the conflict. They hold a grudge against what they believe is a military-led, or military sanctioned looting of their property that led to loss of lives and extensive damage to livelihoods.

Aside from the military, the consultations also identified the activities of armed youth militias (Gojam) who support the SPLA-IO as well as other government allied militias both of whom are described as untrained and hostile. The Gojam consists of mainly male youth aged between 14-20 that emerged in the course of the current conflict and fashioned after the White army in the neighboring Jonglei state. These youth are armed and are said to be easily provoked over small disputes and can kill or maim at will. The group together with armed youth believed to come from other counties such as Koch, Mayom and Guit also stands accused of impregnating girls, and are said to rape women and girls when found in isolated places. There are reports of gang rapes of girls and women.

The command structures for the Gojam are unclear although they in principle operate in support of the SPLA-IO. The government-allied militias also operate with their own command structures but are understood to act in support of the government. The Gojam have their own semi-autonomous structures based on clan and are overall responsible to IO leadership.

Government forces and allied militias from Mayendit, Koch, Guit and Mayom are said to have benefited from the conflict by taking away money, girls, cattle and any property that they could find. The government-allied militias are said to be responsible for most of the looting of property and stealing cattle. Local respondents indicated these militias normally would leave after a raid, wait till people are settled down before coming back for more. As a result, the local community has an accumulated sense of fear and resentment. Views of key informants indicated that the government allied militias and the Gojam have similar characteristics and exhibit a sense of lawlessness that is considered worse than the formal SPLA and the SPLA-IO.

4.2.2. Governance Breakdown

One thing the current conflict has succeeded in doing is breaking down the capacity of government to enforce the rule of law. People do not fear consequences for breaking the law, except cases where the threat of military force or violence is evident. As a result, many aggrieved people in Leer have no legal channel to resort to and peacefully resolve grievances against each other. Aggrieved parties often find their own means to settle scores with perpetrators and vice versa creating a vicious cycle of anarchy.

Prior to the start of the current conflict in 2013, issues would be reported to the police who would then refer them to the office of the Paramount Chief. The Paramount chiefs at the Payam level arbitrated issues using local customary laws. When parties were not happy with the resolution at this level, the case moved to the county level. If either party was dissatisfied with the county ruling (main court), the case proceeded to the formal courts in Bentiu where a proper judicial process was held.

The current conflict broke down this system. People are afraid of locking up accused persons in the fear that when a raid happens they will have been effectively been handed over to people they consider enemies. At present, when someone is accused of a crime, a record is kept by the paramount chief in the hope that when peace returns, arbitration will be held. The danger with this is the piling expectations on future restitution that is likely to hang heavily on the community and end up causing new frontiers of conflict if these are not met.

The local government headed by the County Commissioner is seen to be undermined by the presence and activity of military groups (allied to both government and opposition groups). There is a perception among locals that the office of the County Commissioner is a mere formality, but the real power is held by the armed youth in the case of information gathered in Tochriah and Thonyor controlled by SPLA-IO, who are generally considered as a law unto themselves. The County Commissioner as well as the traditional authorities do not command much respect among these armed youth.

There are no local courts; bench courts (traditional/customary) no prisons or police. All these are broken down and need to be rebuilt if there is any

reasonable expectation that the rule of law will have a chance of curtailing the existing lawlessness.

In a few instances, elders have involved traditional powers to arbitrate on issues between people, especially killings by invoking traditional magical powers. It is reported that in some instances this causes accused persons to confess for fear of the unknown. However, the existence of this has not in any way caused perpetrators of violence to desist from unnecessary violence.

4.2.3. Resource Related Conflict

Besides livestock which whose role as a useful productive resource in Leer is diminishing due to loss of livestock to raids, the oil fields to the East of the county block 5A, the port at Adok and fishing constitute key resources important for Leer.

The oil fields are functional but not yet connected to the main export pipeline. This is an important local resource with national importance. Secondly, the port at Adok is a strategic transit port between Juba and Khartoum. As such it turns out that whoever controls this port controls movement of people and goods along the Nile. Transport in the river has been insecure and this impacts operations of the port. Thirdly, fishing and the sale of dry fish is an important economic activity along the Nile. The conflict has impacted many fisher folk negatively since they cannot access key markets hinterland as well as in Juba. Extensive human displacement all through the former Unity State as well as country wide mean initial distribution channels are not there and where the few still remain, their purchasing power is dented. As a result fisher folk who may still access fish, have a limited market since the war.

The residents of Leer have for long had pastoralism as a way of life. Besides cattle, the land and water have acted as useful resources to support livelihoods. Respondents indicated that forces involved in the fighting (with a significant role alluded to armed youth militias) looted the cattle and other visible property. The loss of livestock in particular has hit the community hard as they are forced to learn new ways of survival. Almost every household relies on food assistance by UN and other support by organizations operating in the areas.

Besides losing members of their families, a significant number being productive members of these households, the loss of livestock and the ensuing disruption of livelihoods created significant vulnerability among the people. Many people interviewed view the resulting struggle for survival as being responsible for many of the conflicts witnessed among the people in Leer.

4.2.4. Ethnic/Clan Conflict

There are different opinions in Thonyor as to whether ethnic conflict (understood as inter clan conflict) is one of source or root cause that led to conflict in Leer County. Every payam (sub-clan) has its own youth militia who while they terrorize their people, also act as the clan defense force against external aggression. This external aggression may be in the form of responding to differences with neighboring clans. Many people therefore have a healthy fear of these armed youth and would not want to be seen to be saying anything to suggest that the youth are problematic, especially when this is said in the public context of an FGD. Indeed members of the armed youth who responded to this consultation dismissed inter-clan conflict among the different sub-clans.

It may be argued that while inter-clan competition for resources could be important, it has recently been overshadowed by the presence of other key issues in the current conflict that affect all clans and sub-clans jointly.

There are however pockets of people who remained in the government controlled areas in Leer Town. These people are perceived as pro-government and as peace returns and the possibility of internally displaced people coming back, there is potential for this to start simmering as a new conflict frontier. The people in Leer Town have expressed interest for dialogue with their brothers in other locations and investments in this regard will become necessary to break down tension and address perceived hostilities among the people.

4.2.5. Intimate Partner Conflict

Culturally, the communities in Leer are steeped in Nuer tradition where men and women hold special roles in the home. Men are herders and providers while women take care of homes. In the current conflict, many men have been deprived of their ability to act as reliable providers. This presents a scenario where manly egos are bruised. The resulting

aggression finds an outlet at home where men seek to vent their frustrations by beating their wives over flimsy disagreements.

There are many cases of wife battery and women returning to their maternal homes among other domestic squabbles. In most instances when domestic violence escalates, women bear the brunt of this situation because they end up having to care for the children single handedly. In other instances, neighbors and relatives are forced to care for the affected children.

Many families in Leer live close to each other and when domestic violence and the separations occur, wives move to their maternal homes (most of which are not far off) and often this create hostilities between the two families. These suspicions are rooted in the perception that either side has mistreated their daughters or sons.

Whenever domestic disagreements occur, people tend to generally believe the husband's side of the story. Women's testimony is generally not taken seriously until it is proven beyond reasonable doubt. Women therefore tend to remain perceived as guilty of any accusations leveled against them, while men are presumed innocent until there is clear evidence that they were in the wrong. Till their innocence is established, women continue to suffer both domestic violence and the associated social indignities.

Women do not play significant roles outside of homes where they are considered as caregivers, and churches. They are not consulted nor do they play a decision-making role in issues that impact on the community, including issues that affect women.

4.3. Institutions

Institutions have been defined as the formal and informal rules that organize social, political and economic relations.⁴ They are systems of established and prevalent social rules that structure social interactions⁵.

⁴ North, D. (1990): *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

⁵ Hodgson, G. (2006): What are Institutions? *Journal of Economic Issues*, 40(1), 1-25

These can be both formal and informal. In the section below, we briefly described a number of key institutions that we identified in Leer County and which we believe have a role to play in any future peace building initiatives.

From key informant discussions, there are shifting power dynamics during the war where youthful militia groups aligned to either sides of the conflict because a lot more influential than other hitherto influential institutions like the elders among others. As peace returns, there is potential of the government playing an enhanced role, and this could provide an opportunity to reinstate the elders, work with churches and women groups to institute community based institutions with clear responsibilities for instilling peaceful coexistence among everyone.

During the war, safety and protection considerations were prevalent and those who were perceived to be able to provide actual protection against enemies (whether real or perceived) became influential at the expense of traditionally influential institutions like churches, elders, women groups and others. As peace re-emerges, opportunities

4.3.1. The National & State Governments

The recently created Southern Liech State with headquarters in Leer town where the defunct Leer County, is part of the national governance structure. The national government is represented locally through the State governor and a lean cabinet.

The national and State government have the primary responsibility for ensuring law and order, that people have access to basic services and coordination of service provision by non-state actors.

Up until the signing of the peace agreement, the government controlled parts of Leer Town while the SPLA-IO controlled most of the areas outside of Leer Town. What is clear is that the war caused a severe breakdown in its governance ability in part because of inability to access many parts of the State or counties as well as the conflict dynamics described elsewhere in this report.

Following recent peace developments at the national level and the expected cessation of hostilities, the national and state governments are expected to resume their legitimate role in the State. What form that will

take and how different it will be from how it is currently will largely depend on the outcome of political process that stretches beyond Leer. However, the damage to how people view the government has already been done, and this will take time to be undone.

The government will need to play a central role for any future peace to be sustainable. The office of the Governor assisted by the police and the judicial department holds the legitimate responsibility to ensure peace in Leer. Their ability to discharge their mandate to ensure law and order is achieved is a critical prerequisite for sustainable conflict management.

4.3.2. Traditional Authorities

Elders, led by the local paramount chiefs are the custodians of traditional authority. In South Sudan, traditional authorities have been assimilated in the formal government structure as Paramount Chiefs play key administrative and judicial roles at the Payam level accordance with the Local Government Act of 2009.

Elders among the Nuer and indeed other nomadic pastoral communities in the Horn of Africa play critical roles as sages, making important decisions that affect their communities. Their ability to influence key decisions has been dealt a blow by the conflict. The emergence of gun-toting, armed youth who are answerable to opaque command structures with little regard for the cultural order governed by the elders has somewhat limited their ability to provide wise counsel.

The signing of the revitalized agreement on the resolution of conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) provides a window of opportunity for the institution of the elders to once again to gain respect. They are expected to play an increasingly important role in resolving conflict in Leer in the coming days.

4.3.3. The Military

There are two military wings in the Leer. There are those who are allied to SPLA-IO and the government soldiers under the government of South Sudan, SPLA-IG.

4.3.4. Armed Groups

From the interviews with various respondents, there are local armed militias allied to either side of government or opposition within the county

and the one outside from the neighbouring counties and they further went to say that these groups are alleged to come from Mayendit, Koch, Mayom and Guit Counties. Both groups are associated with number of atrocities committed including cattle raiding, destruction of properties among other crimes in Leer.

4.3.5. The Church

The church is an important institution and people still have faith in it. Many of the people interviewed in Klls, focus group discussions (FGD) and informally expressed their trust in the church and want them involved in issues affecting community. The church is trusted as neutral body that can help in mediating and leading the local reconciliation process in the state.

4.4. Actors

Certain actors drive the themes discussed in the preceding section above. The national conflict has caused the emergence of new actors taking up different roles. A case in point is the role taken up by youth militias especially in light of the breakdown in law and order. Elders on the other hand are struggling to maintain their hallowed traditional authority owing to the existence of the unruly youth. The section below provides an overview of the different actors in Leer, whose actions impact peace and stability in the state in one way or the other. We identify their role and propose how each can potentially be involved in a future peace building efforts in Leer.

- **Elders**

Leaders and traditional leaders are important in keeping peace and maintaining our culture. While elders have always advocated for peace, their influence has been diluted by the overriding national conflict. The signing of the revitalized agreement on the resolution of conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCISS) provides an opportunity for elders to play an important reconciliatory role in Leer.

- **Religious Leaders**

Religious leaders possess unique cross-cutting influence over different people in Leer. They have been organizing a monthly inter-

denominational prayer that brings together Catholics and Presbyterians. They will play an important role in future peace building efforts.

- **Businessmen**

Business people are helping the community by providing goods and services which otherwise could not be reached. Many people have no ability to travel. However, at the moment the trading activities are limited. Many have lost their properties during the war. Some with few things are being targeted and also causes of conflict as some of them are armed.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1. Conclusions

Based on the consultations conducted, it is clear that achieving complete peace in Leer will require addressing a lot of systemic issues that impact the State negatively. Damaged livelihoods, restoration of the rule of law, and healing ethnic animosities that heated up in the recent conflict and wholesomely addressing the plight of young armed combatants are all key towards lasting peace in Leer.

The impact of the national conflict will continue to be felt and it can be argued that resolution of this conflict is critical to sustainably managing local conflict dynamics. Based on our assessment of the situation, the national conflict has taken many forms with the SPLA and SPLA-IO being the key forces at war. However, on either side of the conflict in Leer, there are armed youth militias associated with both sides of the conflict. The *Gojam* (the armed ragtag rebel militia in Leer) and government allied militias share the unfortunate distinction of being armed, untrained and dangerous. These militias (predominantly male youth) share the distinction, of being a law unto themselves and are easily provoked. They have been accused of rape and violence against women, looting and murders. Within the local communities in Leer, they often provide protection to local sub-clans and act in defense of the clan against perceived enemies.

Many local people fled from government-controlled territories especially Leer Town during the war to areas controlled by the SPLA-IO. Based on field interviews with residents in both formerly government controlled areas and those who fled to rebel areas, there seems to exist tension between the two groups. This tension is based on perceptions that those who remained joined the government side in what they viewed as its oppression of their brothers. The view seems to suggest that those who fled accuse those who remained of 'betrayal' of their people. The resulting tension will need to be managed to avoid a new conflict frontier especially in light of reconciliation at the national level and the potential of forming a joint government.

Most people lost property, and livelihoods were disrupted significantly since 2013. This being a nomadic pastoral community, the loss of livestock

has dealt a big blow to both the ability of household heads to provide as well as their dignity. Furthermore, we understand that most people cannot cultivate crops for fear that they will be attacked in the process of doing so, or other parties will harvest the crops. As a result, lawlessness and crime that is driven by the need for subsistence is widespread.

The breakdown of government's ability to enforce law and order play another significant role in encouraging lawlessness. Paramount Chiefs who act as arbiters in local conflicts are not able to discharge their mandate, only recording reported crimes in the hope that when peace returns, there will be an opportunity to review it. There is a little chance that these will finally be addressed. Faced with a lack of formal restitution, many people have resorted to revenge. If this continues, there is likelihood that in future, community complaints regarding atrocities conducted in war, especially within the community are likely to raise a new community conflict frontier.

Lastly, with opportunity that is offered by the recently signed revitalized agreement on resolution of conflict in South Sudan in Addis Ababa, it will be another chance for men to provide for their households which were already weakened, and the domestic conflict and resultant violence that has been witnessed. Women are becoming breadwinners by selling items like tea in the market and this is a reported source of conflict, as husbands demand these proceeds to afford alcohol. Generally the inability of these men to provide for their families is a key source of domestic conflict. When these women return to their homes of origin, there are accusations and counter-accusations that pit different families and when these fall on different clans, this tension has potential to flare up.

The armed youthful militias on both sides of the conflict have taken an important role in the current conflict. These militias have vague command structures though not as organized nor as disciplined as the armed forces. There is word on the ground that apart from their allegiance to their commanders, they also respond positively to key SPLA-IO political leaders and SPLA-IG respectively. A comprehensive initiative is needed to rehabilitate these youth. Engaging with political leadership of both the government as well as the opposition will be critical in reaching out to these youth.

Elders, religious leaders and women are also key actors that must be engaged to ensure the seeds of conflict resolution are laid down.

The government, traditional authorities, churches and armed groups constitute key institutions that will need to be engaged to ensure that the influence each of these have in their spheres can be harnessed for sustainable peace in Leer.

5.2. Recommendations

Leer is a conflict hotspot in South Sudan. An area contested both for its strategic location as well as being the birthplace of the former First Vice President and leader of the SPLA-IO. We acknowledge that quick fix solutions for conflict in Leer will not work. The conflict locally is inextricably intertwined with the national conflict and it must be clear that long term peace locally must be tied to a broad-based national agenda for it to be sustainable. There are elements of the local conflict that are unique to Leer including the location as a conflict frontier, its access to an important port on the river Nile, being home to the leader of the SPLA-IO among others. These issues while local, have national implications and perhaps contribute to and are considered part of the national conflict narrative.

Having said that, we believe there are several opportunities that we identified locally that if addressed will contribute greatly towards reducing local and regional tensions and will directly contribute to reduced hostilities locally. These are discussed briefly below.

- **Manage armed youth**

Youthful armed militias on both sides pose the biggest threat to stability in Leer and by extension other counties in South Sudan. Many of these youth in their teenage years, are growing up at a time when it is attractive to join the militias, while some are forcefully conscripted. As they do these, they lose their childhood innocence while becoming a risk to society. The recent signing of the (R-ARCSS) in Addis Ababa provides an opportunity to demobilize and integrate these youth back into society by identifying areas where they can be meaningfully engaged. Given the damaged government capacity to quickly address this in the short term, development partners will need to take a leadership in this while working closely with government. The involvement of government is critical since demobilization efforts cannot be handled entirely by development

partners, but these partners can support development of sustainable livelihood options for these youth. It may be also useful to identify other relevant opportunities that will re-orient their energies to roles that benefit their communities better.

- ***Strengthen the rule of law***

The breakdown in the rule of law has given rise to violations with impunity. While fingers are pointed squarely at the army and militia groups, opportunistic incidents that include murder, robberies, rape and revenge killings have occurred. As peace returns, strengthening the ability of executive and judicial institutions to enforce peace should become a top priority. This will require working very closely with government to strengthen capacity to deal with the backlog of cases stored in pending lists while ensuring that differences between individuals or communities are given priority hearing for resolution.

- ***Address livelihoods vulnerability***

The war has devastated livelihoods in Leer; many families have no means to assure their livelihoods. A mix of targeted food aid and Unconditional Cash Transfers (UCTs) to affected persons is useful life saving initiative in the short term. In the medium to long term, there is need to identify a range of livelihood opportunities in Leer that may include livestock restocking, conservation agriculture and agribusiness, fisheries among others. This will provide opportunities for households to build self-sufficiency in addressing their own food needs while restoring the dignity of affected persons.

- ***Address marginalization of women***

During these consultations, it emerged that women have no say in important community decisions yet they bear the biggest burden when conflict escalates. There is need to ensure women's opinions are heard and considered in key decisions making at the community level. Women also possess the most significant potential leverage against the armed youth as mothers and sisters. It is instructive that women should be organized at the county and grassroots level to ensure that their voice is heard and that they are represented in community conflict dialogue forums. R-ARCSS has recognized women participation and inclusion in

various governance structures, however, how effective that is something to be seen as it is too early.

- **Community Dialogue Platforms**

During this conflict, a lot of animosity has been generated. A number of groups of people within the community in Leer will require opportunities to engage with each other to resolve past and ongoing complaints. Based on this consultation, we propose the following sets of dialogues to improve relations and address simmering issues that are creating instability in Leer.

- ✓ *Leer Town residents and Leer Town IDPs:* This dialogue meeting will seek to mend differences between former residents of Leer Town and those who left, addressing the accusations of working with people they consider 'their enemies' during this conflict. The proposed participants in this dialogue include but not limited to:
 - Government (both state and county level)
 - SPLA
 - SPLA-IO
 - Community representatives from Leer Town
 - Community representatives from Leer Town IDPs
 - UNMISS
 - Religious Leaders
 - Women representation
 - Elders representation
 - Youth representation
- ✓ *Armed Youth engagement forum:* We propose dedicated dialogue meetings in each payam that seeks to reach out to the armed youth. The objective of this meeting is to reach out to the commanding structures of the youth in order to encourage restraint in their conduct within the community. Subject to availability of resources, we propose that this forum is held in each Payam. The proposed participants to this dialogue will include but not limited to:
 - Government (County and payam levels)
 - Representation from the armed groups (Commanders or leaders)
 - Religious Leaders
 - Elders representation
 - Women representation

- Politicians
- Non-militarized youth representation