What is Youth Violence in Jonglei?

Since the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2005 the state of Jonglei in South Sudan has experienced widespread local violence and insecurity. A generation of “youth in crisis” is perceived to be at the heart of the problem. Based on insights garnered from nearly 150 interviews in Jonglei (Twic East, Duk, Uror, Nyirol, Akobo and Bor) and Juba in the period October 2012 to April 2013, this PRIO Paper demonstrates that there is no “youth rebellion” in Jonglei. Instead, the civil war and subsequent violence has contributed towards expanding the very definition of youth. Currently perceptions of “youth” in Jonglei encompass most able bodied boys and men. Despite increased independence of “youth” vis-à-vis older generations, insecurity and inter-communal violence in Jonglei state have also promoted social cohesion within local communities.

Violence in Jonglei is closely linked to the prevailing security vacuum in rural areas and participation of “youth” in violence is a consequence of the political economy of civil war and large-scale violence, but also their social role and responsibilities as protectors of the community. As long as the state cannot adequately provide security and rule of law, youth in Jonglei will continue to arm themselves.

The report is an outcome of the PRIO research project Youth and Violence in South Sudan. Its findings are based on a multi-disciplinary methodology combining in-depth semi-structured interviews with analysis of a broad range of documentation and academic literature. The project is funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
Summary

Since the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2005 the state of Jonglei in South Sudan has experienced widespread local violence and insecurity. This violence is often described as “tribal” or as an escalation of “traditional” cattle raiding practices through the proliferation of modern arms. A generation of “youth in crisis” is perceived to be at the heart of the problem. Studies conducted by the Peace Research Institute Oslo challenge these perceptions.

FINDINGS

- Rather than a result of ancient cultural practices resistant to change, violence in Jonglei may be seen as a response to the dynamic political and socio-economic post-war environment.
- Violence in Jonglei is closely linked to the prevailing security vacuum in rural areas. The participation of “youth” in violence must be understood as a consequence not only of their social role and responsibilities as protectors of the community, but also of the political economy of civil war and large-scale violence. As long as the state cannot adequately provide security and rule of law, youth in Jonglei will continue to arm themselves.
- The civil war and subsequent violence has contributed towards expanding the very definition of youth. Currently perceptions of “youth” in Jonglei encompass most able bodied boys and men.
- There is no “youth rebellion” in Jonglei. Despite increased independence of “youth” vis-à-vis older generations, insecurity and inter-communal violence in Jonglei state have also promoted social cohesion within local communities. “Youth” are as much victims of violence as they are perpetrators of it.
- Warfare and post-war politics have contributed to reinforce “ethnic” identities and boundaries between local communities. These identities nonetheless remain highly contextual and flexible and may change in response to the dynamic environment, which includes political and economic interests.

These insights imply that instead of promoting quick solutions targeting “youth” as a distinct group, interventions to address local violence in Jonglei need to be multi-faceted and to approach “youth” as an integral part of local communities.
Layers of violence in Jonglei

Jonglei is one of South Sudan’s ten states. It borders Ethiopia east of the Nile. Dinka, Nuer, Murle and Anuak make up most of the population. During colonial times these peoples were divided into political entities known as “tribes” in administrative and anthropological terms. Their livelihood is for the most part based on livestock, subsistence farming, foraging and fishing. During the civil war, especially after the split of the SPLM/A in 1991, Jonglei was a battleground of intense inter-factional conflict. Faction leaders, some allied to the government of Sudan, mobilised civilians to fight, resulting in inter-communal polarisation and a general militarisation of civilians.

Post-war violence in Jonglei is multi-faceted. As in many other rural areas of South Sudan, the signing of the CPA in 2005 did not raise security to a satisfactory level. The people of Jonglei continue to experience inter-communal conflicts wherein groups of armed civilians carry out violent attacks and counter-attacks against neighbouring communities. These are often accompanied by cattle raids, mass killings, and abductions of women and children. Frequent incidents of small-scale cattle thefts, abductions and feuds at the village level are also sources of insecurity and fear. Local violence in Jonglei is linked with the rebellions of the late George Athor and David Yau Yau: both contributed to a flow of weapons and ammunition as well as to mobilisation of local “youth”. The large-scale counter-insurgency operation in Pibor, launched by the government in March 2013, is also a factor in the complex security dynamics of the state.

Because of its scale, brutality and wide-ranging consequences, post-war violence in Jonglei has received considerable attention from the international media, policy makers and humanitarian community in South Sudan. There has been a tendency to see this violence
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through an ethnic and tribal lens, where assumptions about ancient “ethnic” hatred and “traditional” cattle raiding have been linked with recent arms proliferation. “Youth” or young men are identified as the locus of the violence, and the notion of a “youth crisis” has gained credence in the current policy discourse.

Most of Jonglei remains inaccessible for as much as nine months a year, and the Government of South Sudan has therefore identified poor infrastructure, first and foremost the lack of all-weather roads, as the major inhibitor for the provision of security. Combined with further development of telecommunications, roads would contribute to improve government outreach, facilitate trade, and lower the cost of development efforts and services. Building roads in rural South Sudan – especially in flood-prone areas – is, however, prohibitively expensive. And roads and mobile towers alone will not resolve the security problems; in the context of the complex conflict dynamics in Jonglei they might even enable violence.

The government’s main response to local violence in Jonglei has been civilian disarmament, but the results have been mixed at best. The latest campaign, in 2012, which was combined with a peace initiative, seemed initially to be fairly successful in terms of curbing intra-communal violence at the village level in Lou Nuer and Dinka areas of Jonglei. This achievement was largely attributed to an increased SPLA presence and enforcement of the ban on arms in public. The process, however, broke down in Pibor, where the SPLA used force against the civilian population.

Amid continuing insecurity, government policing incapacity and absence of the rule of law, disarmament campaigns become a source of friction between local communities and the state. Representatives of the Lou Nuer and Dinka communities perceive the disarmament campaigns as biased and commonly express dissatisfaction with the lack of government protection. The Murle of Pibor, on the other hand, discern ethnic discrimination and marginalisation within the government sector – a belief strengthened by anti-Murle rhetoric in the public sphere.

Political economy of “youth violence” in Jonglei

“Youth” is not a fixed biological category, but a fluid social construct: becoming a youth is a social process, and one may take on different roles in a dynamic context. While subject to local variations among the agro-pastoralist communities in Jonglei, membership of the “youth” category largely depends on boys’ and men’s ability to protect their communities and take care of their family’s cattle wealth. Their military role is related to social status and specific privileges: it affords them respect, the right to participate in decision-making, and the ability to socialise with girls. Although females also go through a “youth” phase, the local concept of “youth” typically signifies males. The category is further intertwined with age-set membership and its associated privileges and obligations. Among the Murle, Dinka Twic and Nyareweng, age-set systems continue to play roles in social, political and military organisation.

Findings from our research among agro-pastoral communities in Jonglei state indicate

Youth [rienythii] are from 18 years up to 50 years. You can be called a youth if you are capable of doing something and you are still strong. Youth protect the community. We are cattle keepers.

Focus group discussion with village youth (Nyareweng Dinka) from Poktap, Duk county (15.03.13).
that the social definition of “youth” has become broader and more flexible in recent decades. Physical fitness determines to a large extent inclusion in or exclusion from the category of “youth”. Availability of arms has contributed to a further expansion of the youth category; use of a gun does not require the same strength or skill as using a spear. Marital status appears to be less significant in defining male “youth” than female, although married youth are seen as more responsible and hence enjoy more respect in the community. Men seem to remain in the youth category for longer than what was previously the case. Moreover, in the militarised post-war context young boys enter “youth” or “manhood” prematurely, as is illustrated by the initiation of Lou Nuer boys as young as 10. Privileges associated with membership in the “youth” segment may also be compelling incentives for such young boys.

“Youth” in Jonglei are not acting in isolation from their respective communities: they are the cattle keepers and protectors of the family’s cattle wealth, and systems of youth mobilisation are the main guarantees of security and justice at the local level. Their sense of social worth and identity depends on success in executing this role, which also entails participation in inter-communal feuds and conflicts, and even large-scale revenge attacks or wars. “Youth” and their communities at large consider participation in such violence as legitimate and moral.

As the locally recognised protectors of the community, “youth” justify atrocious acts of violence, including large-scale revenge attacks and killing of women, children and elders. The brutality of the violence must also be seen in relation to the inter-factional fighting during the civil war. In many areas the codes of fighting ethics has eroded because of the war-time politicisation of ethnicity and redefinition of the social and spiritual consequences of homicide.

Although “youth” participating in large-scale revenge attacks seemed to enjoy broad support in most locations, we observed some local variations. In areas severely affected by violence, e.g. Nyandit in Akobo and Lekuongole in Pibor, many women, especially among the older generations, expressed their discontent with the “youth’s” continued engagement in the spiralling violence due to its devastating impact on their lives and livelihoods.

The structural backdrop for the broadening of the social definition of youth is the government’s incapacity to enforce the rule of law in rural areas. Recent re-arming of youth in Lou Nuer and Dinka areas of Jonglei, and establishment of community police, have further strengthened the perception that the government has tacitly abandoned to local communities its responsibility for maintaining security. This has consequences for the social status of “youth” and for generational dynamics in post-war rural Jonglei.

Going to Murle land is automatic. We go for revenge. We even told the government that if they don’t disarm the Murle we will go for revenge. This was after the attack on Pieri [in Uror, August 2012]. So it was very legal. People were told to go by their leaders. […] When it happens it is good if all go. It is a source of income. It will keep the youth busy. It is something good because they don’t have any employment with the government.

Focus group discussion with cattle camp youth leaders in Waat, Nyirol (02.03.13).
Generational conflict?

In Lekuongole the Lango are between 18 and 28 years old, but we are still not rebelling. In 2008 we started to rebel. But after this the tribal crisis came to our area. The elders said we cannot fight when the enemies are attacking us. This is why we became quiet. We rather stay united and face the enemy.

Interview with youth from Lekuongole payam, Pibor county, Juba (22.04.13).

Discourses on “youth in crisis” explain youth mobilisation into violence as a rebellion against political and economic marginalisation within their communities, including older generations’ monopoly of power and control over livelihood assets. Findings from Jonglei indicate a somewhat different explanation. We must from the outset distinguish between long-lasting practices of struggles for generational ascendancy and widespread assumptions of war-induced up-rooting of youth and destruction of systems of social control and mutual dependency.

Among the Murle of Pibor younger age-sets are supposed to demonstrate their eligibility for responsible adulthood through a ritual or social performance in which violence plays an important role. Since entitlement to privileges associated with “youth” or manhood can be obtained only through membership in the dominant age-set, younger age-sets are expected and even encouraged by the community to rebel against the ruling age-set. While traditionally using sticks and clubs, in the post-CPA era there have been a few isolated incidents where members of the rival age-sets have used guns against each other, e.g. between Lango and Botonya in Gumuruk in 2011.

Competition between Murle age-sets is a rite of passage overseen and regulated by the older generations. It is not, as the “youth crisis” discourse often implies, an outcome of generational conflict or of war-induced tearing of the social fabric. The younger age-sets cannot

Lou Nuer youth carrying the flag of his bull in a cattle camp outside Waat payam, Nyirol county (March 2013). Photo: Ingrid Marie Breidlid/PRI/O
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afford to dismiss completely the authority of the older generations because generational ascendancy also depends on social recognition by the community – and not simply on the assertion of physical strength. Moreover, when facing a common enemy internal power struggles may be set aside in the interest of unity within the community.

Following forceful disarmament in Pibor, members of rival age-sets (Botonya and Lango) joined Yau Yau’s movement. This can be seen as an indication of the “youth’s” commitment to fulfil their security role in response to external threats. Tensions between the rival age-sets within Yau Yau’s rebellion, however, indicate the fragility of this alliance. Moreover, some individuals and groups have used their weapons to conduct attacks against neighbouring communities. These actions are not sanctioned or controlled by the community or older generations. The elders’ ability to provide advice and guidance to the younger generations is further challenged by continuing conflict and subsequent internal displacement.

Although the violence in Jonglei should not be understood as symptomatic of generational conflict or youth in crisis, generational relations have undergone drastic changes over recent decades. The political economy of the civil war and post-war period, including “youth’s” role in this violence – either as armed civilians or as rebels – seems to have contributed to an increased socio-economic and political independence of “youth” vis-à-vis the older generations. The civil war shaped new structures for leadership and mobilisation of young men in rural areas, which are still employed for protection and large-scale inter-communal violence. Not only are the “youth” able to make decisions on matters pertaining to security, but their participation in large-scale raids and revenge attacks has arguably resulted in a redistribution of cattle wealth between generations in at least some parts of Jonglei.

Our findings indicate that accumulation of cattle wealth is an important incentive for youth’s continued engagement in violence, and that trade in looted cattle and abducted children also form part of the complex post-war economy. Following large-scale raids or revenge attacks, youth leaders among the Lou Nuer and Dinka and red chiefs within the Murle age-sets are responsible for dividing captured cattle among the fighters. While not obliged to share with elder generations, fighters may also distribute a few cows to family and kinship members. Moreover, other actors may also receive shares of the cattle, e.g. prophets, chiefs and individuals with political or military positions. Since participants in large-scale raids and attacks receive the main share of loot, some “youth” have accumulated large amounts of cattle wealth. Many elders, on the other hand, have lost their herds in raids and have not been sufficiently compensated by the government or their own “youth”.

A likely consequence of the redistribution of cattle wealth is the older generation’s increased economic reliance on “youth” and the latter’s enhanced ability to pay bride wealth with their own cattle. Although they still need the blessing of extended family and in-laws to avoid social sanctions, this may give “youth” more freedom when choosing a wife. Further research is required on how trade networks and mechanisms of cattle distribution have changed during the civil war and post-war era.

While the older generation is dependent on youth for physical protection and livelihood, youth need the advice and knowledge of elders for their own social survival, including marriage and their ambition for a social legacy through the continuation of the family bloodline. Cattle keeping and the cattle economy further continue to be a cohesive force within the community – reinforcing collective identities by linking social life with the ancestral past and coming generations. In an increasingly unpredictable and volatile world, the authority
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and perceived powers of spiritual leaders, such as the prophets and the Kuaar Muon [Earth Priest], is attracting Lou Nuer youth. In this way many youth find meaning for their participation in violence and its consequences. Hence, despite increased independence of “youth” from older generations, insecurity and inter-communal violence have also promoted social cohesion.

Meanwhile, warfare and violence have contributed to reinforce ethnic identities and boundaries between local communities. The current politicisation of ethnic identities must be seen in relation to the legacies of the civil war and more recent violence in Jonglei, where political and military actors appeal to ethnic identities and local grievances in pursuance of their own agendas. For instance, the current antagonistic relations between the Murle communities of Pibor and the “others” have been exacerbated by a derogatory discourse against the Murle.

Mobilisation for offence and defence usually takes place at the tribe or sub-tribe level, e.g. between Lou Nuer clans, or between Lou Nuer and Jikany Nuer or between the Murle of Gumuruk and Dinka Nyareweng – and not between all the Dinka and the Nuer or Murle peoples. As witnessed in the post-CPA period, mobilisation can also take place across tribal boundaries in face of a common enemy, e.g. the Lou, Gawaar Nuer and Dinka Nyareweng against the Murle of Lekuongole. However, while strengthened in the face of an external enemy, these identities remain highly flexible and may change in response to the dynamic environment – as illustrated in the fragile unity between the Dinka Nyareweng and Lou Nuer as well as within the different communities.

Policy implications

The “youth problem” must be addressed as a part of the acute crisis of rural insecurity in Jonglei. The large-scale clashes in recent years are a result of a general mobilisation of men and boys willing and able to fight on behalf of their communities. Instead of singling out youth, efforts to mitigate the violence must encompass all segments of the community.

Youth as a social segment must be disaggregated when addressing their role in violence. It is necessary to distinguish between different age segments, but also between cattle
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Camp youth and town youth. An eighteen year old returnee living in Bor has little in common with a forty year old cattle camp leader in western Akobo or a Murle youth from the Lango age-set in Lekuongole.

A wide spectrum of violence in Jonglei requires multiple and localised approaches. Leadership, organisation, participation and social support of the various forms of violence differ within and between various communities. The dynamics of large-scale inter-communal violence and small-scale cattle raids may be very different. Variations in social structures further necessitate localised engagement strategies. Moreover, local violence is sometimes closely intertwined with political conflicts at the sub-national, national and even regional level. This has important implications for conflict mitigation approaches and the identification of relevant actors. Such efforts should be based on systematic mappings of the complex security and conflict dynamics within local communities.

The Government of South Sudan should change its approach to disarmament. As long as the government is unable to provide security and the rule of law in rural areas, “youth” will be reluctant to give up their arms, or will rearm as soon as insecurity arises. In the short term, measures could include a gradual introduction of gun control and transfer of protection responsibilities from local youth to civilian police authorities.

The Government of South Sudan needs to increase its efforts to protect all local communities in South Sudan. An increased presence of trained and well-equipped security personnel in rural population centres could contribute to alleviate a general sense of insecurity. This should be accompanied by construction of all-weather roads and telecommunication infrastructure, which will increase government outreach, improve inter-communal communication and stimulate trade and socio-economic development. However, where relations between the SPLA and local communities are strained, deployment of the SPLA should be carefully planned and the background of personnel and officers given greater emphasis. Long-term reconciliation and confidence building measures are required to establish amicable relations between the Government of South Sudan and local communities.

Sensitisation campaigns are required at the national and sub-national levels to dismiss prevailing myths regarding the “Murle”. Negative discourses and stereotypes of the Murle people reinforce antagonistic relations between local communities in Jonglei. Important in this regard are the popular narratives of child abductions and “Murle infertility”. Although further research is required on the complex political economy of abductions, they are not linked to infertility among the Murle but constitute an important element in the history of conflict in Jonglei and elsewhere in South Sudan. Information campaigns aimed at government officials, adults and school children at the national and state levels, as well as in rural areas, can contribute to banish this and other myths circulating in Jonglei and further afield.

Mobile inter-communal courts should be introduced to regulate and enforce social control mechanisms to mitigate the spiral of large-scale revenge attacks in Jonglei. Compensation mechanisms for homicide, abducted children and women as well as raided cattle are vital in this regard.

Spiritual leaders can be both peace enablers and spoilers. It is important to identify spiritual leaders with influence over “youth” in Jonglei. These leaders must be given the opportunity to play constructive roles in peacebuilding and conflict-mitigation efforts.
Further reading


Harragin, Simon. “South Sudan: Waiting for peace to come a study from Bor, Twic East and Duk Counties in Jonglei”, Local to Global Protection, 2011.


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