**“When youth are holding guns, they are**

**not listening to anyone”[[1]](#footnote-1)**

**Critical Reflections on Youth, Conflict and the Prospects for Peace in Rubkona and Greater Unity State, South Sudan**

**Analysis**

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**Introduction**

South Sudanese youth have found themselves trapped at the centre of violent political competition. Their lives are distinguished by violence, dependency and exclusion. Unsure how youth relate to broader nation and state-building projects in the country and sidelined from decision-making that invariably impacts their futures, they are caught between the competing pressures of wanting to shape their own path forward and political, social and economic systems that subordinate their interests. Prized for the role they play in protection and warring, for example, male youth have been mobilized by political and military elites to fight battles on their behalf. At the same time, they have been denied access to the profits that such violence brings. Conflict has also left many young males dispossessed, robbing them of the resources they may have once had and instilling a sense of contestation over increasingly scarce resources. As one report on the situation of youth put it, [y]oung people have been both the greatest perpetrators and victims in this war, instrumentali[z]ed by political and military leaders…while also deprived of a future, of livelihoods, marriage and of establishing themselves as meaningful members of society.”[[2]](#footnote-2)Female youth are frequently denied the opportunity to be youth altogether, with early child and forced marriages, care labor and sexual and gender-based violence restricting their chances of participating in actively in society and reinforcing their subordination to economic and social structures that treat them as property. While the Revitalized Agreement for the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) provides a window for working to transform this cycle of conflict and discrimination and place youth at the forefront of efforts to forge sustainable peace at the grass roots level, it also supplies new opportunities for violence. The war that began on 15 December 2013 is just the most recent in a long history of conflict and has merely served to reify divides between communities, increasing the prospects for future violence.

Nowhere is this more true than in Rubkona and greater Unity State where the splits between different ethnic groups have served as the basis for violent competition since the previous civil war with north Sudan in the 1980s and 1990s. The area has also witnessed some of the most recent conflict’s most intensive fighting, with widespread human rights violations and displacement from 2014 onwards. Populations have been stripped of their assets, most notably livestock, which is the foundation of the livelihoods the communities who reside in Unity State. Political and military actors in the conflict have also used pastoralist-based male youth as “force multipliers,”[[3]](#footnote-3) leaving a large contingent of loosely aligned armed cattle keepers whose key motivation for violence appears to be one of material reward rather than one of political ambition.[[4]](#footnote-4) Excluded from the R-ARCSS, these young men are now a major source of instability, with violence and crime being their only avenues for accessing resources, as well as a sense of belonging and empowerment. Not surprisingly, localized violence in the form of livestock-related conflict have proliferated as people seek to atone for losses incurred during the war, utilizing the lull in hostilities that has followed the signing of the new peace agreement to avenge for past grievances. The result is a sense of uncertainty that has prevailed against the backdrop of the peace deal that was meant to bring an end to fighting. While thawing modestly, relations between communities are still dominated by a “with us, or against us”[[5]](#footnote-5) narrative, limiting the space for neutrality and undermining the prospects for peaceful co-existence.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Humanitarian partners will continue to have to confront these realities when operating in Rubkona and greater Unity State moving forward. Internally displaced persons (IDPs) living in the Protection of Civilian (PoC) site on the base of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) and elsewhere have started to return, as have those living abroad as refugees. This could ignite tensions and conflict connected to the complex political dynamics of land, livestock and resource access. The following analysis was an effort by IOM’s Transition and Recovery Unity (TRU) to better understand how peacebuilding efforts could prevent potential violence linked to returns, re-establish diminished trust between incredibly divided communities around Rubkona and greater Unity State, as well as enhance female participation in peace-making activities. It sought to use the voices of youth and their communities as the basis for contextualizing peacebuilding in the area and contemplating how to advance future interventions.

 ***Methodology***

This analysis is built on local fieldwork conducted by IOM’s Conflict Analyst in June and September 2019 in Bentiu PoC, Bentiu Town, Rubkona Town, Nhialdieu and Din Din. The Conflict Analyst, together with the TRU’s Conflict Mediation Specialist based in IOM’s Bentiu Sub-Office engaged a variety of participants, including: community leaders; customary chiefs; local government authorities; ordinary men and women; humanitarian and development partners; and most importantly, male and female youth. Building on past research experiences in South Sudan the fieldwork utilized a qualitative strategy that sought to emphasize people’s own perceptions where participants were given the space to share their perspectives on issues related to peace and conflict. Such an approach enabled the Conflict Analyst to collect more fine-grained and contextualized information, as well as the more “everyday” views”[[7]](#footnote-7) of those most impacted by violence and crisis in Rubkona and surrounding areas in Unity State. It also ensured that the priorities and opinions of beneficiaries, themselves, were placed at the forefront of analysis respecting the political, economic and social situation in their own country,[[8]](#footnote-8) making research participants the primary source of knowledge about their own situation.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The analysis encompassed around 123 participants who were relatively equally distributed across gender and residence inside and outside of the Bentiu PoC site (see Table 1 below). An additional eight key informant interviews were also carried out with humanitarian and development partners operating out of Bentiu. Questions and prompts employed by the Conflict Analyst revolved primarily around evolving concepts of gender and youth, displacement and return, as well as the prospects for peace and/or the continuation of violence and conflict. The resultant details were supplemented by a review of relevant academic and grey literature, which helped to shed light onto topics of gender, youth, peace and war, and to historicize and further contextualize data obtained from focus group discussions and in-depth individual interviews. Spending two weeks in Rubkona over a three month period also allowed the Conflict Analyst to visibly observe changes associated with both the progress and stagnation with regards to the implementation of the R-ARCSS, as well as better understand the environment in which peacebuilding and other activities for violence reduction take place.

 ***Table 1. Gender and Location Breakdown of Participants***

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Female**  | **Male**  | **Total**  |
| **Bentiu PoC Residents**  | 40 | 19 | 59 |
| **Non-Bentiu PoC Residents** | 25 | 39 | 61 |
| **Total** | **65** | **58** | **123** |

**Context**

***Violence and Division in ‘Unity’ State***

Notwithstanding the promises that South Sudan’s transition to independence on 9 July 2011 provided, the country has continued to be marred by conflict and chronic underdevelopment, unable to deliver on the dividends that peace and independence should have supplied. Even before the outbreak of the war on 15 December 2013, intercommunal violence between various communities was widespread, driven, in part, by unaddressed grievances and divisions stemming from the previous civil war with the Khartoum government in the north of Sudan. When fighting broke out in the capital, Juba at the end of 2013 between forces loyal to former Vice President, Riek Machar and forces loyal to President Salva Kiir, these divisions served as a ready base for the mobilization of communities against one another under the banner of the broader national conflict. Unity State is probably one of the more emblematic examples of this dynamic. The area was considered to be the site of a “Nuer civil war” with the Khartoum government in north Sudan backing different factions of the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA), with the principle divisions lying between Riek Machar from Leer on the one hand, and the late Paulino Matiep from Mayom, on the other.[[10]](#footnote-10) Intra-Nuer killings during this period were said to be proportionally much higher than homicides amongst any other ethnic group in southern Sudan, which according to other research was “…for no other reason than that Nuer men have fought on every side of every political schism that has radiated outward from Khartoum and Juba over the past 60 years.”[[11]](#footnote-11) The fissures between Nuer clans that were created have been at the forefront of much of the contemporary conflict in the area and continue to pose considerable hurdles to the peaceful co-existence of communities.

After South Sudan’s independence in 2011, Unity State was comprised of nine counties, including Pariang, Abdienmhom and Mayom in the north, Rubkona, Guit, and to some extent Koch, in the centre, and Leer, Mayendit and Panyjiar in the south. While the Dinka retain an enclave in the northern counties of Pariang and Abdienhom, the state consists chiefly of different Nuer clans and sub-clans – the distinctions between which remain central to both national and local-level conflicts. As other reports have pointed out, the name ‘Unity’ is largely misleading with major fault lines falling between different Nuer clans in what is otherwise a predominantly Nuer state.[[12]](#footnote-12) Developments in the post-independence period did little to alleviate tensions. Violent disarmament campaigns in the period following the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005 and South Sudan’s subsequent independence in 2011, for example, acted to exacerbated the already deeply entrenched divisions that existed.[[13]](#footnote-13) Weapons stocks in the area were rarely, if ever destroyed, instead placed in the hands of political and military elites who would simply re-allocate them to both protect their own communities, as well as expand their personal herds, precipitating a pattern of deadly cattle raiding and inter-communal violence in what was supposed to be one of the more peaceful chapters in the country’s otherwise tumultuous history.[[14]](#footnote-14) Present-day political and conflict dynamics have reinforced many of these divides. The continued politicization of clan identities as a result of the war that started nearly six years ago, particularly amongst Nuer clans has further bolstered the importance of ethnicity, specifically the “clan” as the basis of the area’s ‘disunity,’ dismantling the possibilities for neutrality in the current context.[[15]](#footnote-15) As other research has argued, this has deepened the broader crisis of how Unity State relates to the SPLA and nation-building projects in South Sudan[[16]](#footnote-16) – a crisis that is clearly reflected in the precarious position of youth in the area who remain trapped at the centre of violent political competition.

The area has also witnessed some of the worst fighting and violations of the war. Throughout 2014 and 2015 government forces and their allied militias, including the Bol Nuer groups from Mayom launched a series of successive offensives down the principle frontline running from Bentiu and Rubkona to Leer, attacking SPLA-In Opposition (IO) strongholds in Koch, Mayendit and Leer.[[17]](#footnote-17) The violence has taken an immeasurable toll on civilians. 10,000 people are thought to have died between 2014 and 2015.[[18]](#footnote-18) Between May and December 2015 alone, 1,430 civilians were estimated to have been raped and an additional 1,630 abducted.[[19]](#footnote-19) The SPLA alongside their allied militia also engaged in large-scale raiding of civilian livestock – the mainstay of Nuer communities in Unity State and the foundation of people’s livelihoods and coping strategies. According to one report, widespread raiding had two interrelated aims, devastating the livelihoods of the Nuer in southern parts of the state, specifically Leer and Mayendit and punishing those perceived to be aligned with Riek Machar and the SPLA-IO.[[20]](#footnote-20) The scope of the raiding during the first two years of the conflict was so pervasive that, at one point, there was said to be more than 100,000 heads of livestock in Bentiu and Rukona, with others brought to other government-controlled areas in Mayom, Koch and Leer towns.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Although the next two years saw a pacification of the kinds of violence that had characterized 2014 and 2015, political developments added new strains on already divided communities, for instance, through the unilateral establishment of 28 states by President Salva Kiir in late 2015. The creation of Ruwang State, which encompasses the Dinka-ruled enclaves of Pariang and Abdienmhom placed the Unity State oil fields in the hands of the Unity State’s otherwise marginalized and isolated Dinka population to the north.[[22]](#footnote-22) To amalgamate Pariang and Abdienmhom into one state, a triangle of land (see map of Unity State counties below) from Rubkona (now part of Northern Leich State under the new state system) was effectively appropriated by Ruwang. This cut the Nuer off from Sudan and Khartoum and placed almost all of Unity State’s lucrative oil resources in government-supporting areas. While clashes between communities in Rubkona and Ruwang have been minimal since the alteration of state boundaries, the issue is considered to be a major source of potential conflict. There is a recognition that should the land problem not be adequately addressed, violence between Unity State’s minority Dinka areas and majority Nuer could transpire, specifically the Leek Nuer in Rubkona. This will be all the more likely as populations start to return to Rubkona, including in triangle that now falls under the jurisdiction of the newly created Ruwang State.

Then there was the break within the SPLA-IO that followed clashes in the capital, Juba in July 2016 when Taban Deng Gai split from the rest of the opposition, assuming Riek Machar’s role as the First Vice President in the new transitional government. This lead to the formation of what was colloquially referred to as the SPLA-IO-1 under Riek Machar and the SPLA-IO-2 under Taban Deng Gai who is a Jikany Nuer haling from Guit, east of Bentiu. The split reignited tensions, with Taban Deng Gai’s forces accused of recruiting and mobilizing troops against Riek Machar’s forces in the area, generating additional divides between pro-Machar and pro-government Nuer communities in Unity State and provoking competition over resources in an environment that continued to be marked by a worsening humanitarian crisis and economic decline, even after the heavy fighting of 2014 and 2015. It also increased the number of formal military entities in Unity State to four, including: the government under the SPLA, or what is now the South Sudan People’s Defense Forces (SSPDF); the SPLA-IO under Taban Deng Gai who have been more, or less integrated into the SSPDF, the SPLA-IO under Machar, mostly made up of Jikany Nuer from Guit and the Bul Nuer militias under the leadership of Matthew Pujlang with the latter three corresponding to various Nuer clans in different geographical pockets of Unity State.[[23]](#footnote-23) This, of course, does not include the large number of armed, male youth in Unity State who have associated themselves variously with different political and military elites, but who have retained some semblance of autonomy, leading to a fluid security situation and fluctuations in territorial control throughout 2016 and 2017. Today, many of these youth are engaged in banditry and criminality, including along some of the main roads leading into Rubkona and Bentiu. With few opportunities, participating in violence and crime have become one of the chief ways through which these young males can access resources and gain a sense of empowerment.

It should be noted that, cattle raiding during various episodes of violence have not only stripped populations of much needed assets but has also exacerbated and created new tensions. Matthew Puljang, a Bul Nuer from Mayom, had reportedly given orders to “raid and pillage in the south,”[[24]](#footnote-24) worsening the divisions that had emerged out of the intra-Nuer conflicts during the previous civil war with the north. Warring parties were also able to exploit an economy dominated by pastoralism. The mass displacement of populations in Unity State into urban centres and towns where humanitarians and others were able to respond to the needs of civilians enabled the SPLA and their allied militias to operate in otherwise deprived rural areas, seizing livestock that where then distributed to government-controlled territories, or back to the capital, Juba where they were sold.[[25]](#footnote-25) This, in turn, led to continued raiding as communities have tried to retrieve assets lost during the war and restore resources, leading to the persistence and extension of more localized manifestations of violence, specifically cattle-related conflict against the backdrop of the larger lull in hostilities.

***Map 1. Unity State****[[26]](#footnote-26)*



Although 2016 and 2017 witnessed a suspension in large-scale hostilities in Unity State, the cumulative effects of the conflict there continued to be deeply felt by civilians.[[27]](#footnote-27) In addition to heightened tensions between Nuer clans, the inability to cultivate on account of mass displacement and continued insecurity, contributed to severe food insecurity with famine declared in Leer and Mayendit in southern Unity State in February 2017. 2018 then saw yet another large-scale government offensive against southern areas, intensifying the already dire humanitarian crisis in an area that was just beginning to recover from some of the long-term effects of the violence in Unity, including severe food shortages and starvation. Starting in late December 2017, there were a series of clashes between the SPLA-IO under Riek Machar and government forces around Bentiu in Rubkona, Nhialdieu, Jazeera and Koch.[[28]](#footnote-28) Then in April 2018 the government and their allied youth militias, mostly from Koch, Guit and Runokna launched yet another offensive on southern Unity in Leer and Mayendit in an effort to clear out the opposition.[[29]](#footnote-29) The offensive in many ways mimicked previous attacks on southern Unity with the government “….relying on proxies, as a force multiplier, as well as clan-based youth military to carry out and bolster its military offensive.”[[30]](#footnote-30) Not only did the patterns of violence mirror those of previous periods in 2014 and 2015, but as human rights reports made clear, some of those that appeared to be responsible for the wave of attacks on southern Unity in 2018 were the same individuals thought to be responsible for violations in the past offensive in 2015.[[31]](#footnote-31) 40 villages were attacked, during which time 120 girls and women were raped and gang raped, 232 civilians killed and 19,995 people displaced.[[32]](#footnote-32) The abuses occurred just as people were returning to their villages and planting ahead of the lean season and seemed to be aimed not only at displacing civilians, but at explicitly preventing their return. [[33]](#footnote-33)

While the offensive had largely concluded by the middle of 2018 the onset of the dry season towards the end of October that same year saw the renewal of violent confrontations between pro-Machar and pro-Taban forces in places like Koch and Guit. Even after the signing of the R-ARCSS on 12 September 2018, government forces, including those operating under Taban Deng Gai were said to be engaging in a recruitment exercise, particularly around Rubkuai in northern Mayendit, which was apparently being done in order to shore up numbers for Taban Deng Gai ahead of the cantonment and later integration and unification of forces as part of the agreement.[[34]](#footnote-34) Things started to improve slowly towards the end of the year, especially in late December when the incumbent governor of the newly created Northern Leich State and the SPLA-IO governor led the Bentiu PoC and Bentiu Town in joint peace rallies. Despite these improvements, however, civilians remained at high risk throughout the second part of 2018, which is especially true for women and girls who continued to be vulnerable to violence. Just as the country was mobilizing for the ’16 Days of GBV Activism’ at the end of November 2018, there was a spike in sexual violence against women and girls traveling to access much needed aid. This was part of a broader trend that saw a surge in attacks against female populations by armed elements, especially armed youth on footpaths near Guit and Nhialdieu when traveling to, or from Bentiu Town and the Bentiu PoC site between September and December 2018, with 134 cases of rape and gang rape and 41 cases of other forms of physical and sexual violence.[[35]](#footnote-35) The escalation in such cases demonstrated the precariousness of the area’s newfound relative stability for women and girls and just how deeply embedded violence continued to be in Unity State despite the signing of the deal.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Sexual violence is not the only form of abuse that has persisted against the backdrop of the renewed peace agreement either. Inter-communal violence, particularly in the form of cattle raiding and theft, as well as revenge killings have been endemic, driven in part by the large number of arms in circulation in the area and the abundant amount of armed youth who had previously been mobilized to participate in military operations. While the militarization of cattle-raiding had taken place during the last civil war with the north in the 1980s and 1990s, issues related to cattle and livestock have become heavily politicized in the context of the conflict that started in December 2013. As mentioned above, elites were able to exploit pastoralism dominated local economies throughout the course of fighting, stripping areas of cattle and redistributing them to their own areas. The respite from the national conflict has now provided individuals, families and communities with the opportunity to try and regain assets lost in the conflict. People have also taken advantage of the climate of impunity to engage in cattle raiding and cattle theft, where armed youth are able to move freely within and between different parts of Unity State. To the extent that the area continues to experience a pause in all-out fighting between warring parties, cattle-related violence is likely to rise as people seek to atone for losses incurred during previous episodes of fighting and acquire the resources they need to start rebuilding their lives. The same logic applies to revenge killing. Like cattle-raiding, revenge killing is not new to Unity State and reflects a culture of retributive and communal justice for wrongdoings wherein retaliation oftentimes falls onto the family of the individual perpetrator.[[37]](#footnote-37) Yet, as part of the more general increase in inter-communal violence, there has also been a swell in targeted revenge killing.[[38]](#footnote-38) People have used the break in conflict to settle old scores, some of which stem from the most recent war and others from long before. Similar to cattle raiding, the return of populations could trigger further cycles of revenge that are actually closely linked to the theft of cattle. Customary solutions to murder entail the payment of compensation in the form of cattle. With most individuals and families left destitute by the war, the raiding of cattle is one of the only means through which compensation can be obtained, precipitating a violent pattern that persists far beyond the individuals originally targeted.[[39]](#footnote-39)

 ***Rubkona and the Bentiu PoC***

 Even with the relative calm in place since the end of 2018, the prevailing uncertainty with respect to the overall security environment in Unity State can be seen in the remaining population in the Bentiu PoC site, which has stayed relatively stable at around 100,000 ever since the 2015 government offensive. At this point, the Bentiu PoC site approximates something closer to a city, or town in terms of population size, which is reinforced by the fact that the site serves as a critical hub for different Nuer clans and a coping mechanism for those affected by past episodes of violence. Families also spread themselves across both the PoC site and other places of residence outside of it, doing so in a bid to diffuse some of the risks that they face across family members with some people remaining inside the site and others testing the proverbial waters outside.[[40]](#footnote-40) As the end of the dry season in South Sudan corresponds to a rise in hunger during the lean season, populations will also use the PoC site as a way to access resources necessary to their survival.[[41]](#footnote-41) As one key informant put it, the stark reality is that everyone seems to have *“one leg inside and one leg outside”[[42]](#footnote-42)* the PoC site, which is how the majority of Nuer clans and sub-clans in the area have managed to deal with the constant uncertainty of the security situation in Unity State.

 At the same time, the PoC site also serves as a microcosm for the broader dynamics oftentimes mirroring the political divisions between political and military elites. Nuer clans that are perceived to be allied with the government have been attacked, with the main fault lines falling between the Bul Nuer who have typically been affiliated with the state forces, and the other Nuer clans who are ordinarily aligned with the opposition.[[43]](#footnote-43) After the split in the SPLA-IO between Riek Machar and Taban Deng Gai, Jikany Nuer from Guit were likewise treated with suspicion in the PoC with disputes and violence within the site reflecting divisions within the overall opposition. As one report remarked, “…clashes outside the camp are reflected inside and constantly threaten the demilitarized nature of the PoC” such that “…the site has become part of a conflict in which both sides attempt to control movements of people and resources.”[[44]](#footnote-44) There is also a strong sense of betrayal amongst Nuer clans that have normally sided with the opposition and its’ leader Riek Machar who is a Dok Nuer from Leer. Furthermore, many people wait for signals from their leaders such that events at the national level act as almost instantaneous triggers for violence inside the PoC site. In addition, the government continues to view the sites as a so-called “fifth column” for the opposition and a locus of rebel activity. People outside the PoC site are viewed alternatively as government supporters. Ever since government forces reclaimed Bentiu and Rubkona Towns in May 2014, the area has remained relatively securely under their control. This enabled the reification of divisions between residents of the PoC sites and residents living in Bentiu and Rubkona towns, which have been under government control since 2014. Although there has been a slight improvement in relations between the two sides since the signing of the peace agreement in September 2018 and the joint peace rallies at the end of the same year, by and large, distrust continue to mare people’s interaction, with divides not only cutting across Nuer clans, but also within families (see Table 2 below for perceptions of community cohesion from those inside and outside of the Bentiu PoC site). It has also replicated the “with us, or against us” at the national level, which has made it difficult for people to come together in an apolitical fashion. [[45]](#footnote-45)

***Table 2. Perceptions of Community Cohesion***

|  |
| --- |
| **How do you feel about people living outside of the PoC?”**  |
| *“You can go to Bentiu and Rubkona, [but] you only greet one another. There is no communication. Why should we communicate with the when they took our cows and goats and chickens and they took all our things…these guys will laugh at you and say ‘why are you in the PoC’” (FGD, Women, Bentiu PoC, 14 June 2019)* *“Our relationship would be peaceful if there is peace. For now, we are moving and combing back [to the PoC site]. I come back and sleep here. I don’t have a home there to sleep there. My home has been destroyed. As now, we are living in the PoC, there is no proof that there is peace. There is no implementation of the peace agreement and that is why some of us are fearing that if you leave the PoC and go back to original place and another war will erupt…The big people are agreeing on things and we are skeptical. We never move beyond mere greetings with those outside” (FGD, Farmers Union, Bentiu PoC Site, 15 June 2019)* *“You can visit Bentiu, but you cannot sleep out. The one thing that is happening is that differences that it [the conflict] creates, dividing people in the town and the PoC. Our relationship is not good. No one can communicate with you in a good way. For us, that situation is still bad (FGD, Youth, Bentiu PoC site, 13 June 2019)* |
| **“How do you feel about people living inside the PoC?”** |
| *“We are the same people, we are not enemies. What divided us is the war….Politicians are the ones who are fighting…Youth have a different style because outside youth, since the war broke, hae been together with the government and when they see the other side of the PoC, you can find they have a problem…” (FGD, Woman, Bentiu Town, 18 June, 2019)* *“After the signing of the agreement [in September 2018], people are friendly between. People look at us as someone supporting the government….Before the peace agreement, you are seen as a government agent and you will be kidnapped and killed if you try and enter the PoC. Before, there was no free movement and it was very rare for them to come to Bentiu Town” (FGD, Youth, Bentiu Town, 17 June 2019)* |

 The ‘Beyond Bentiu Response’ launched in 2016 saw the increasing provision of humanitarian services outside of the PoC site. However, previously security and access issues had hindered the ability of humanitarian partners to respond to the large amount of needs that persisted outside of the walls of the UNMISS base, fueling accusations of impartiality by the government who continued to see the sites as safe haven for the opposition. [[46]](#footnote-46) This demonstrates the otherwise difficult position that most humanitarian partners find themselves in the area. Although the principle goal of humanitarian partners has been to provide much needed assistance to civilians in various pockets of Unity State, providing services to SPLA-IO controlled areas would lead to perceptions of bias, not only by government forces, but also by the civilians living under their control. [[47]](#footnote-47) This is a dynamic that has been evident in different parts of the country where people will interpret the contours of aid delivery to favor one or the other side of the conflict, particularly when it comes to the PoC sites, which are viewed as being treated favorably in terms of service delivery. [[48]](#footnote-48) The effect has been to entrench and bolster divisions between those living inside the PoC site and those living outside of it. As one report maintained, “[t]he civilians in the PoC are…at the centre of the struggle to control flows of aid and people. The SPLA and the SPLA-IO have long experience manipulating aid flows, the control of which, during the second civil war [1983-2005], became essential the SPLA’s economic base.”[[49]](#footnote-49)

UNMISS has been insistent that the PoC sites no longer serve the same security functions for civilians that they did when the war started and, therefore, no longer require a static protection force. The recently published ‘180 Day Report’ on “Future planning for the protection of civilian sites in South Sudan” reiterated this position, calling the sites “untenable” and saying that their continuation posed “increasing protection and security risks.”[[50]](#footnote-50) While there has been a considerable improvement in the overall security situation since the signing of the revitalized peace agreement in September 2018, the precarity of the situation, particularly in dispossessed rural areas throughout greater Unity State, remains a paramount concern for civilians who had sought shelter at the Bentiu PoC site. As mentioned above, people try to diffuse the risks associated with going back to their places of habitual residence by sending only some members to ‘test the waters.’ Many will have had memories of previous episodes of violence, as well. For instance, some people had started to return to places, such as Leer and Mayendit during the intermission in fighting that occurred in 2016 and 2017, only to be displaced by yet another government offensive on southern Unity in late April 2018.[[51]](#footnote-51) Such incidents echo painfully for people and serve as an important reminder shaping peoples’ choices to return. Even people who have left the PoC site recognize that the environment for return remains less than ideal. As one woman living in Bentiu Town put it, *“[a]ll of the houses were burned…we are waiting for organizations to help…we come back knowing that even if this thing happens we can run again and come back…I am coming back knowing that the country is very dirty.”[[52]](#footnote-52)* The coming together of opposition and government officials at the state level in Unity in December 2018 has provided some encouragement that the peace agreement could hold, however, skepticism and caution have for the most part continued to characterize peoples’ perceptions of the prospects for peace.

**Fragile Peace**

 Along those lines, the R-ARCSS has been cautiously received by most people living in and around Bentiu and Rubkona, including in the PoC site. This is in line with national-level statistics. In a survey conducted by the South Sudan Civil Society Forum, less than half (43%) of people though that the agreement would result in lasting peace.[[53]](#footnote-53) Once again, in late December 2018 the incumbent governor of Northern Liech State and the SPLA-IO governor led the Bentiu PoC site and Bentiu Town communities in joint peace rallies. This has provided the space for the relaxation of tensions between those who live inside the PoC site and those who live in town, enabling some semblance of free movement and interaction between the two sides. Yet, even with the unification of government and SPLA-IO officials at the state level, many people do not seem to think that peace in Unity is viable without leaders at the national level reaching a similar sort of arrangement. As one group of youth in Bentiu Town divulged: *“I cannot say peace is 100%...This thing was signed in 2016 and collapsed…The politicians know themselves and there will be peace and if they are not committed.”[[54]](#footnote-54)* They continue by saying, *“when governors are coming together and the top guys are not coming together there is also a question and nobody is sure whether the opposition leader will accept to come….People in South Sudan are not sure of this year…so…when the two parties come together…then all people will believe that there is peace. I want Machar to be in Juba.”[[55]](#footnote-55)*

The persistence of more localized fighting, the escalating levels of criminality by roving bandits of armed, male youth and defecting soldiers and the rise in conflict-related sexual violence at the end of 2018, have all served as important illustrations for the need for careful optimism amongst the population. The high number of armed young males who were never formally integrated into the ranks of the SSPDF and the SPLA-IO have, and will continue to, present a risk to the overall security situation. As stated in the introduction, these predominantly pastoralist male youth have been instrumentalized by parties to the conflict to fight their battles with cadres of armed cattle camp youth serving as the basis of many frontline military operations. Still, historically-speaking these same youth have been somewhat skeptical of organized forces with material rewards being one of the key motivations.[[56]](#footnote-56) With so many communities in Unity State laid to bare by various offensives and counter-offensives, youth are not only in the same desperate position as most people living in the area but are also armed. Violence and crime serve as some of the few means for accessing much needed resources. These youth have also been excluded from R-ARCSS. Similar to the August 2015 ARCSS that preceded it, the deal was designed as a power-sharing solution to the political crisis in South Sudan, reflecting elite-level politics, rather than dynamics on the ground, or the unique interplay between the two. The problems related to the exclusion of these youth from the provisions of the agreement will not only haunt the process but could jeopardize it altogether.

 ***Table 3. Perceptions of Peace***

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | **“Do you feel like peace has come?”**  |
| **Inside the PoC Site**  | *“We are hearing peace has come, but not much because we are still staying here….One thing we noticed is that before there was lots of robberies….and that issue is reduced…before people are not moving out [of the PoC site] and you can move where you want to go….movement is now more free” (FGD, Female Youth, Benitu PoC Site, 15 June 2019)* |
| **Outside the PoC Site** | *“As now, we are getting help from NGOs and also cases of raping are being reduced so we are feeling like peace is coming….I am just comparing year where gun shots are higher and now we can feed our children without any raping so we are seeing it is calm” (FGD, Women, Bentiu Town, 12 September 2019)* *“Peace is better than years back….the way we are seeing it as people on the ground, we are moving freely….but, the bigger people there, we don’t know if they are cheating us. Is there something later on that will happen….We see that they are moving together but we don’t know if there is something else in their hearts” (FGD, Men, Rubkona Town, 12 September 2019)**“For us, we are not sure. We don’t know if the people who are beginning the crisis…agree totally or have something bad. We don’t know” (FGD, Chiefs, Nhialdieu, 14 September 2019)* |
|  | **“What would you need to see in order to know that peace had come?”**  |
| **Inside the PoC Site**  | *“Now people are mixed up and you can find someone sister is inside and the brother is out, but if there is peace, all of those things will be forgotten and that is the only solution that can finish the problems between the people” (FGD, Women, Bentiu PoC Site, 14 June 2019)**“For me, I am fearing for a 2016 situation…I will return back home when I have heard that soldiers are not carrying guns in town, if all the guns are took to one store…and also if the soldier will stop the abduction and raping of women and that is when you go back home…I also need people to stop accusing me of being a rebel” (FGD, Youth, Bentiu PoC Site, 13 June 2019)* |
| **Outside the PoC Site**  | *“They are moving together, the [SPLA]-IO governor and unity state [governor], but we need to see all IO and government together…” (FGD, Women, Benitu Town, 18 June)**“…For me, I am the one to shoot gun in these area and now I am here sitting with those who are fighting with me and this is a sign of peace” (FGD, Chiefs, Nhialideu, 14 September 2019)**“If the transitional government is formed then we will know [and] if all rebels come to Juba and they settle and implement everything. We see peace now, but it is not 100%” (FGD, Youth, Bentiu Town, 17 September 2019)*  |

**Youth in Conflict**

The fact that violence is such a conspicuous reality in the lives of youth in Rubkona and Unity State is reflected in the very definitions of ‘youth.’ Indeed, the meaning of youth in South Sudan does not necessarily connote an age-set or clearly demarcated category based on, for instance, marital status.[[57]](#footnote-57) Instead, ‘youth’ tends to signify a predominantly male “historical life-stage category” where unmarried men are seen to be responsible for both caring for the cattle, as well as defending the community.[[58]](#footnote-58) To be sure, when people talk about “youth” in South Sudan what they are referring to is almost exclusively young men, the reasons for which are discussed in the next section. In a highly militarized environment, ‘youthhood’ frequently manifests itself once someone is able to carry a gun and protect both cattle and the community.[[59]](#footnote-59) Moreover, as other academic work on South Sudan has highlighted, youth occupy the tenuous space between ‘*hakuma[[60]](#footnote-60)*’ and ‘home,’ or rather political and military life on the one hand, and family and community, on the other.[[61]](#footnote-61) While falling somewhere in between these two ‘spheres,’[[62]](#footnote-62) many youth are also excluded from both, unable to meaningfully participate and influence politics at either the national or community-level and increasingly powerless to reach responsible ideals of adulthood. This has contributed to sentiments of frustration and isolation amongst youth whose lives have been punctuated by years of conflict. When asked if they felt that the government represented their interests, a group of youth in Bentiu Town voiced how, *“we don’t feel it. We are lacking jobs….there is no roads, no schools, no anything. They are there for their own interest. This makes us feel bad…they are…our political figures and they don’t represent our interest.”[[63]](#footnote-63)*

Just as it was during the last civil war between 1983 and 2005, parties to the conflict that started in December 2013 have used violence and patronage as a way to secure the allegiances of youth.[[64]](#footnote-64) As was already made plain in the context section of this analysis, throughout the course of successive offensives between 2014 and 2018, the “modus operandi” of government and opposition forces has been to “rely…on proxies, as a force multiplier, as well as clan-based youth militia to carry out and bolster its military offensives.”[[65]](#footnote-65) Similar to the second civil war in the 1980s and 1990s where Nuer youth were mobilized under the auspices of the ‘White Army,’ the current conflict has witnessed the mobilization of young Nuer males into ad hoc militias, including the ‘Gojam,’ which replaced the ‘White Army’ amongst many of the western Nuer in Unity State after the outbreak of the conflict in 2013.[[66]](#footnote-66) A group of youth residing in the Bentiu PoC site states this point quite clearly, *“[l]eaders do not want peace but in reality, they don’t want to implement it…they are encouraging youth to go and do an attack to other youth…tangible peace is not there.”[[67]](#footnote-67)* Once again, however, the loyalties of pastoralist youth have always been fluid such that even during their participation in political conflicts they only ever remained weakly integrated into formal military hierarchies.[[68]](#footnote-68) Their motive for violence is rarely one of political ambition, but rather one of material reward[[69]](#footnote-69) and the prospect of increasing their personal herds of cattle.[[70]](#footnote-70) In this sense, the authority of political and military elites is more of a presumption than it is an actual reality. Most ‘Gojam,’ for example, seek first and foremost to protect their own communities and avenge for losses at the local level.[[71]](#footnote-71) Nevertheless, their mobilization has left a large remnant of unaligned or semi-aligned armed young men who fall outside the remit of elite politics, including agreements meant to bring a halt to fighting. For many of these male youth material gain is still one of the primary impetuses for participating in violence and criminality where they can be easily recruited and utilized by spoilers for criminality.[[72]](#footnote-72) It is, therefore, not surprising that even after lulls in conflict in the Unity State area that armed youth revert back to pre-war style tit-for-tat raiding and other forms of crime and banditry mostly as a way to survive. The economic crisis that has accompanied the conflict has made the need for material resources all the more important, as has the extensive asset stripping that has occurred during the course of fighting. Raiding and crime are also a way for youth to reduce their dependency on community and political structures that they feel like do not represent their interests with membership in cattle-camp youth-based militias or youth gangs as some of the few means through which youth can access resources on their own, as well as feel as a sense of belonging and empowerment. [[73]](#footnote-73) A group of women in Bentiu Town, *“…since the war broke here in Unity State people are looting and grabbing each others property anyhow and they [the youth] find…what they can to survive…you tell them don’t go and they don’t understand…some of the youth joining the groups…they are nowhere to be seen and you can hear your child is somewhere else.”[[74]](#footnote-74)*

At the same time, the involvement of youth in political conflicts has reified ethnic and political divisions amongst Nuer youth, preventing them from connecting with one another in a manner where their identity as “youth” can transcend ethnic and political affiliations.[[75]](#footnote-75) The situation as a whole has been exacerbated by the compounding livelihoods crisis in South Sudan with economic collapse and insecurity throughout Unity State encumbering activities, such as livestock trade, which may have initially supplied youth the chance to accrue some level of income. Youth are not only divided by clan, but also by socio-economic status, separated into categories of “haves” and “have-nots,” which has gained increasing salience with the economic and humanitarian crisis. Where economic status corresponds to clan identity, the space for ethnic and political objectivity becomes even more circumscribed. The absence of livelihoods opportunities also preoccupies youth and pushes them into violence and criminality.[[76]](#footnote-76) Although there are examples where youth have come together for the purposes of material purposes, such instances usually involve violence and crime (as illustrated by the case study on youth gangs below). In anecdotal cases heard during the course of the analysis, groups of youth from different Nuer clans, including those who would typically be in conflict with another were said to come together to steal cattle.

**Box 1. Case Study on Youth Gangs**

Youth gangs are one of the avenues through which South Sudanese youth living in Bentiu and Rubkona towns, as well as the PoC site can achieve a sense of belonging and inclusion. These youth gangs are nothing new to South Sudan and are often referred to locally as ‘nigga’ groups or ‘teams,’ which does not have the same racialized connotation as it does in the industrialized West, but instead signifies the ways in which members of the groups contravene South Sudanese custom and culture, exhibiting styles of dress and tastes in music that are more closely aligned to the rest of East Africa and North America. As one report on youth gangs in Benitu and Rubkona stated, members of these gangs “…coalesce together as a social group with a particular type of moral order and code seeking to connect to a wider global culture, who sometimes also engage in criminal activities and fighting amongst themselves.”[[77]](#footnote-77) What is most interesting about these groups is their ability to organize across lines of conflict, which in the Bentiu and Rubkona context falls along the lines of different Nuer clans. As one group of males in the Bentiu PoC cited, *“[t]he nigga groups don’t segregate…they’re interested in unity…they are doing bad things and they are doing bad things that unify them and bring them together.”[[78]](#footnote-78)* It was even said that there was collaboration between groups operating in the PoC site and groups operating in town.

Since the population of the Bentiu PoC site is so large it is often considered to be one of the bigger towns in South Sudan and resembles something of a peri-urban setting that provides a ripe environment for the proliferation of gang groups, many of whom have their origins in post-independence Bentiu Town where there were a number of youth who had returned from neighboring countries, such as Sudan and Egypt.[[79]](#footnote-79) The gangs provide an important alternative to youth idleness in the PoC site and in other towns where livelihoods opportunities are nearly non-existent. And while these groups are not necessarily criminal, in recent years they have been known for their targeting of urban poor communities, which also applies to those residing in IDP settlements. [[80]](#footnote-80) A group of women in Bentiu Town, *“[t]hese niggas are making looting. There is serious fighting. They don’t eat at home…criminals at night are many.”[[81]](#footnote-81)* As such, they pose a considerable obstacle to the overall security environment in urban centres that are also hubs for returning and relocating IDP populations. As people continue to flock to towns, returning and relocating youth going to towns in search of opportunities, may turn to gangs as a way to access resources. Already there is hearsay that defecting soldiers elsewhere in the country are joining criminal gangs with little in the way of other opportunities, raising the significance of thinking more critically about what reintegration in urban areas entails.

For rural youth, agriculture is not seen as a practical choice considering the risks that youth faced in tending to their fields. It must be remembered, as well that, although agriculture exists in Unity State, local economies and livelihoods are dominated by pastoralist systems. Various parts of Unity State, including rural parts of Rubkona have also been hard hit by successive waves of offensives and counter-offensives, many of which have corresponded to the end of the dry season when people are just beginning to plant. This grim seasonality of fighting[[82]](#footnote-82) has caused people to have understandably short time horizons with respect to the anticipated returns from investing in agricultural production, whether subsistence or otherwise. In Rubkona specifically, rural youth have been carved up between those that stayed in rural areas and retained their cattle and those who had their cattle raided and subsequently sought refuge in the PoC site. For those displaced into the PoC site, they have had to adopt the pseudo-urban lifestyle that existence in a large-scale IDP settlement requires. Yet, they lack the same educational qualifications that would make them good candidates for the few jobs that exist with humanitarian partners. One group of male youths in the Bentiu PoC site express how, *“in terms of employment, for those who are not studied they are the ones who are suffering since jobs are for people who study*.[[83]](#footnote-83) Humanitarian partners have tried to tackle youth idleness by hosting sports events, establishing youth centers and other activities, however, such efforts are inherently limited in that they fail to meet the income and livelihoods needs of youth in the PoC site and in the towns.[[84]](#footnote-84) For urban youth in the PoC site who have completed their secondary and even tertiary education, the few jobs that do exist with partners do not come close to meeting their expectations and hopes for post-education employment.[[85]](#footnote-85)

That being the case, the only attractive jobs that exist are ones with humanitarian partners. This is true both inside the PoC site, as well as outside of it. The private sector is still nascent and although oil fields are reopening, the number of jobs will remain finite when equated with the numerous amount of unemployed youth. Although government positions may have once held an appeal for youth, the constant delay in salaries and the limited decentralization of resources from the national to the state and county levels means that these jobs are far less enticing than they would have been in the post-independence period, which has been made worse by the politicization of Nuer clan identities in the conflict. A group of youth in Bentiu Town, *“[i]t is just humanitarian vacancies, the government doesn’t employ graduates or youth. We are focusing on humanitarian partners and whenever we get employed it is the only chance.”[[86]](#footnote-86)* The absence of viable employment opportunities for youth has bolstered divisions between youth with divisions cutting across both Nuer clan identity and socio-economic status. Once more, while the re-opening of strategic oil fields in Unity State could theoretically offer jobs to the many desperate youth, this is one area where the realities of clan divisions can be seen quite starkly. Leek Nuer youth from Rubkona, for instance, expressed reticence about working in Magna Port, located in the Jikany Nuer territory of Guit. As the youth put it themselves, *“[d]ue to the crisis, it is not possible if you are from Rubkona to go and work in Guit. Nowadays, the crisis has made boundaries between people…its’ not like before.”[[87]](#footnote-87)* With the high levels of desperation generated by the crisis and conflict in Unity State, vying for limited opportunities ends up falling on ethnic lines. Another youth in Bentiu Town, *“South Sudanese hiring managers…recruit based on who you know and this makes me angry and I feel discouraged. Now I am finished my studies and I don’t have an opportunity…those will go to other states, but we don’t have means.”[[88]](#footnote-88)*

The upshot is the increasing dependency on humanitarian partners for everything from immediate life-saving assistance, to jobs, to protection. With the high levels of violence in Unity State where entire populations have been left destitute and stripped of their resources, people have no choice but to rely on aid for basic sustenance. The “dependency culture” as it is often called in South Sudan, is not so much a dependency cultures as it is an accountability problem that has persisted through the decades. Consecutive administrations that have ruled over what is now South Sudan have done so through extraction and extortion – a practice that dates back as far as the Arab slave raids and runs through British, Khartoum and Juba rule. In all instances, administrations governed based on coercion and violence, obstructing the development of a social contract between the ‘state’ and citizens where people could not come to reasonably expect that those who exerted control over them would also provide even the most minimal of services, such as water, health and education. South Sudanese people have shown astounding resilience in such a scenario, but it has also meant that they have had to actively seek alternatives elsewhere and try and fill the gaps left by largely unaccountable governance systems. Since Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) launched in the 1980s, humanitarian assistance has served to fill the gap left by administrations that have not been accountable to their own people.

Peoples’ own coping mechanisms have been almost completely depleted. Rather than self-reliance, humanitarian aid became a mainstay for populations with little changing from the 1980s until today. While humanitarian partners cannot necessarily be blamed, rather than trying to build on peoples’ own capacities, the system inculcated a culture of direct support where people came to rely on outsiders in the case of an emergency. In responding almost entirely to peoples’ immediate humanitarian needs, at least until the early 2000s when there was more discussion about building in components related to rehabilitation and development,[[89]](#footnote-89) OLS unintentionally generated a dynamic wherein humanitarianism and the support that it means became an entrenched reality with humanitarian partners routinely performing many of the tasks associated with a government administration with respect to service provision – something that continued after the country’s 2011 independence. The current administration whether at the national, state or county level has little to no capacity to respond to the high needs of the population. Even in government-controlled areas people will admit that at most, the ‘state’ is capable at providing some semblance of security with no expectation that they would be able to supply essential services, such as education and healthcare, creating a concomitant perception that this is, and will continue to be, the role of humanitarian partners. Frustrations and tensions could feasibly rise as people choose to leave places of displacement, including the Bentiu PoC site if services are not in place. In a context where the control of aid is so critical, people have learned how to maneuver humanitarian assistance in such a way that reinforces a reliance on said aid. As a group of youth in Rubkona said, *“if we have an issue with an organization, then we go to the RRC [Relief and Rehabilitation Commission] and then to the commissioner. We know that they [partners] will not go, they have an interest in it. We are the sons of this soil. They will build it for us.”[[90]](#footnote-90)*

Relying on humanitarian aid has fortified the sense of dependency that youth feel on structures that do not necessarily represent their interest. It has also contributed to broader feelings of emasculation amongst males who are no longer able to reach responsible ideals of adult and manhood that treat them as providers for their families. Young men in this sense do not just aspire for income and livelihoods, but rather for the social belonging that comes with being seen as adults in their communities – a sense of belonging that is oftentimes only achieved through acts of marriage that require income and resources.[[91]](#footnote-91) This is especially decisive given the linkages between masculine identities, cattle and local economies of bridewealth, where young men pay their prospective bride’s family in the form of livestock.[[92]](#footnote-92) Cattle raiding and cattle theft are one way that young males can accumulate the resources needed for marriage and, hence, meet ideals of adulthood. This has been exacerbated by the escalation in bride prices that has accompanied the conflict where the exchange of daughters for bridewealth serves as one of the only livelihood’s options for families.

This has all occurred against the backdrop of the erosion of traditional forms of moral authority, which has allowed demonstrations of “hyper-masculinity” [[93]](#footnote-93) to obtain a form of predominance,[[94]](#footnote-94) especially amongst male youth whose very identity is tied to their ability to defend and protect their communities. The proliferation of small arms and light weapons has reinforced this predominance as youth benefit from their armed status through predation.[[95]](#footnote-95) Similar to the influence of political and military leaders, traditional authority is often assumed rather than real, with most customary chiefs admitting that they have limited control over the use and non-use of violence anymore. A group of chiefs in Nhialdieu, *“[w]hen youth are holding guns they are not listening to anyone…if we go to the youth, they will not listen to us, they will even shoot us.”[[96]](#footnote-96)* They continued by referencing a case, *“there was a father, his son is one of the cattle raiders. He advised his son to not raid cattle and then [the son] took the gun and shot his father. There three of such incidents…here. This happened after the crisis.”[[97]](#footnote-97)* As other research has highlighted, the authority of chiefs and other traditional leaders in South Sudan is performative and contingent on their ability to capacity to deliver justice and services.[[98]](#footnote-98) With the war and humanitarian crisis they are not able to do so, let alone make ammends for the losses that youth have experienced as a condequence of a conflict that has seen them be both perpetrators and victims.[[99]](#footnote-99)

**Gender, Violence and Exclusion**

Despite the fact that definitions of youth in South Sudan reflect almost exclusively male understandings, as discussed above there are strong connections between the identities of young men and local economies of bridewealth, which act to violently underscore discrimination against their female counterparts who frequently lose out on the opportunity to actually be youth. For females the separation between child and adulthood has more to do with marriage and child rearing. Coupled with the fact that most female youth often have to take on a substantial duty of care with respect to their families, practically-speaking young girls in South Sudan have little space to experience the period between being a child and adult. Given the high rates of child early and forced marriages, the room for being youth is restricted. Because female youth act as one of the primary sources of income for families through the exchange of bridewealth, they are also some of the key targets of conflict-related violence, including sexual violence, where rape and other-related offenses end up targeting not only the individual girls, but also the livelihoods of families and communities. Since the war started nearly six years ago, their lives have largely been identified by brutality and violence. As indicated in the context section, 1,300 women and girls were estimated to have been raped and 1,600 women and children abducted in Leer, Mayendit and Koch between April and September 2015 alone.[[100]](#footnote-100) As recent as late 2018 there were reports of 134 cases of rape and gang rape by warring parties and youth militias around Bentiu, Guit and Nhialdieu. [[101]](#footnote-101) While the ages of the victims differed, many of those who were targeted were girls.[[102]](#footnote-102) Female youth are especially vulnerable given that they are often responsible for care work, including accessing the resources necessary to familial survival.

As much research has shown, this kind violence against female youth does not happen in a vacuum.[[103]](#footnote-103) Female youth are valued in terms of their ability to command bridewealth. This commodifies them, reinforcing the idea that women and girls in South Sudan are a form of property and denying them agency over their own bodies and own lives. While conflict-related sexual violence is a constant reality for female youth, child early and forced marriage are some of the most commonly reported forms of abuse.[[104]](#footnote-104) One female youth in the Bentiu PoC site, *“[f]or me, before the crisis my father forced me to marry when I was 16 and I spent a lot of time without a child because I was still young.”[[105]](#footnote-105)* Although child early and forced marriages have long been the norm in South Sudanese society, prevalence has been rising as parents engage in negative coping mechanisms, selling off their daughters at younger and younger ages in order to make ends meet. Chiefs in Din Din, *“[h]ere we depend for girls, if your girls does not marry, you will not eat. They are our resource. You…cannot solve this issue of dowry.”[[106]](#footnote-106)* This has done nothing to alleviate the sense of ownership males feel over their female peers. In another study, adolescent boys and girls talked about a man’s “right” to beat his wife on the basis that the owned her having paid bridewealth.[[107]](#footnote-107) A group of women in Nhialdieu provide a telling explanation of male entitlement over female bodies, *“…we are being married by men and then they will…own you. Men are beating us. If you tell a man to cook, he will beat you.”[[108]](#footnote-108)* This does not only apply to married women. Girls too are said to be beaten for not having performed their domestic duties in line with highly gendered expectations,[[109]](#footnote-109) such that the subordination of female youth to their household is continuously reinforced. For girls who are married early, they are oftentimes chastised for not carrying out the tasks normally associated with being a wife since many girls are naturally unprepared for the heavy burden of marriage in South Sudan at such a young age.[[110]](#footnote-110)

In such an environment, violence against female youth has been almost entirely normalized, particularly in Unity State where rape and other-related offenses have been prolific. This is reflected in the resignation of women and girls when it comes to the likelihood of sexual violence when carrying out daily survival tasks, akin to that, which occurred at the end of 2018,[[111]](#footnote-111) as well as in the violence they experience in their daily lives in the form of child early and forced marriages, domestic abuse and denial of resources. The situation is so acute that one report found indications that Nuer culture had actually adapted to the endemic levels of rape in Unity State following December 2013.[[112]](#footnote-112) The ‘weaning taboo,’ which conventionally prevents sex while a woman is breastfeeding would have ordinarily seen women who were sexually assaulted have to disregard breastfeeding their infants.[[113]](#footnote-113) However, it appears as though cultural practices have conformed to the realities of conflict-related sexual violence such that rituals would be performed to enable breastfeeding mothers to continue to wean their children even after they had been raped.[[114]](#footnote-114) While anecdotal, the suggestion was that this is something that emerged on the back of the widespread violence witnessed in 2014 and 2015,[[115]](#footnote-115) and is part of the wider continuum of violence and insecurity that typifies the experiences of female youth at home, in their communities and in the context of the conflict. [[116]](#footnote-116) Trapped in this brutish cycle, female youth have conveyed a sense of hopelessness with one study noting that 26% of adolescent girls in South Sudan had considered ending their own lives.[[117]](#footnote-117) The pressures and challenges they face with respect to violence and care labor also prevent them from associating and participating in the same way as males. When discussing the reasons behind the lack of participation of female youth, youth in the Bentiu PoC site talk about how, *“women do much more work in the family and that is why they don’t participate and are in a secondary position.”[[118]](#footnote-118)* With fears of the loss of potential bridewealth being so serious, female youth and girls are also restricted from engaging in outside activities, which can even include education.

The gendered roles of females and males are also strictly upheld and serve as a basis for the exclusion of female youth from participating in all manners of activities, including those intended to promote peace. For males who take on any of the care load, they will admonished as feminine. Youth in the Bentiu PoC site again, *“[w]e categories things for ourselves – a man has duties and men cannot cook….and that is the division of the system. A woman will criticize him and say ‘he is a woman’ and they will open a case for your cooking and even a court can agree. If you are on your own [as a man], your sister will help [to cook].”[[119]](#footnote-119)* This sentiment was reaffirmed by a group of women in Bentiu Town, *“the culture doesn’t allow men to collect firewood…people will abuse you and say ‘you are a woman’…and they say you are not a good man.”[[120]](#footnote-120)* Despite the fact that women and girls have taken on many of the roles associated with male members of the households, specifically in providing for their families, their secondary position has changed little. In fact, it seems as though their secondary position has been strengthened, rather than mitigated by the effects of the conflict and changes in the gendered division of labor.[[121]](#footnote-121) The same group of women from Bentiu Town, *“men before the crisis…they can cultivate and they can look after cattle, but since there are no cattle and no one who can make the maize because things are burning….men decide to sit at home and they don’t work. But they are still ordering us around. For a woman, it seems we have a power to do everything since that is what we do, only men will not accept that, they will fight with you if you try and do something. They cannot accept.”* This does not mean that women would not appreciate the assistance. Women in the PoC site say how, *“[w]e are waiting for the day that they maybe cook for us one meal and help us with water and other chores.”[[122]](#footnote-122)*

There is also an understanding that these gender roles are divinely ordained with many people making biblical references to rationalize women’s subordinate status. The group of women in Bentiu Town, *“that one is beginning from the bible. A woman is the rib of a man according to Adam and Eve and she is ever supposed to be silent and he is the one who is supposed to talk a lot of things even if he cannot implement them.”[[123]](#footnote-123)* When conversing over the lack of female participation, male youth in a focus group discussion stated how, *“[w]omen are supposed to be behind men and giving us ideas and supporting us. What makes women to fear is that some men are so challenging to the point that if a woman goes and stands in front of people…you will get a challenge…if she speaks randomly, they will say she is crazy.”[[124]](#footnote-124)* This creates a system wherein which women are relegated to background of any discussion, precluding them from meaningfully participating in decision-making that impacts their lives. Living in the PoC site where there is a high concentration of humanitarian partners promoting norms associated with gender equality has generated some exposure to more progressive gender ideologies, offering the space for contesting what is a highly patriarchal social order that marginalizes female youth from even being youth in the first place. A group of men living in the PoC site state, *“what is affecting us, is that we are behind the modern world and we are still developing…South Sudan was isolated before and there was a division between the north and south and that is why we just go to war. People don’t know about public interest. Now we are here and things are changing. All of us are going like this and learning new things and we are fighting our culture. Even girls and boys are sent to school together.”[[125]](#footnote-125)* There are signs that adaptations of Nuer culture to international standards have taken place, especially in the PoC sites where there have been positive developments related to gender parity.[[126]](#footnote-126) Yet, as other research has made clear, these changes can also increase the incentives for reinforcing gender roles through violence and disparagement against female populations.[[127]](#footnote-127) It is incumbent upon humanitarian partners and others to conduct activities in such a way that duly considers the realities of underlying power structures.[[128]](#footnote-128)

**Conclusion**

 In conclusion, youth in Rubkona and greater Unity State remain trapped in a relentless cycle of violence, exclusion and dependency. Male youth have been mobilized to fight on behalf of political and military elites who do not necessarily represent their interests, pushing young men to search for a sense of belonging and empowerment through alternative avenues, including violence and crime. Female youth have been denied the chance to be youth at all, subjected to an array of pressures and challenges that all serve to continuously reinforce their subordination to male interests. This analysis has tried to offer some of the more “everyday” views and voices of youth and their communities in Rubkona and greater Unity State as a way to start to understand how they have been both implicated in, and impacted by violence, as well as their perceptions on issues of peace, conflict and change.[[129]](#footnote-129) This stands in contrast to other analyses that tend to look solely at fissures between political and military elites.[[130]](#footnote-130) While the emphasis has been on the situation in Rubkona and the Bentiu PoC site, the analysis has also tried to present some initial insights into the situation of rural youth elsewhere in Unity State, contemplating the myriad ways in which war has influenced rural and urban youth. One thing that has become plain is that, much in the same way that socio-economic status and access to resources can divide youth deepening divisions between them, material rewards can also motivate youth to come together and are essential to them becoming full members of society and realizing ideals of responsible adulthood. Capitalizing on these pre-existing capacities is crucial, as is promoting sustainable livelihoods that help populations move away from a reliance on humanitarian assistance. Education, as well is key to helping youth envisage another future for themselves.

This is not an easy task. Humanitarian partners are faced with navigating an incredibly complicated terrain in Rubkona and greater Unity State. Both peace and youth programming are highly sensitive and politicized and outcomes are closely connected to exogenous factors outside of anyone’s control, particularly developments in the national level political arena. Even so, the sustainability of the R-ARCSS in Unity State and the small gains made towards peace in the past year depend heavily on progress on the ground. While the lull in hostilities in the area does provide a window of opportunity for strengthening community cohesion, the divides between Nuer communities run deep and have only been strengthened as a result of the most recent iteration of civil war in the country. These divides not only cut across Nuer clans, but have also carved up families. Reconciling these cleavages will be a long-term process but is necessary for lasting pace. Such efforts can also help to ameliorate some of the impacts of political competition – competition that youth regularly find themselves at the centre of. At the same time, the grievances that violent competition has already engendered need to be addressed and acknowledged. Reconciliation and truth telling are one way to do this, but so too are broader transitional objectives that try to diminish the probability of cycles of revenge as people seek compensate for losses during the war.[[131]](#footnote-131) The return of populations from places of displacement, including the Bentiu PoC site can act as a catalyst for further conflict if the complex drivers of violence are not dealt with. Equipping people with the tools they need to effectively manage conflict is, therefore, vital. Below are some recommendations for peace and youth programming moving forward:

 ***Recommendations***

* Peacebuilding activities need to consider how to link local-level and national-level processes such that grass roots peace efforts can effectively reinforce developments at the national level, while at the same time providing a buffer against the negative impacts of elite competition.[[132]](#footnote-132) As other research on peacebuilding in South Sudan has pointed out, mapping the connections between national and local interests can provide windows into the kind of longer-term change that is needed, allowing people to overcome long-standing grievances,[[133]](#footnote-133) many of which stem to previous episodes of civil war in what is now South Sudan;
* Accordingly, just as reconciliation and social cohesion are important moving forward, so too is broader transitional justice that acknowledges and addresses peoples’ grievances.[[134]](#footnote-134) This entails thinking about linking youth and peacebuilding programmes to access to justice programmes, as well as other processes that serve as a form of recognition for the harm done, such as symbolic reparations;
* Inclusivity is key to countering the otherwise exclusionary processes that have been characteristic of attempts to broker peace in South Sudan. Yet ,this cannot be done simply by bringing people together. In line with the below, peace activities that seek to bring together youth from different Nuer clans, as well as females and males must also focus on the structures of power that inhibit meaningful participation in different processes in the first instance. Engaging men and community leaders through both gender and inter-generational dialogues can help in dismantling some of the structures that exclude both male and female youth;
* Youth also need to be supported to develop their own priorities for peace, which is yet another way to help to combat feelings of exclusion and disenfranchisement and provide youth with a sense of empowerment outside of violence and crime;
* Along those lines, youth programming commonly neglects the voices and perspectives of the youth who are actually implicated in ongoing violence, whether that be in the form of urban criminality (youth gangs), or rural insecurity (cattle camp-based youth militia). Involving armed and criminalized youth is imperative to ensuring ownership over norms and processes that encourage peace and wider societal transformational, which is particularly critical when considering their exclusion from national-level agreements, as well as political and community structures;
* Longer-term, process-based initiatives are needed to transform power structures, particularly patriarchal moral and social orders and notions of “hyper-masculinity,” which in South Sudan are heavily impacted by bridewealth-based local economies;
* Livelihoods and resource access can both connect and divide youth. It is important to find creative ways to bring youth together, for example, through value-added livestock chains that emphasize their mutual interest in cattle. Education is also an important venue for bringing disparate groups together where they can create a shared vision of the future;
* Interventions should seek where possible to build on peoples’ own capacities and coping mechanisms in such a way that promotes self-reliance and helps people to be able to better manage shocks related to ongoing conflict, livestock loss and food insecurity;
* Project activities should seek to advance a sense of collective action and civic responsibility, for example, through small grants where community members work together to complete a series of tasks that benefits the whole of the community.

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