

South Sudan

Building peace through intergenerational community dialogue

One of a series of ten case studies summarised in HelpAge's guide, *Bringing generations together for change* →

This project started in 2021 and ended in April 2022. It was funded by Tearfund and the EU with in-kind contributions from Africa Development Aid (ADA), the implementing organisation, for a total of \$100,000. It took place in Uror county, Jonglei state, and aimed to promote peaceful co-existence between different generations as well as clans.

Its main activity was to facilitate community dialogue and collective social or economic activities among people of all ages and backgrounds to encourage a shift in attitudes and practices that would foster a more peaceful and prosperous nation.



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What problem or issue did the project address?

The Republic of South Sudan became the world's newest nation in 2011, but renewed conflicts in 2013 and 2016 have undermined the development gains achieved since independence, with millions of people displaced or living as refugees. Ten years on, and three years after signing the revitalised peace agreement with Sudan, the people of South Sudan continue to struggle in the face of endemic violence and intercommunal conflict triggered by political, economic and ethnic divisions, now deeply ingrained in the culture. Older people are often accused by younger generations of having mostly benefited from the conflict, retaining assets such as land and cattle. Young people resort to cattle-raiding when they need exchange 'currency' or to killings when their frustration or anger turns to neighbours of different ethnic backgrounds even if they live in the same county.

The project brings together people of different ages (young, middle-aged and older people) in peace dialogue groups, to promote consensus on solutions to conflict and to embrace peacebuilding efforts. It creates space for intergenerational dialogue, so that older and younger people can exchange views on how best to sustain peaceful co-existence within their communities and with their neighbours. Older people hold many expectations of younger people, including that they must respect the opinion of elders on matters of conflict that could wipe out whole communities (for example, rampant cattle-raiding and child abduction by neighbouring tribes). Many older people also believe that despite the pull and attractions of modern living, youth must uphold customs and traditions that have sustained entire communities for generations.

The project benefits from the insights of both generations: older people provide traditional wisdom on ways to bring about peace, while younger people tap into their ideas and energies for constructive activities, such as community income-generating projects and debates with older people on how to foster peaceful co-existence. As the programme's Director explained:

“We are engaging young men, who actively take up arms during inter-communal violence, in a dialogue with elders – the fountain of age-old traditions and wisdom – in finding a lasting solution to endemic ‘tit-for-tat’ [revenge] killings and inter-communal clashes. These conflicts can only be solved when older people at family level urge the young to refrain from violence, starting within their own households and people from their own relations.”



ADA

Another issue addressed by the project is the regressive attitude towards women and their exclusion from decision making, including on matters that affect them directly, such as marriage. Women of all ages – as mothers, wives and sisters of the young men involved in conflict – can try to influence them to choose peaceful options, but they also have the right to have

their say in decisions that affect their future and the future of the entire community.

What did the project aim to do?

The project aimed to address the cyclic and endemic culture of violence by promoting new knowledge, attitudes and behaviours to support local communities in their efforts towards inclusive peacebuilding, conflict mitigation and peaceful co-existence. As an ADA staff member working on the programme commented:

“The intergenerational approach is a good approach towards attempting to create both intra- and extra-communal harmony over matters that otherwise tear [the] same communities apart. Women tend to believe, and men generally agree, that a wife has a silent, but strong influence on her husband, as well as their own grown-up male children, when given a chance to discuss peace in the community.”

How did the project work?

HelpAge's partner, ADA, recruited and trained volunteers, including older women and men and younger people, from rural communities in the county where the project operated. The volunteers encourage other people to take part in regular dialogue meetings and share their perspectives. These meetings follow strict rules about behaviour and create spaces to talk about issues that people may hold very different views on – such as young people wanting to do things their own way, versus the traditional wisdom of elders, or “behaviour [by youth] that is deemed anti-social” compared to the socially acceptable traditional norms exemplified by older generations.

They aim to bridge the gap between older and younger people's perceptions of each other. ADA joined forces with other institutions that work on social cohesion, such as the church, which traditionally deploys counsellors to promote peace. Young people could be mobilised more easily through these structures and activities conducted jointly, such as community dialogues, but also income-generating businesses or agro-based activities.

The project set up peace dialogue groups in each community. At least half of the members must be young people (aged 15–35 years), 30 per cent must be women, and 20 per cent must be people identified by the community as being among the most vulnerable (such as people aged 60 and above). The group members received training in peacebuilding (using the 'training of trainers' model) at *boma* level (the lowest level of local government administration). The peace dialogues took place every three months, bringing together community leaders, including women, faith leaders and ethnic groups that are typically in opposition – for example, the Nuer and Murle. Topics for discussion were agreed ahead of each meeting and decisions were made on the basis of consensus.

Early on, the group members carried out a stakeholder analysis (aided by a local facilitator) to find out the range of interests held by different community members.

What changes did the project achieve?

One of the key changes the project achieved has been the mutual realisation that different age groups have different strengths and weaknesses that must be acknowledged and respected to uphold good community relations. The dialogue meetings demonstrated the need for changes in perceptions and attitudes through knowledge-sharing and conflict-resolution techniques. They also showed the need for

support services to perpetrators and victims of violence, such as trauma healing and psychosocial support. Joint activities, social activities (such as sports) or small business ventures enabled groups to focus their energy on positive change, which defused tensions. For example, in some areas, young people and older people started a joint village savings and loans association, developing a sense of common belonging. Early signs of conflict resolution have also been witnessed. For example, there are reports that in some cases the project has averted revenge killings likely to be committed by youth, through arbitrated settlements negotiated by community elders. Older people and younger people have both acknowledged their relative positions in the community, especially in advancing peaceful co-existence and a sense of community belonging. As one participant in a focus group discussion explained:

“The youth have the [big] numbers, physical strength, but often rush into immature decisions [such as hastened revenge killings] that disgraced their own communities. On the other hand, elders are fewer [in number], sometimes frail, and weak, but often tender mature and realistic advice to the youth on matters of avoiding conflict, both within and outside [the community].”

What worked well?

The project has demonstrated the importance of dialogue and giving safe spaces for people to share their grievances and beliefs. It also showed the importance of including women in activities, as an end in itself but also as a way to achieve more inclusive and lasting peace. Women and girls are now invited and encouraged to participate in community discussions and decision making, and to share

their views on matters that affect them, such as having a say in who they marry, when they have children, and reproductive health matters more generally.

The project's peacebuilding efforts were rooted in the local context. Activities were participatory and deliberately engaged key stakeholders, mindful of community dynamics. It targeted older people, younger men and women, local government and faith leaders – all of whom have a strong influence in their communities. As another focus group participant commented:

“These engagements have restored respect for one another [elderly and youth] for what they can [and cannot] do based on lessons learnt. For example, the youth must not go to fight neighbourhoods [for whatever reason] without consulting the Council of Community Elders. Besides, the elders must accommodate youth inputs in deciding anything in the community – for example, bride price, or punishments meted out to offenders.”



ADA



What can we learn from this project?

- **Setting up inclusive intergenerational groups can lay the foundations for constructive dialogue within and between communities, and generate a powerful sense of common belonging.**
- **To maximise their impact, organisations supporting peacebuilding groups and dialogues should undertake a thorough stakeholder analysis when planning activities, to identify the full range of groups involved and the local dynamics of power and influence.**
- **Intergenerational relationships, strengthened through dialogue, allow both younger and older people to understand and appreciate their respective value and the positive role they can play in society, especially on matters of peaceful co-existence.**
- **Intergenerational groups should be as inclusive as possible, involving women and men of different ages, ethnicity, social status, as well as groups who are particularly vulnerable (for example, people with disabilities) and those who are hard to reach (such as those living in remote rural areas).**
- **Stereotyping the role and value of women and girls undermines efforts to strengthen community cohesion and decision making, and to promote peaceful co-existence.**
- **It is vital to promote discussion between generations on the meaning and consequences of certain traditions that older people understand but younger generations may not.**

What could be done differently?

Given the complexity of the issues the project was dealing with, and the sensitive nature of deep-rooted causes of conflict, more time and resources should have been spent on mapping out all the different stakeholders and understanding their grievances and perspectives. The stakeholder analysis that was conducted was generic, and did not fully consider the diversity of backgrounds and history of individuals and their affiliations. Peacebuilding is clearly a long-term endeavour that requires time, expert skills and financial resources. The project would have benefited from being extended, with more resources for comprehensive and regular follow-up on community action points agreed in the quarterly dialogue meetings.

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