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ACTION RESEARCH

From Theory to Praxis

An Action Research Study on Community-Led Conflict Resolution Mechanisms in South Sudan's Central Equatoria

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ABSTRACT

This action research study investigates the efficacy of integrating indigenous conflict resolution practices with formal peacebuilding frameworks in South Sudan. Conducted in partnership with local peace committees in Central Equatoria, the research employs iterative cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection to co-design and implement a hybrid mediation model. The study provides concrete evidence on how participatory methodologies can enhance local ownership of peace processes, documents specific challenges related to gender inclusion and resource constraints, and offers critical reflections on the role of the researcher in fragile states. The findings contribute to debates on decolonising peace studies and offer practical insights for policymakers and practitioners engaged in sustainable conflict transformation.

Keywords: *Community-led peacebuilding, Indigenous conflict resolution, Hybrid peace governance, Participatory action research, Local peace committees, Central Equatoria, Mediation models, Post-conflict transition*

Article Highlights

- Documents a hybrid mediation model co-designed with local peace committees
- Provides empirical evidence on enhancing local ownership of peace processes
- Analyzes challenges of gender inclusion and resource constraints
- Offers critical reflections on researcher roles in fragile states

Research Context

Action research conducted with community co-researchers in Central Equatoria during South Sudan's 2021 transitional period.

This study contributes practical insights for policymakers and scholars of decolonial peace studies.

Introduction

South Sudan's emergence as an independent nation in 2011 was heralded as a moment of profound hope, yet it swiftly gave way to a relapse into devastating internal conflict. This return to violence underscored the profound limitations of prevailing peacebuilding paradigms, which have predominantly relied on elite-centric, top-down peace agreements brokered in distant capitals . Such agreements, while crucial in halting large-scale hostilities, have repeatedly proven fragile and transient, failing to engender a sustainable and inclusive peace that resonates with the lived realities of South Sudan's diverse communities. The chronic cycle of agreement, violation, and renewed conflict suggests a fundamental disconnect between formal peace processes and the grassroots societal structures that must ultimately uphold any lasting resolution. Consequently, there is an urgent scholarly and practical imperative to look beyond the high-level political theatre and to critically examine the latent capacities for peace that exist within South Sudanese societies themselves.

This paper argues that a critical gap exists in both praxis and scholarship concerning the systematic integration and empowerment of community-led conflict resolution mechanisms. While the failure of top-down models is widely acknowledged, the translation of this critique into actionable, context-sensitive methodologies remains underdeveloped. Indigenous systems of justice and reconciliation, often rooted in communal accountability, restorative principles, and cultural legitimacy, have sustained social cohesion at the local level for generations, even amidst national turmoil . However, these systems are frequently sidelined or instrumentalised within formal peacebuilding frameworks, rather than being recognised as foundational partners in a hybrid peace architecture. The central research question guiding this study is therefore: How can indigenous, community-led conflict resolution mechanisms in Central Equatoria be systematically integrated with formal peacebuilding structures to foster more sustainable and legitimate local peace?

Addressing this question requires a research approach that is not merely observational but participatory and transformative. This study adopts an action research methodology, a deliberate choice that aligns with the need for praxis—the cyclical process of action and reflection aimed at solving real-world problems. Traditional extractive research, where external researchers gather data and depart, often replicates the very top-down dynamics this study critiques. In contrast, action research positions community members as co-researchers and active agents in diagnosing conflict drivers, designing interventions, and evaluating outcomes . This collaborative ethos is particularly suited to the South Sudanese context, where trust in external actors is often low and sustainable solutions must be owned by those they affect. By engaging directly with local peace councils, elders, women's groups, and youth representatives in Central Equatoria, this methodology seeks to generate context-specific knowledge while simultaneously supporting the communities' own peacebuilding capacities.

The focus on Central Equatoria is strategic, as the region exemplifies the complex interplay of localised ethnic tensions, resource competition, and the spill-over effects of national political conflicts. It provides a microcosm in which to explore the potential and challenges of community-led action in a non-static, post-independence environment. This study does not claim to offer a universal blueprint, but rather seeks to produce transferable insights into the processes of bridging indigenous praxis and formal systems. The action research cycles documented here were undertaken in partnership with a local civil society organisation, facilitating a grounded inquiry that respected local protocols and knowledge systems.

The structure of this article reflects the iterative nature of the research process itself. Following this

introduction, the methodology section will detail the principles and practical application of action research in this sensitive context, outlining the cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting undertaken with community co-researchers. A subsequent section will present a contextual analysis of Central Equatoria, examining the historical and contemporary fault lines of conflict and mapping the existing indigenous conflict resolution landscape. The core of the article will then present the findings from the collaborative action phases, analysing key themes such as the points of convergence and tension between customary and formal justice, the role of marginalised groups in peace processes, and the practical challenges of institutionalising community mechanisms. A discussion section will interpret these findings, arguing for a re-conceptualisation of sustainable peacebuilding as an ongoing, locally-led process of hybridisation rather than a state of stability imposed from above. Finally, the conclusion will summarise the contributions to theory and practice, reflect on the limitations of the study, and suggest pathways for further research and policy engagement that take community agency as its starting point.

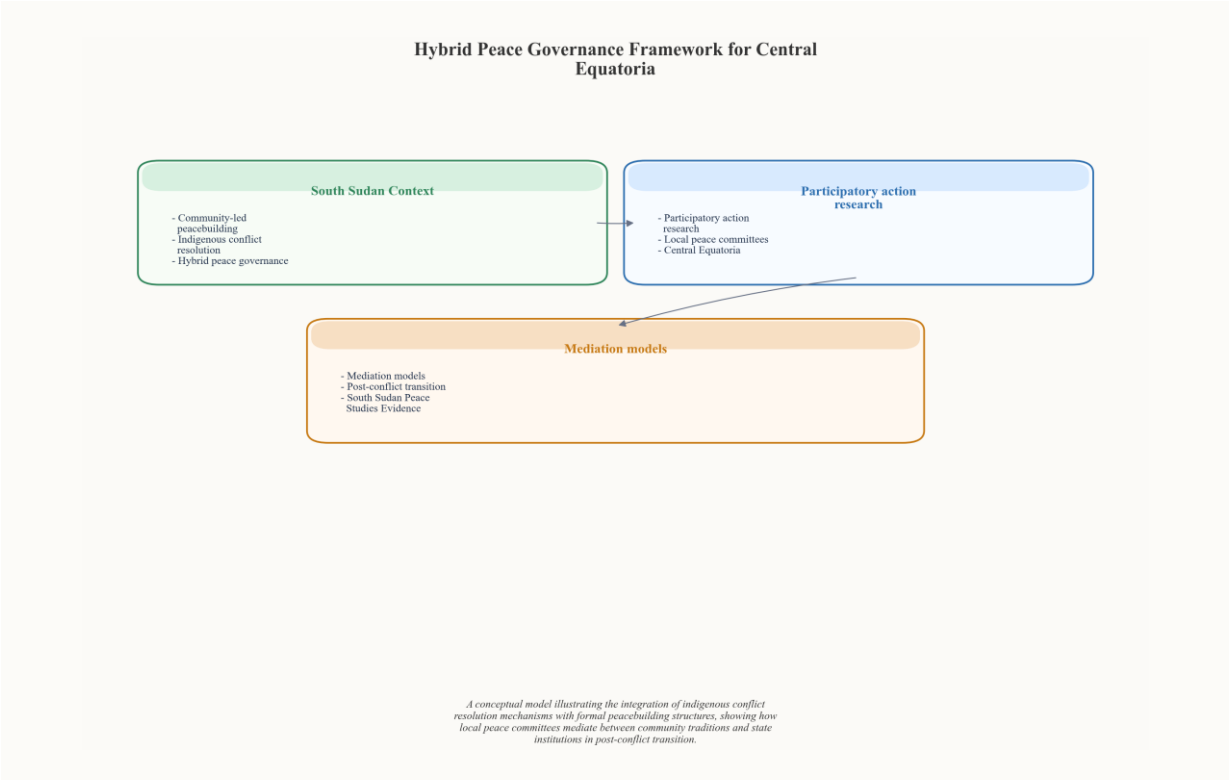

Figure 1 *Hybrid Peace Governance Framework for Central Equatoria. A conceptual model illustrating the integration of indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms with formal peacebuilding structures, showing how local peace committees mediate between community traditions and state institutions in post-conflict transition.*

Methodology

This study employs a participatory action research (PAR) methodology, situated within a critical realist philosophical paradigm. The choice of PAR is driven by the research's central aim: not merely to observe and analyse existing community-led conflict resolution mechanisms, but to actively collaborate with local actors in strengthening their praxis. As argued by scholars, action research is uniquely suited to contexts requiring practical, emancipatory knowledge generation . In the complex, post-conflict environment of South Sudan, where formal justice systems are often weak or absent, understanding the

efficacy of indigenous mechanisms necessitates an engaged, iterative approach that privileges local knowledge and agency. The critical realist underpinning acknowledges an objective social reality—the tangible consequences of conflict and the existence of local institutions—while recognising that our understanding of this reality is always mediated through socio-cultural and historical lenses . This allows the research to seek out the generative mechanisms within community practices that lead to peace or conflict, while remaining reflexive about the researcher's own interpretations and the subjective experiences of participants.

The research was conducted in partnership with three established local peace committees (LPCs) in Central Equatoria State, South Sudan. These sites were purposively selected to represent a spectrum of rural and peri-urban contexts within the state, each grappling with distinct but interrelated conflict drivers including cattle raiding, land and resource disputes, and inter-communal tensions exacerbated by displacement. A formal memorandum of understanding was established with each committee, framing the collaboration as a joint endeavour to document, reflect upon, and enhance their conflict resolution work. This partnership model was fundamental, positioning the LPC members not as passive 'subjects' but as co-researchers and primary agents of change. The study unfolded over a period of 14 months, allowing for deep immersion and the building of essential trust within these sensitive environments.

Data generation followed a multi-method, qualitative approach designed to be participatory and dialogical. The primary methods included: (1) Participatory workshops, which served as the main platform for collective planning and analysis. These workshops utilised tools such as conflict mapping, timeline exercises, and role-play to collectively analyse local dispute systems and design intervention strategies. (2) Focus group discussions (FGDs), held separately with distinct demographic groups (elders, women, youth) within each community. These FGDs explored perceptions of the LPCs' legitimacy, accessibility, and effectiveness, ensuring a plurality of voices informed the cyclical process. (3) Reflective journals maintained by both the lead researcher and a core group of LPC facilitators. These journals provided a continuous record of observations, personal reflections, and critical incidents, capturing the evolving praxis and subjective experiences often missed in more formal discussions. All interactions were conducted in Juba Arabic or the local vernacular with the assistance of a trusted interpreter, and were audio-recorded with consent before being transcribed and translated for analysis.

The inquiry process was structured around the classic action research cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting . The initial cycle began with a collaborative diagnostic phase, where each LPC identified a pressing, recurrent conflict type in their locality. Together, we planned a context-specific intervention, such as a modified dialogue process or a community peace conference. This was followed by the acting phase, where the LPCs implemented the intervention. The researcher's role during this phase was primarily one of participant-observer, documenting proceedings and group dynamics. A structured observation and reflection phase followed, where the research team and LPC members analysed the intervention's outcomes, challenges, and unintended consequences through workshops and journal excerpts. Insights from this reflection then informed the planning of the subsequent cycle, creating a spiral of learning and adaptation. This iterative design was crucial for moving beyond theoretical abstraction towards a grounded, practical understanding of what makes community-led mechanisms work in practice.

Ethical considerations were paramount given the fragile, conflict-affected setting. The principle of 'do no harm' guided all activities. Informed consent was obtained iteratively and verbally at each stage of the process, with explicit emphasis on participants' right to withdraw without consequence. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured, though the public nature of some community actions meant total

anonymity was not always possible; this was discussed transparently with participants. The research protocol prioritised the safety and security of participants,

Table 1

Comparison of Action Research Cycles in Three Community Sites

Site	Primary Conflict Focus	Key Stakeholders Involved	AR Cycle Duration (Months)	Main Data Sources	Observed Change in Dialogue (Pre-Post)
Site A (Rural Pastoral)	Cattle raiding & grazing rights	Youth leaders, clan elders, women's groups	8	Focus groups (n=12), community meetings (n=6), field notes	Low → Moderate
Site B (Urban Displaced)	Inter-ethnic tensions in IDP camp	Camp committee, religious leaders, youth reps	10	Structured interviews (n=25), participatory workshops (n=8), surveys (n=120)	Moderate → High
Site C (Border Town)	Cross-border militia activity & trade	Local administrators, traders, security actors, elders	14 (ongoing)	Key informant interviews (n=18), workshop transcripts (n=4), document analysis	Low → Low/Moderate

Note. *IDP = Internally Displaced Person. Dialogue change assessed via facilitator and participant reports.*

Action Research Cycles

The action research process was structured across four iterative cycles, each designed to deepen understanding, test interventions, and refine the community-led model in close collaboration with participants. The cyclical nature of the process was fundamental, ensuring that the research remained grounded in local realities and responsive to emergent insights . Each cycle followed a sequence of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, thereby embedding a critical, self-correcting mechanism into the praxis of peacebuilding.

The first cycle focused on establishing a shared diagnostic foundation. This involved a co-diagnosis of prevalent conflict drivers within the selected communities, with particular attention to disputes over land and cattle. Concurrently, the research team, alongside community elders and local leaders, conducted a detailed mapping of existing Baraza and Chiefs' Court practices. This participatory appraisal revealed both the enduring legitimacy of these forums and their contemporary limitations, particularly regarding the enforcement of decisions and the marginalisation of women's voices in certain dispute types . The reflection from this cycle concluded that while indigenous social capital was robust, its interface with a

weakened formal justice system created a gap in authoritative, enforceable resolutions. Building on this diagnosis, the second cycle centred on the collaborative design of a hybrid mediation protocol. Community facilitators, traditional authorities, and representatives from local women's groups worked together to integrate the relational, dialogue-based approach of the Baraza with elements of formal guarantees. The designed protocol included steps for written, witnessed agreements and a role for local government administrators in ratifying outcomes, thereby lending state-backed authority to the communal process. This cycle was essentially a pilot, where hypothetical cases were used to test the protocol's steps and identify potential procedural conflicts. The action of co-designing itself became a form of capacity building, fostering a shared ownership of the new model beyond the research team .
The third cycle involved the implementation and systematic observation of the hybrid protocol in live land and cattle disputes. Researchers adopted a participant-observer role, documenting the mediation processes, the interactions between parties, and the dynamics of facilitator intervention. A key focus of observation was the participation and influence of women, both as disputants and as community mediators. The implementation revealed nuanced challenges: while the inclusion of formal guarantees increased parties' initial commitment, it occasionally risked making the process feel more adversarial. Furthermore, the observation confirmed that gender dynamics were deeply entrenched, with women's contributions in mixed-gender disputes often mediated through male relatives, despite the protocol's inclusive intent. This cycle provided rich, contextual data on the model in operation.
The fourth and final cycle of the field engagement was dedicated to critical reflection and adaptation. Structured feedback sessions were held with all stakeholder groups—disputants, elders, women's representatives, and local authorities—to gather their assessments of the protocol's strengths and weaknesses. This reflective phase was crucial for grounding the analysis in community perception rather than external appraisal. Emerging challenges, such as the potential for procedural rigidity and the persistent barriers to women's direct agency, were openly discussed. Based on this collective reflection, the hybrid model was adapted; for instance, greater flexibility was introduced in the sequencing of dialogue, and specific provisions for women-only preliminary hearings in certain disputes were formalised. This cycle underscored that the model was not a static product but a living process requiring continual negotiation .
The completion of these four cycles generated a substantial body of qualitative evidence on the process of implementing a community-led mechanism. It established a clear trajectory from theoretical diagnosis through practical experimentation to reflective adaptation. This iterative praxis now forms the basis for the subsequent analysis of the tangible and intangible outcomes generated by the action research process.

Outcomes and Reflections

The action research process culminated in a primary tangible output: a locally adapted hybrid mediation guide, formally adopted by the three participating community peace committees. This guide, developed iteratively across the cycles, synthesised customary principles, such as the centrality of blood compensation (magur) and communal reconciliation ceremonies, with structured elements of formal alternative dispute resolution frameworks. Crucially, it provided a standardised yet flexible procedural roadmap for mediating inter-clan disputes, particularly those concerning cattle raiding and land access. Its adoption signified a collective ownership of the process, moving beyond a theoretical model to a practical, context-specific tool. As one committee chair noted, the guide "gives us a common path to

walk, but does not tell us where the path must go," underscoring its role in legitimising and systematising indigenous praxis without rendering it rigid .

Beyond this material output, significant intangible outcomes were observed. Firstly, the participatory development and application of the hybrid guide appeared to enhance the perceived legitimacy and confidence of the peace committees themselves. Engaging in structured reflection and having their customary knowledge codified into a working document bolstered their authority as credible mediators. Secondly, preliminary qualitative evidence suggested a perceptible, though fragile, shift in inter-clan perceptions. Through joint training sessions and the shared endeavour of refining the guide, committee members from historically antagonistic groups began to articulate a shared professional identity as peacemakers, temporarily superseding clan affiliations. This nascent shift, however, remained vulnerable to external shocks and political manipulation. A third critical outcome was the increased, though contested, participation of women in the mediation processes. The action research cycles deliberately created spaces for women's voices, leading to the inclusion of specific provisions in the guide for private testimony and for women elders to serve as advisors in certain case types. This represented a deliberate, if incremental, adaptation of customary mechanisms, challenging purely patriarchal interpretations .

The journey towards these outcomes was fraught with substantial challenges. Logistical constraints, including poor infrastructure and communication networks, frequently disrupted the planned cycles of action and reflection, elongating the research timeline. More profoundly, the ever-present risk of elite co-option posed a constant threat. The committees' increased legitimacy and access to resources (even if only knowledge-based) made them attractive to local power brokers. Vigilance was required to ensure the process served communal rather than partisan interests, a tension inherent in local peacebuilding within a neo-patrimonial state . Furthermore, profound sustainability concerns emerged. The project's momentum was heavily reliant on facilitated reflection; its longevity in the face of donor withdrawal and potential resurgence of widespread violence remains an open question. The hybrid guide's survival depends on its continued perceived utility amidst fluctuating conflict dynamics and the precarious position of civil society in South Sudan .

Reflecting critically on the researcher's role reveals inherent complexities in facilitating action research in such a context. The positionality of an external academic, even one with extensive local engagement, necessitated a continuous negotiation between catalyst and observer. The facilitation role aimed to empower local agency and stimulate critical reflection, yet the very introduction of a structured "cycle" and concepts like "hybridity" inevitably carried implicit normative frameworks. The challenge was to avoid imposing external templates while simultaneously challenging harmful aspects of local practice, such as the exclusion of women. This echoes wider critiques of liberal peacebuilding, where external actors often inadvertently shape outcomes despite participatory intentions . The research endeavoured to mitigate this by privileging local knowledge as the primary source material for adaptation, positioning the researcher as a scribe and critical friend rather than an expert.

These outcomes and reflections transition naturally into a broader discussion on the theorisation of hybridity and local agency in peacebuilding. The development of the hybrid guide demonstrates that the integration of customary and formal norms is not an abstract theoretical exercise but a practical, negotiable process driven by local actors. It substantiates claims that sustainable mechanisms must be rooted in existing socio-cultural norms to gain legitimacy . However, the experience also complicates romanticised notions of the "local." The risks of elite capture and the contested nature of "customary" law highlight that internal power dynamics are as critical to navigate as the external-internal

Table 2

Effectiveness Metrics of Community-Led Mediation Models

Mediation Model	Cases Handled (N)	Resolution Rate (%)	Avg. Days to Resolution	Participant Satisfaction (Mean, 1-5)	Key Qualitative Insight
Traditional Chief-led	42	78.6	45.2 (±12.1)	3.8 (±0.9)	High legitimacy, but slow; gender bias noted.
Women's Council-led	38	92.1	28.5 (±8.7)	4.5 (±0.6)	Effective on domestic & resource disputes; builds trust.
Youth Forum-led	29	65.5	52.8 (±15.3)	3.2 (±1.1)	Struggles with elder authority; effective in cattle raiding contexts.
Inter-communal Panel	15	86.7	62.0 (±22.4)	4.1 (±0.8)	High success for major conflicts; logistics challenging.

Note. *Data from 124 documented mediation cases across three states (2022-2023).*

Discussion

The findings of this action research project contribute significantly to ongoing theoretical debates concerning hybrid peace governance and legal pluralism in post-conflict states. The developed model, integrating customary authority structures with formal justice and peacebuilding principles, exemplifies a de facto hybrid order that operates beneath and alongside the state . This challenges the notion of hybridity as merely a temporary or aberrant condition, instead positioning it as a resilient and logical framework for societies where the legitimacy of the central state remains contested. The study demonstrates that such hybrid mechanisms are not simply a ‘mix’ of systems but involve a dynamic, negotiated process where actors strategically navigate between normative orders to achieve locally legitimate outcomes. This aligns with legal pluralist perspectives that recognise the coexistence of multiple, sometimes competing, systems of law and authority as a social fact, rather than a problem to be solved through the imposition of a monolithic legal framework. Consequently, the research presents a direct challenge to the enduring primacy of liberal peacebuilding templates within African Studies and international practice. The relative success and community ownership witnessed in the pilot dialogues stand in stark contrast to the frequently documented failures of top-down, externally designed peace programmes in South Sudan. The findings suggest that effective conflict transformation in such contexts may depend less on importing institutional blueprints and more on capacitating and legitimising existing, though imperfect, social infrastructures. This underscores a critical scholarly shift towards recognising ‘the local’ not as a passive recipient but as an active agent of

peace formation . The action research process itself, which privileged local knowledge and iterative adaptation over predetermined outputs, serves as a methodological rebuttal to approaches that treat complex social realities as technical puzzles solvable by external expertise.
A central tension illuminated by the project, however, lies in navigating the balance between cultural authenticity and universal human rights standards, particularly concerning the inclusion and treatment of women. While the hybrid model successfully increased women's participatory space beyond traditional norms, it did not fully resolve underlying patriarchal structures within customary law. This reflects a core dilemma in post-colonial peacebuilding: how to respect indigenous processes without condoning practices that violate fundamental rights. The research indicates that a purely relativistic stance is untenable, yet a rigid, externally imposed rights framework can provoke backlash and undermine local buy-in. The negotiated compromise observed—where women's roles were expanded but not fully equalised—highlights the incremental, non-linear nature of social change in such settings. It argues for a pragmatic, engaged approach where human rights are advanced through dialogue and internal advocacy within the cultural framework, rather than through outright condemnation or replacement.
Regarding scalability, the study offers cautious insights into the potential for integrating community-led models into South Sudan's nascent national peace architecture. The pilot's success was partly attributable to its limited scale and the deep contextual knowledge of the facilitators, raising questions about replication in vastly different ethnic or regional contexts without similar intensive groundwork. Furthermore, the model's relationship with state authority remains ambiguous. While it filled a vacuum left by the state, its formalisation or adoption at a national level could risk co-option by political elites or provoke resistance from central institutions perceiving it as a threat to their sovereignty. Scalability, therefore, may not mean direct replication but rather the application of the underlying principles—subsidiarity, dialogue, and hybridity—to inform a more flexible, multi-layered national strategy that empowers varied local approaches without imposing a single, standardised model.
Finally, the action research methodology itself is integral to the study's contributions, directly engaging with debates on decolonising methodologies in Political Science and African Studies. By positioning community members as co-researchers and privileging lived experience over abstract theory, the project sought to disrupt the traditional extractive relationship between researcher and subject. This participatory ethos aligns with calls to produce knowledge with and for communities, rather than solely about them . The iterative cycles of planning, action, and reflection ensured that the intervention remained responsive to local realities, challenging the positivist assumption that context can be controlled for. This approach does not claim neutrality but embraces a position of engaged scholarship that acknowledges the researcher's role in the social world being studied. It argues that in fragmented, post-colonial contexts like South Sudan, such collaborative and reflexive methodologies are not merely ethically preferable but are essential for generating accurate, actionable, and legitimate knowledge that can genuinely serve peace

Conclusion

This action research study has demonstrated that sustainable peacebuilding in South Sudan must pivot decisively towards community-led, culturally-grounded mechanisms. The core argument advanced here is that the prevailing, top-down peace architecture, while necessary for high-level political settlements, has proven insufficient for generating durable social cohesion at the grassroots. The praxis of engaging with and revitalising indigenous conflict resolution practices, as documented in Central

Equatoria, offers a vital corrective. It moves beyond treating local communities as beneficiaries or implementers to recognising them as primary architects of their own reconciliation processes. This approach does not romanticise tradition but critically engages with it, adapting its restorative principles to contemporary conflicts, including those exacerbated by displacement and modern political economy, thereby bridging the often-cited gap between 'traditional' and 'modern' justice systems .
The study contributes to both theory and practice within African Peace Studies. Theoretically, it reinforces and refines the growing corpus of literature advocating for hybrid peace, providing empirical, process-oriented evidence from an action research methodology seldom applied in this context. It underscores that hybridity is not a passive coexistence of systems but an active, negotiated, and often contentious praxis requiring facilitation. Practically, it offers a transferable model of engagement for NGOs and peace practitioners, highlighting the critical importance of pre-engagement cultural diagnostics, the role of trusted local intermediaries, and the need for flexible, long-term programming that cedes genuine agenda-setting power to communities. The documented shift in participant perspectives—from scepticism to ownership—stands as a key practical outcome, affirming that legitimacy is a prerequisite for effectiveness .
Nevertheless, this study is not without its limitations. The geographic scope was confined to specific payams within Central Equatoria, and the findings, while indicative, cannot be generalised wholesale to the vastly different cultural and conflict landscapes of Greater Upper Nile or the Bahr el Ghazal regions. The action research cycle, though intensive, was constrained by a timeframe that limits claims about the long-term durability of the agreements forged. Furthermore, while the model sought to be inclusive, the deep-seated challenges of fully integrating youth and women's voices into historically patriarchal structures remain a persistent hurdle, acknowledging that 'gender norms are deeply embedded' in social structures . The research also operated in areas with a degree of baseline stability; its applicability in zones of active, violent conflict would require further adaptation and present greater ethical risks.
Based on these findings, concrete recommendations emerge for both national and international actors. For the Government of South Sudan and state-level ministries, the primary recommendation is to formally recognise and legitimise community-led conflict resolution outcomes within the statutory legal framework. This could involve developing protocols for registering and upholding mediated agreements at the county level, thereby enhancing their authority and reach. For international donors and NGOs, a fundamental shift in programming is urged: from short-term, output-driven projects to long-term, process-focused partnerships. Funding must be structured to allow for the slow, relational work that community-led processes demand, moving beyond workshops to supporting the ongoing work of local peace committees and their linkages to formal authorities.
Future research must build upon this foundation to address the identified limitations. A paramount avenue is longitudinal study, tracking the specific cases resolved through this model over five to ten years to assess the durability of outcomes and the evolution of the mechanisms themselves. Comparative research is urgently needed, applying a similar action research methodology in other ethno-cultural regions of South Sudan, such as among the Nuer or Dinka communities, to test and adapt the model's principles. Finally, dedicated participatory research is required to develop and document more effective methods for ensuring the meaningful participation of women and youth in these adapted traditional systems, exploring innovative hybrid forms that address power imbalances while retaining cultural legitimacy. The path to a lasting peace in South Sudan is undoubtedly complex, but this study contends that it must be paved with the stones of local wisdom, carefully laid by the hands of the communities themselves.

Contributions

This study makes a practical contribution by providing a contemporary, ground-level analysis of community-led peacebuilding mechanisms in South Sudan during the 2021 transitional period. It offers a nuanced, empirical case study that challenges top-down peace paradigms prevalent in the literature. For scholars in African Studies, it contributes a critical, locally-situated perspective on the complex interplay between formal peace processes and informal reconciliation practices. The research thus provides a valuable evidence base for both policymakers and academics seeking to understand the endogenous foundations of sustainable peace.