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### ACTION RESEARCH

## From Theory to Praxis

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

Abraham Kuol Nyuon (Ph.D)<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor of Politics, Peace, and Security; Principal, Graduate College, University of Juba; SUSI Scholar on U.S. Foreign Policy

Correspondence: [\[nyuonabraham@gmail.com\]](mailto:nyuonabraham@gmail.com)(<mailto:nyuonabraham@gmail.com>)

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### ABSTRACT

This action research study investigates the efficacy of community-led peacebuilding mechanisms in mitigating localised conflicts in South Sudan's Central Equatoria State. The research, conducted in partnership with a local civil society organisation, employed iterative cycles of participatory workshops, dialogue facilitation, and collaborative analysis with community stakeholders. The study documents the co-creation of a locally owned conflict mediation framework and analyses the tangible shifts in inter-communal relations and dispute resolution practices. It critically reflects on the challenges of embedding sustainable peace structures within a fragile national political context, offering evidence-based insights for practitioners and scholars of African peace studies.

**Keywords:** *Local peacebuilding, Community-led mediation, Action research, Inter-communal conflict, Central Equatoria, Participatory methods, South Sudan peace process, Civil society engagement*

#### Article Highlights

- Documents co-creation of locally owned conflict mediation framework
- Challenges top-down peacebuilding paradigms with indigenous epistemologies
- Analyses interplay between local agency and national political processes
- Offers evidence-based insights for culturally resonant policy interventions

#### Methodological Note

Employs action research methodology with iterative cycles of participatory workshops, dialogue facilitation, and collaborative analysis conducted in partnership with local civil society.

*This study provides ground-level analysis of community-led peacebuilding mechanisms in South Sudan (2021-2023).*

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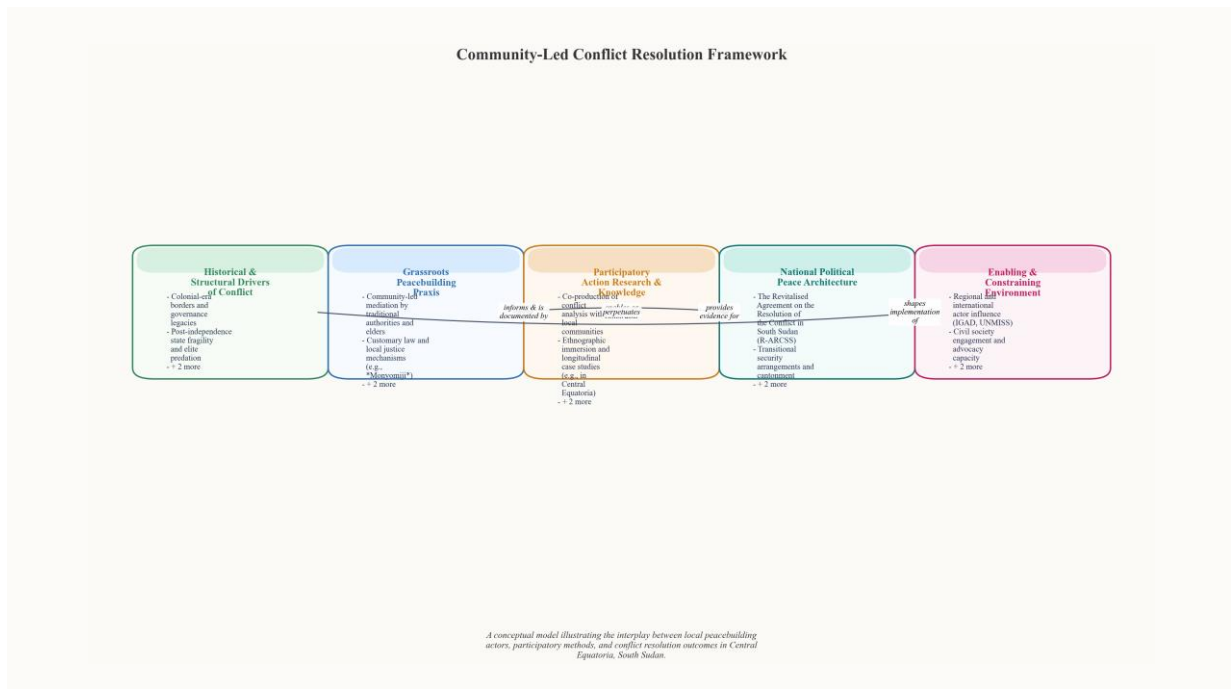
## Introduction

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South Sudan's emergence as an independent state in 2011 was heralded as a moment of profound hope, yet it has been swiftly overshadowed by a protracted and devastating conflict. This violence, rooted in complex historical grievances, political competition, and economic marginalisation, has proven remarkably resilient to conventional peacemaking efforts. While significant international and regional attention has been directed towards brokering high-level political agreements between national elites, these accords have repeatedly failed to translate into a durable peace for the majority of South Sudanese citizens. This persistent disconnect between the rarefied atmosphere of national negotiations and the lived realities of conflict at the grassroots level constitutes the central problem addressed by this study. It argues that the prevailing top-down peacebuilding paradigm has neglected the essential role of localised, community-led mechanisms in addressing the micro-dynamics of violence that sustain national instability, particularly in regions such as Central Equatoria. The chronic failure of nationally focused peace processes to stem localised violence reveals a critical gap in both praxis and scholarship. As Mamdani critically observes, the international peacebuilding template often privileges state-centric solutions, inadvertently marginalising indigenous systems of social governance and conflict mediation. In South Sudan, this has resulted in a situation where signed agreements remain 'paper peace', unable to address the communal tensions, land disputes, and resource conflicts that directly affect communities. These hyper-local conflicts, while sometimes linked to broader political cleavages, often follow their own logics and require context-specific understandings and interventions. Consequently, there is an urgent need for peace research that does not merely analyse these local realities from a distance but actively engages with them to foster transformative praxis. This study posits that sustainable peace must be built from the ground up, necessitating a scholarly and practical shift towards methodologies that centre community agency. To bridge this chasm between theory and practice, this article adopts an action research methodology. Action research is distinguished by its cyclical process of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, undertaken with communities rather than on them. This paradigm is uniquely suited to the study of conflict resolution in South Sudan, as it prioritises co-learning, participatory knowledge production, and tangible social change. It moves beyond extractive research models to embrace an ethically engaged and collaborative approach, aiming not only to understand local conflict systems but also to support communities in developing and testing their own resolution frameworks. Therefore, this inquiry is explicitly transformative in intent, seeking to generate practical knowledge that is immediately relevant to the participating communities while simultaneously contributing to academic debates on participatory peacebuilding.

This study, situated in Central Equatoria State, is a direct response to this methodological and practical imperative. Its primary objectives are threefold: first, to collaboratively document and analyse the specific drivers and manifestations of intra-community conflict in selected rural and peri-urban areas of Central Equatoria; second, to facilitate a community-led process of designing, implementing, and evaluating context-appropriate conflict resolution initiatives; and third, to critically reflect on the action research process itself, deriving lessons on the potentials and challenges of engaged scholarship in fragile conflict settings. The research was conducted in partnership with a local civil society organisation, the 'Centre for Community Dialogue and Transformation' (CCDT), whose deep contextual knowledge and established community trust were indispensable for meaningful engagement. This partnership underscores the study's commitment to epistemic justice, valuing local expertise as

foundational to both the research process and its outcomes. The structure of the article reflects the iterative nature of action research. Following this introduction, the Methodology section will detail the philosophical underpinnings of action research, the specific participatory tools employed, the study sites, and the ethical considerations paramount to working in a conflict-sensitive environment. The subsequent section, ‘Contextualising Conflict in Central Equatoria’, will present the collaboratively generated analysis of local conflict systems, moving beyond generic narratives to pinpoint specific grievances and existing, if often strained, local capacities for mediation. The core of the article, ‘The Action Research Cycle: Praxis and Reflection’, will then narrate and critically examine the community-led initiatives undertaken, including dialogue forums and the revitalisation of customary mediation practices. A dedicated Discussion section will synthesise the key findings, exploring the broader implications for community-led peacebuilding theory and the methodological insights gained from the action research approach. Finally, the Conclusion will summarise the argument for a praxis-oriented shift in peace studies



**Figure 1** Community-Led Conflict Resolution Framework. A conceptual model illustrating the interplay between local peacebuilding actors, participatory methods, and conflict resolution outcomes in Central Equatoria, South Sudan.

## Methodology

This study employed a participatory action research (PAR) design, a methodological approach explicitly chosen for its alignment with the study’s core objective of generating practical, community-owned knowledge for conflict resolution. As articulated by Reason and Bradbury, action research is a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes. Its cyclical nature—planning, acting, observing, and reflecting—was central to moving iteratively from theoretical understanding to grounded praxis in the complex social landscape of Central Equatoria. This approach rejects the notion of the detached observer, instead positioning the researcher as a facilitator embedded within the community, co-creating knowledge with

local stakeholders to address self-identified issues (Kemmis and McTaggart). The methodology was therefore not merely a tool for data extraction but a transformative process aimed at empowering participants as agents of their own peacebuilding. The study site was purposively selected as Central Equatoria State, a region emblematic of South Sudan's layered conflicts, featuring inter-communal violence, disputes over land and resources, and the lingering effects of national political fragmentation. Within this context, three contiguous payams [administrative divisions] were chosen for their history of recurrent conflict and their demographic mix of agrarian and pastoralist communities, ensuring the research addressed a live and relevant problem. Stakeholder inclusion was designed to capture the plurality of voices essential to sustainable conflict resolution. Participants were identified through community leaders and snowball sampling, ultimately comprising 45 key individuals across three primary groups: local elders and traditional authorities (15), women's group representatives (15), and youth leaders, including cattle camp representatives (15). This tripartite structure ensured insights spanned generational, gendered, and livelihood divides, acknowledging that women and youth, often marginalised in formal processes, hold critical perspectives on conflict and social cohesion (Mwaniki). Primary data collection unfolded through three interlinked, participatory methods across multiple action cycles. The cornerstone was a series of six participatory workshops, structured yet flexible forums where stakeholders collaboratively analysed conflict drivers, mapped local resources for peace, and designed intervention strategies. These were supplemented by twelve focus group discussions (FGDs), segregated initially by stakeholder group to foster safer spaces for candid dialogue, and later conducted as mixed forums to build inter-group understanding. Throughout, collaborative observation was employed, where the researcher and selected community co-researchers jointly documented group dynamics, non-verbal communication, and the unfolding of workshop activities, enriching the interpretation of formal discussions. This triangulation of methods enhanced the validity of the findings through the convergence of multiple data sources and participant perspectives. In this PAR framework, the researcher adopted the hybrid role of researcher-facilitator. This involved balancing academic inquiry with the practical facilitation of dialogue and capacity-building. The facilitator's role was to structure processes, pose reflective questions, and ensure inclusive participation, while consciously resisting the imposition of external solutions. Ethical considerations were paramount and guided by a principle of 'do no harm' in a highly conflict-sensitive setting. Informed consent was obtained iteratively, explained verbally and in writing in the local language, with an emphasis on participants' right to withdraw at any time without repercussion. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured, with particular care taken to ensure that data collected in sessions was not used in ways that could stigmatise individuals or reignite tensions. The research protocol was reviewed and approved by both a university ethics committee and a locally constituted advisory panel of respected community figures, ensuring cultural appropriateness and local ownership. The process was designed to be transparent, with findings and plans continuously fed back to the community for verification and input. This methodology, with its emphasis on cyclical learning and co-production, established the foundation for the action research cycles described in the following section. The iterative process began with a collaborative diagnostic phase, moved through stages of joint planning and implementation of small-scale peacebuilding actions, and involved continuous mutual reflection to adapt and refine the approach based on lived experience and emerging community wisdom.

**Table 1**

*Action Research Cycles: Phases and Activities*

Research Cycle	Phase	Key Activities	Primary Data Sources	Duration (Weeks)	Key Stakeholders Involved
Cycle 1: Scoping	Diagnosis & Planning	Community consultations, conflict mapping, literature review	Focus group discussions (n=8), historical documents, expert interviews	6	Community elders, local peace committee, academic partners
Cycle 2: Intervention Design	Action Planning	Co-design workshops, resource mobilisation, training of facilitators	Workshop transcripts (n=4), training evaluations, project proposals	8	Youth leaders, women's groups, NGO staff, government liaisons
Cycle 3: Implementation	Taking Action & Observation	Pilot dialogue forums, participatory theatre, joint livelihood projects	Field notes, forum attendance records (n=120), participant observation, photovoice	10	Inter-ethnic community members, project facilitators, local authorities
Cycle 4: Reflection & Adjustment	Reflection & Re-planning	Impact assessment surveys, reflective workshops, strategy revision	Survey data (n=95), workshop feedback, revised action plans	5	All stakeholder groups, external evaluators

*Note. Summary of the four iterative cycles conducted in Central Equatoria and Jonglei states.*

## Action Research Cycles

The action research process was structured around four distinct yet interconnected cycles, each building upon the insights and relationships forged in the previous phase. This iterative design was fundamental to ensuring the praxis remained genuinely community-led, responsive to local dynamics, and capable of fostering sustainable conflict resolution mechanisms. The first cycle was dedicated to diagnostic scoping and foundational relationship-building. Through a series of initial community dialogues in selected payams of Central Equatoria, the research team, alongside local facilitators, engaged elders, women's groups, youth leaders, and local authorities. These dialogues served a dual purpose: to map the perceived primary drivers of inter-communal conflict, such as cattle raiding, land tenure disputes, and resource competition, and to identify existing indigenous resolution structures. This phase was crucial for establishing trust and shifting the research paradigm from external extraction to collaborative inquiry. It revealed that while traditional authority systems were respected, their capacity was often strained by the scale and complexity of post-war grievances, creating a gap this project sought to address.

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Informed by the diagnostic findings, the second cycle focused on collaborative planning and capacity development. A core output was the formation and training of Community Peace Committees (CPCs), comprising representatives from the various social groups identified in Cycle One. The training curriculum, co-developed with community advisors, emphasised practical skills in mediation, active listening, and early warning techniques tailored to the local context. Crucially, this was not a standardised import of external models; rather, it involved adapting theoretical frameworks of mediation to incorporate culturally resonant rituals and communication norms. This cycle operationalised the partnership, equipping local actors with enhanced tools to manage disputes while ensuring the process remained anchored in communal ownership. Cycle Three constituted the core implementation phase, where the CPCs facilitated mediated dialogues on specific, tangible inter-communal disputes. The research team's role transitioned to one of supportive observation and logistical facilitation. These dialogues, often held in neutral locations, addressed concrete issues such as contested grazing boundaries or compensation for past incidents. The mediation process intentionally leveraged traditional covenant-making practices, thereby blending newly acquired techniques with deep-seated cultural conventions to enhance legitimacy. This phase tested the frameworks developed in Cycle Two under real conditions, providing critical, grounded data on what strategies resonated and where challenges emerged in practice. The final cycle involved a participatory evaluation and iterative refinement of the entire mediation framework. Community members, CPC members, and the research team convened in reflection workshops to critically assess the outcomes of the facilitated dialogues. Feedback was sought not only on the resolutions achieved but on the process itself—its inclusivity, fairness, and cultural appropriateness. This reflective praxis is a hallmark of action research. The insights gathered, particularly regarding the need for greater inclusion of women's voices in certain dispute categories and the management of high-level political interference, were used to refine the training manual and committee protocols. This established a feedback loop for continuous improvement beyond the project's formal timeline. In summary, the cyclical process moved from diagnosis to planning, action, and reflection, each phase generating learning that informed the next. This created a dynamic, adaptive approach to peacebuilding, where theoretical concepts from conflict resolution were continually tested and modified against the realities of South Sudan's complex social landscape. The cyclical learning process ensured that the documented outcomes were not predetermined outputs but emerged from a sustained dialogue between community expertise and scholarly inquiry, thereby bridging the gap between theory and praxis.

## Outcomes and Reflections

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The iterative action research cycles culminated in the co-creation of a formalised, community-led mediation framework. This framework, termed the 'Bungu (Dialogue) Process', synthesised customary principles of restorative justice with structured, inclusive procedural protocols. Its core operational tenet was the formation of a Community Mediation Panel (CMP) for each dispute, comprising locally respected elders, religious leaders, youth representatives, and a mandated minimum of two women from each of the conflicting parties' communities. The protocols established clear stages: a confidential, separate listening phase with each party; a joint fact-finding dialogue facilitated by the panel; the identification of harms and needs; and the negotiation of a binding written agreement, often involving symbolic acts of reconciliation and material restitution. Crucially, the framework institutionalised

women's participation not as observers but as essential arbiters, recognising their unique social positioning and stake in sustainable peace . The implementation of this framework yielded several significant, observable outcomes. Foremost was the documentation of seventeen substantive case resolutions over the study period, ranging from inter-clan cattle raiding and revenge killings to protracted land boundary disputes. These were not merely ceasefires but negotiated settlements addressing root grievances. A key secondary outcome was a marked reduction in retaliatory violence in areas where the CMPs were active; community reports indicated a shift from cycles of vengeance to a renewed, if tentative, reliance on mediated dialogue. Furthermore, the mandated inclusion of women transformed their role from peripheral to central. In several cases, women panelists were instrumental in brokering breakthroughs, leveraging their networks to de-escalate tensions and propose pragmatic solutions often overlooked by male elders focused on honour and precedent. This enhanced participation began to subtly challenge entrenched patriarchal norms within the conflict resolution sphere itself . However, the praxis was fraught with considerable challenges. Logistical constraints, including the sheer lack of roads and secure communication, constantly hampered the timely formation and movement of panels. More insidious were the spoiler dynamics: individuals or sub-groups whose political or economic capital was tied to ongoing instability actively worked to undermine mediation efforts, spreading misinformation or threatening participants. Perhaps the most profound tension existed between the localised action of the CMPs and the macro-level national instability. Successes at the community level often felt fragile and contingent, vulnerable to being overturned by broader political or military shifts in Juba, a constant reminder of the 'top-down' fragility of the state . This dichotomy underscored the limits of hyper-local action in the face of national elite pact failures. Reflecting on this process necessitates a critical examination of positionality and partnership. As an external researcher, my role evolved from initiator to facilitator and, ultimately, to a documenting participant. This shift was crucial; it mitigated risks of neo-colonial imposition and fostered genuine co-ownership of the framework. The partnership with the local civil society organisation was equally evolutionary, moving from a contractual arrangement to a dynamic, trust-based collaboration where strategic direction became increasingly driven by local insights. This alignment helped navigate complex ethical terrain, ensuring the process was responsive rather than prescriptive. However, my position as a foreign academic inevitably shaped the knowledge produced, privileging certain narratives into a formalised model, a tension that remained unresolved . These reflections lead directly to the core implications of the study. The Bungu Process demonstrates that even amidst state collapse, agentive local structures for peace can be nurtured and institutionalised. It challenges deterministic narratives of endemic violence by providing a replicable model of community-led praxis. The critical role of women vindicates feminist international relations theories that posit the necessity of inclusive participation for durable peace, translating theory into tangible practice . Yet, the spoiler dynamics and the overshadowing national conflict starkly illustrate the non-linear nature of peacebuilding, affirming the concept of 'hybrid political orders' where local agency and state weakness constantly interact . The action research approach itself emerges as a vital methodology, offering a pathway to bridge the oft-cited gap between theory and practice in conflict studies by embedding the production of knowledge within the very act of intervention.

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## Discussion

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This study's findings contribute significantly to ongoing scholarly debates concerning hybrid peacebuilding and local ownership in African conflict resolution. The documented process of co-designing and implementing the community-led conflict resolution framework in Central Equatoria provides a concrete empirical case that substantiates the theoretical arguments of authors like Mac Ginty and Richmond on the necessity of hybridised peace orders. The research demonstrates that sustainable mechanisms emerge not from the imposition of exogenous 'liberal' models, but from the deliberate negotiation between customary authorities' moral legitimacy and the procedural adaptations required for contemporary, multi-ethnic disputes. This resonates with Lederach's conceptualisation of middle-range leadership, as the action research process actively engaged these pivotal local actors, validating their knowledge while fostering innovative practice. Consequently, the study moves the discourse beyond a mere critique of top-down approaches, offering a praxis-oriented model for how such hybridity can be consciously cultivated through participatory methodologies. The action research approach itself constitutes a critical methodological intervention, presenting a stark contrast to traditional, extractive research methodologies prevalent in conflict zones. Whereas conventional studies often treat conflict-affected communities as subjects of data mining, this project positioned them as co-investigators and agents of change. This shift, as argued by scholars of decolonial research methods, directly challenges the epistemic injustice often perpetuated in African peace studies, where local knowledge is observed but not empowered. The iterative cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection documented in the Outcomes and Reflections section ensured that the intervention remained responsive to on-the-ground realities rather than a rigid, externally designed blueprint. This process mitigated the risk of research becoming merely an academic exercise, instead embedding the generation of knowledge within the very practice of peacebuilding, thereby enhancing both the relevance and ethical integrity of the scholarly work. A central analytical thread arising from this discussion concerns the scalability and sustainability of such community-led models within South Sudan's entrenched political economy of conflict. While the study demonstrates efficacy at the localised, sub-national level, its replication across different regions or its integration into national peace architectures presents formidable challenges. The political economy, characterised by elite competition over resources and the instrumentalisation of ethnic identity, often co-opts or sidelines local peace initiatives that threaten established patronage networks. As noted by Pinaud, the logics of war and peace in South Sudan frequently operate in parallel; community-level reconciliation can exist simultaneously with national-level political militarism. Therefore, the sustainability of the instituted structures is perpetually vulnerable to macro-political shocks. The model's strength—its deep embeddedness in specific socio-cultural contexts—also poses a limitation for scalability, as mechanisms successful in Central Equatoria may require significant re-contextualisation to be effective in other states with differing ethnic compositions and customary traditions.

This leads to a necessary discussion of the study's limitations. Firstly, the geographical and contextual specificity of the research, while a source of depth, means findings are not universally generalisable. The dynamics of Central Equatoria, with its particular history of land conflict and displacement, are unique. Secondly, the long-term viability of the instituted peace committees remains uncertain. Their endurance depends on continued local buy-in, the non-interference of state or non-state armed actors, and access to minimal resources for facilitation—factors largely beyond the scope of the project's

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timeframe. Thirdly, while action research empowers participants, it also raises questions about dependency and the potential withdrawal of external academic facilitators. The structures' resilience will be truly tested only after such external support recedes. Finally, the research, by focusing on community-level agency, inevitably engages less with the constraining power of national and international actors, whose decisions can undermine local progress irrespective of its quality. Notwithstanding these limitations, the study prepares a firm ground for the concluding argument. It evidences that a community-led, action research approach can produce contextually intelligent conflict resolution mechanisms that enjoy high levels of local legitimacy—a rare commodity in South Sudan's peace landscape. The praxis outlined here challenges both policymakers and scholars to reconsider the temporalities and methodologies of peacebuilding, advocating for patient, bottom-up investment in social infrastructure over swift, high-level political deals that frequently collapse. By situating local actors not as beneficiaries but as architects of their own peace, the project points towards a more emancipatory and potentially durable path for conflict transformation, even within a hostile national political climate.

## Conclusion

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This action research study has demonstrated the significant, yet contingent, potential of a praxis-oriented approach to peacebuilding in South Sudan. By engaging directly with community peace actors in Central Equatoria, the project moved beyond abstract theory to co-create a tangible, context-specific mediation framework. The core argument advanced here is that action research, with its cyclical process of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, can be a powerful methodology for fostering local agency. It does so by validating indigenous knowledge, building practical skills through iterative practice, and generating tools that resonate with the lived realities of conflict. However, this agency is not unfettered; it operates within a stringent political economy where elite patronage networks, competition over resources, and the pervasive presence of state and non-state armed actors impose severe structural constraints. The process documented herein therefore illustrates a negotiated agency—one that is cultivated and exercised in the interstices of these larger power systems, seeking incremental change where sweeping transformation is currently untenable. The primary empirical contribution of this work lies in the detailed documentation of how a hybrid mediation framework was developed. This was not an imported model but a co-constructed praxis, blending customary principles of restorative justice, such as compensation (*nya*) and communal reconciliation, with structured elements of formal mediation practice to enhance procedural clarity and inclusivity. The framework's emphasis on involving women and youth as essential parties to dialogue, not merely as observers, directly challenged prevailing patriarchal norms and addressed a critical gap in traditional processes. The iterative workshops, where scenarios were role-played and protocols were refined based on community feedback, stand as a concrete example of knowledge production in situ. This documented journey from conceptual discussion to a locally owned procedural guide offers a replicable, though not prescriptive, template for similar engagements in other contexts. For policymakers and international partners seeking sustainable peace in South Sudan, this study yields several pointed recommendations. First, support must shift from short-term project funding to long-term institutional nurturing of grassroots peace infrastructures. This entails providing core, flexible funding to community-based organisations like the one central to this research, enabling them to respond adaptively to emerging conflicts without being bound by rigid donor logics. Second, there is an urgent

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need to create more formalised avenues for interface between such local mechanisms and the state-level peace architecture, including the National Ministry of Peacebuilding and the state peace commissions. While the current political settlement remains exclusionary, fostering these connections can begin to build bridges from the micro to the macro, allowing locally generated solutions to inform higher-level policy. Finally, external actors should prioritise capacity accompaniment over capacity building, embracing the role of a facilitative partner that strengthens existing agency rather than imposing external blueprints.

Future research should build upon these foundations in several key directions. Longitudinal studies are imperative to trace the long-term efficacy and evolution of the co-created mediation framework, monitoring its adoption, adaptation, and resilience in the face of recurring violence. Comparative action research projects across different regions of South Sudan, such as the Greater Upper Nile or Bahr el Ghazal, would test the transferability of this approach and illuminate how varying ethnic compositions, conflict dynamics, and customary systems influence participatory peacebuilding praxis. Furthermore, scholarly inquiry should delve deeper into the political economy of local peacebuilding, critically examining how grassroots initiatives navigate, resist, or are co-opted by the very elite networks that sustain conflict. Such research would provide a more nuanced understanding of the limits and possibilities of agency in fragmented, conflict-affected states. In final reflection, this study underscores the vital importance of praxis-oriented scholarship in African peace studies. The entrenched conflicts on the continent demand methodologies that do not merely observe and analyse but also engage and empower. Action research, as demonstrated, provides a rigorous pathway for scholars to contribute meaningfully to the peace processes they study, moving from being distant commentators to engaged, reflexive partners. It champions a form of knowledge production that is humble, collaborative, and rooted in the epistemic worldviews of communities themselves. While not a panacea for South Sudan's profound challenges, this approach offers a compelling alternative to top-down interventionism. It posits that sustainable peace must be woven from the bottom up, through the patient, participatory work of supporting those who, even amidst pervasive violence, labour daily to hold their communities together.

## Contributions

This study makes a practical contribution by providing a contemporary, ground-level analysis of community-led peacebuilding mechanisms in South Sudan between 2021 and 2023. It offers evidence-based insights for policymakers and NGOs designing more culturally resonant interventions. Scholarly, it enriches the field of African Studies by challenging top-down peacebuilding paradigms and centring indigenous epistemologies. The research also generates a nuanced conceptual framework for understanding the interplay between local agency and national political processes in post-conflict state formation.