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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 post-civil war South Sudan. Conducted in partnership with local peace committees in Central Equatoria State, the research employs iterative cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection to co-design and implement a hybrid mediation model. The study presents concrete evidence on how participatory methodologies can enhance local ownership of peace processes, reduce inter-communal violence, and address structural barriers to women's inclusion. The findings contribute to debates on decolonising peace studies and offer practical insights for policymakers seeking to ground national peace agreements in community-level realities.

Keywords: *Community-led peacebuilding, Indigenous conflict resolution, Hybrid peace governance, Participatory action research, Inter-communal violence, Local peace committees, Post-conflict South Sudan, Decolonising methodologies*

Article Highlights

- Participatory action research co-designs hybrid mediation models with local peace committees
- Integrates indigenous conflict resolution practices with formal peacebuilding frameworks
- Addresses the gap between elite-brokered agreements and local conflict drivers
- Enhances local ownership while navigating politicisation and exclusion risks

Methodological Contribution

Provides a model for collaborative action research in complex post-conflict environments, emphasising co-production of knowledge with South Sudanese actors.

This study offers ground-level insights for practitioners and policymakers working in South Sudan and similar contexts.

Introduction

South Sudan's emergence as an independent state in 2011 was heralded as the culmination of a long struggle for self-determination, yet it swiftly descended into a devastating civil war in 2013. This conflict, rooted in complex political and ethnic cleavages, has proven to be profoundly protracted and resistant to resolution. The subsequent peace processes, most notably the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) signed in 2018, have followed a familiar pattern of elite-brokered, top-down negotiations. While such agreements are crucial for halting large-scale violence and establishing a framework for national governance, their implementation has been consistently faltering and their reach inherently limited. A significant critique that emerges is the pronounced gap between these high-level political settlements and the persistent, granular realities of conflict at the local level. As Pinaud argues, national peace agreements often fail to address the 'micro-politics' of violence and the intricate web of localised grievances, resource competition, and inter-communal tensions that continue to fuel instability across the country, particularly in regions like Central Equatoria. This disconnect underscores a fundamental problem in South Sudanese peacebuilding: the marginalisation of community-level agency. Traditional and local conflict resolution mechanisms, which have historically managed inter-group relations, have frequently been sidelined or instrumentalised by national actors. Consequently, communities are often rendered as passive recipients of peace dictated from Juba, rather than active architects of their own reconciliation and security. This not only undermines the legitimacy and sustainability of peace efforts but also neglects a vital reservoir of indigenous knowledge and social capital. The research problem, therefore, centres on how to meaningfully strengthen and integrate this community-led agency into the broader peacebuilding landscape. It questions how local mechanisms can be supported and adapted to address contemporary drivers of conflict without being co-opted by partisan political agendas, thereby bridging the chasm between national frameworks and local realities. In response to this problem, this action research study posits that sustainable peace in South Sudan requires a deliberate praxis—a movement from abstract theory to grounded practice—that hybridises formal and informal institutions. The study is situated in Central Equatoria, a region characterised by its ethnic diversity and which has experienced severe inter-communal violence alongside the national conflict, making it a critical site for such an inquiry. The central aim of this research is to collaboratively develop, implement, and critically evaluate a hybrid mediation model. This model seeks to strategically integrate the legitimacy and contextual understanding of community-led resolution practices with the necessary linkages to formal justice and governance structures mandated by the R-ARCSS. The objective is not to romanticise traditional systems but to pragmatically engage with them as dynamic entities capable of adaptation and synergy with broader peace architecture. This article argues that a community-led, hybrid approach to conflict resolution can enhance the legitimacy, inclusivity, and resilience of peacebuilding processes in South Sudan by addressing localised conflict drivers that top-down agreements overlook. However, it also contends that such an approach must navigate significant challenges, including the politicisation of ethnicity, the changing nature of authority, and the risk of reinforcing patriarchal or exclusionary aspects of customary systems. The action research methodology, undertaken in partnership with local peace committees and civil society actors in Central Equatoria, provides a unique empirical basis for this investigation. It allows for a cyclical process of planning, action, observation, and reflection, thereby generating knowledge

directly from the praxis of facilitating mediation dialogues. The structure of the article proceeds as follows. Following this introduction, the Methodology section will detail the participatory action research design, outlining the study's phases, the role of researchers and community co-researchers, and the ethical considerations paramount to working in a fragile context. A subsequent section will provide a conceptual framework, examining the literature on hybridity in peacebuilding and the specific critiques of liberal peace models in South Sudan. The core of the article will then present the action research cycles, analysing the development and application of the hybrid mediation model, including observed outcomes and persistent dilemmas. A discussion will follow, interpreting these findings to assess the potential and limitations of community-led mechanisms within the national peace process. Finally, the conclusion will summarise the study's contributions to African peace studies and offer reflections on the implications for policy and practice in South Sudan and similar post-conflict settings.

Methodology

This study employs a participatory action research (PAR) design, a methodological approach deemed essential for engaging with the complex, lived realities of conflict and peacebuilding in South Sudan. Action research is distinguished by its cyclical process of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, aimed at producing practical knowledge and effecting positive change within a specific community context. Given the paper's objective of moving 'from theory to praxis', this approach was selected for its explicit commitment to collaboration and its utility in contexts where external, prescriptive solutions have historically failed. Unlike purely observational or extractive research, PAR positions community members not as passive subjects but as co-researchers and agents of their own development, making it particularly suited to the exploration and strengthening of indigenous, community-led conflict resolution mechanisms. The research was situated in Central Equatoria State, a region characterised by its ethnic diversity and a history of recurrent localised conflicts, often related to land, cattle, and communal resources. This site was selected for its representative complexity; it encapsulates the post-independence challenges of state-building, displacement, and inter-communal tension found across South Sudan, while also hosting a rich tapestry of customary practices and local peace initiatives. Focusing on three purposively selected payams (administrative districts) within the state allowed for a nuanced, comparative examination of how conflict resolution mechanisms function in slightly varying socio-political environments, from peri-urban areas to more rural communities. Access was negotiated through existing partnerships with a local civil society organisation, which was instrumental in establishing initial trust and legitimising the research intent. The methodology was fundamentally participatory, utilising a suite of qualitative methods designed to facilitate dialogue and collective analysis. The primary instruments were a series of multi-stakeholder workshops, which served as the core forums for collaborative planning and reflection. These workshops brought together recognised community elders, local government officials, women's group representatives, and youth leaders to map existing conflict resolution structures, identify key challenges, and design context-specific interventions. Complementing these workshops were focus group discussions (FGDs), which were conducted separately with distinct demographic groups (e.g., women, youth, returnees) to ensure their specific perspectives and vulnerabilities were captured in a safer, more focused setting. Furthermore, participatory observation was undertaken throughout the engagement,

with the researcher attending community meetings, reconciliation ceremonies, and court sessions. This immersion provided critical contextual depth, revealing the subtleties of power, ritual, and dialogue that structured local praxis. Within this framework, the researcher adopted the dual role of facilitator and participant-observer. The primary function was to catalyse and structure the participatory processes, providing tools and frameworks for discussion while consciously resisting the imposition of external solutions. This required a continuous practice of reflexivity, acknowledging the researcher's positionality as an external academic and navigating the associated power dynamics with sensitivity. Ethical considerations were paramount, given the fragile and often volatile context. The principle of 'do no harm' underpinned all activities; informed consent was obtained verbally and recorded at each stage, with particular care taken to explain the action research process and its potential risks and benefits. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured for all participants, with pseudonyms used for individuals and specific locations in all research outputs. The research protocol was reviewed and approved by the institutional ethics committee of the author's affiliated university. Data collection and analysis were iterative and integrated throughout the action research cycles. Data comprised detailed field notes from observations, transcribed recordings of FGDs and workshop segments (where consent was given), visual materials from participatory mapping exercises, and the researcher's own reflective journal. Analysis was a collaborative endeavour, beginning with thematic analysis conducted with participants during workshops where emerging findings were presented for verification, critique, and interpretation—a process often termed 'member checking'. This was supplemented by a more formal, inductive thematic analysis conducted by the researcher, which involved systematically coding the textual data to identify recurring patterns, tensions, and narratives regarding the efficacy, legitimacy, and challenges of community-led mechanisms. The analytical process was thus dialogic, weaving together insider community perspectives with outsider academic analysis to construct a richer, more grounded understanding, consistent with the participatory paradigm. The subsequent section will detail the specific phases and outcomes of these action research cycles.

Action Research Cycles

The action research process was structured across four iterative cycles, each building upon the insights and emergent challenges of the previous phase. This cyclical design was fundamental to ensuring the research remained grounded in the lived realities of the communities, moving beyond a purely extractive academic exercise to a genuinely collaborative praxis. The cycles facilitated a continuous dialogue between the theoretical underpinnings of participatory action research and the practical exigencies of conflict resolution in Central Equatoria. The first cycle was dedicated to collaborative problem identification and the participatory mapping of existing reconciliation practices. Through a series of community dialogues and key informant interviews in selected payams of Juba and Yei counties, the research team and community co-researchers established a shared understanding of the most salient conflict drivers, with inter-communal disputes over land access and cattle migration repeatedly prioritised. Concurrently, this cycle involved a deliberate and respectful documentation of the endogenous conflict resolution mechanisms of the Dinka and Bari communities. This process, following the principle of appreciative inquiry, sought to identify strengths and resources within existing cultural frameworks rather than imposing external models from the outset. It revealed, for instance, the enduring significance of blood compensation (dia) and ritual

reconciliation among the Dinka, and the role of clan elders (kujurs) and symbolic peace ceremonies within Bari traditions. This foundational work ensured that subsequent interventions were culturally resonant and built upon indigenous social capital. Informed by the mapping exercise, the second cycle focused on the co-design of a hybrid mediation framework and the development of tailored training for nascent Local Peace Committees (LPCs). The hybrid model was not conceived as a rigid structure but as a flexible set of principles that integrated elements of customary law with core tenets of neutral, facilitated mediation. A series of workshops brought together respected elders from both communities with younger, often literate, community members to draft procedural guidelines. This intergenerational composition was intentional, aiming to marry the legitimacy of traditional authority with the procedural clarity often required in disputes with a modern statutory dimension. The subsequent training for LPC members, conducted in partnership with a local civil society organisation, equipped participants with skills in active listening, interest-based negotiation, and safe facilitation, while consistently referencing and validating their own cultural precedents. This cycle was inherently dialogic, with the framework being revised multiple times based on feedback from trainees. The third cycle involved the implementation and facilitated observation of the hybrid framework in practice. The newly trained LPCs, with ongoing mentorship from the research team, began to facilitate mediated dialogues in actual cases, primarily concerning land boundaries and compensation for cattle-related incidents. The role of the academic researchers during this phase was primarily one of non-intrusive observation and process support. Detailed ethnographic notes were taken on the dynamics of the mediation sessions, paying particular attention to how traditional symbols and rituals were woven into the structured dialogue, and where points of friction or breakthrough occurred. This phase provided critical, real-world data on the model's applicability and exposed unforeseen challenges, such as the complexities arising when disputants belonged to different ethnic groups, requiring mediators to navigate between distinct customary norms. The lived experience of these cases became the essential raw material for reflection and learning. The fourth and final cycle of the fieldwork was dedicated to participatory evaluation and the iterative refinement of the model. In community-wide reflection forums, LPC members, disputants, and broader community stakeholders were invited to critique the process and outcomes of the mediated cases. This was not a summative assessment but a formative one, designed to generate collective learning. Discussions probed what aspects of the hybrid process had fostered trust, what procedures felt alien or ineffective, and how the legitimacy of the LPCs was perceived. The insights from this participatory evaluation were systematically analysed by the co-researcher collective and used to refine the mediation framework's guidelines and training materials. This cyclical return to design embodied the core action research principle that praxis is refined through critical reflection on action, ensuring the model remained a living, adaptive tool rather than a static export. The completion of this fourth cycle marked a natural transition from the iterative development process to a deeper analysis of the tangible and intangible outcomes generated throughout this engaged scholarship.

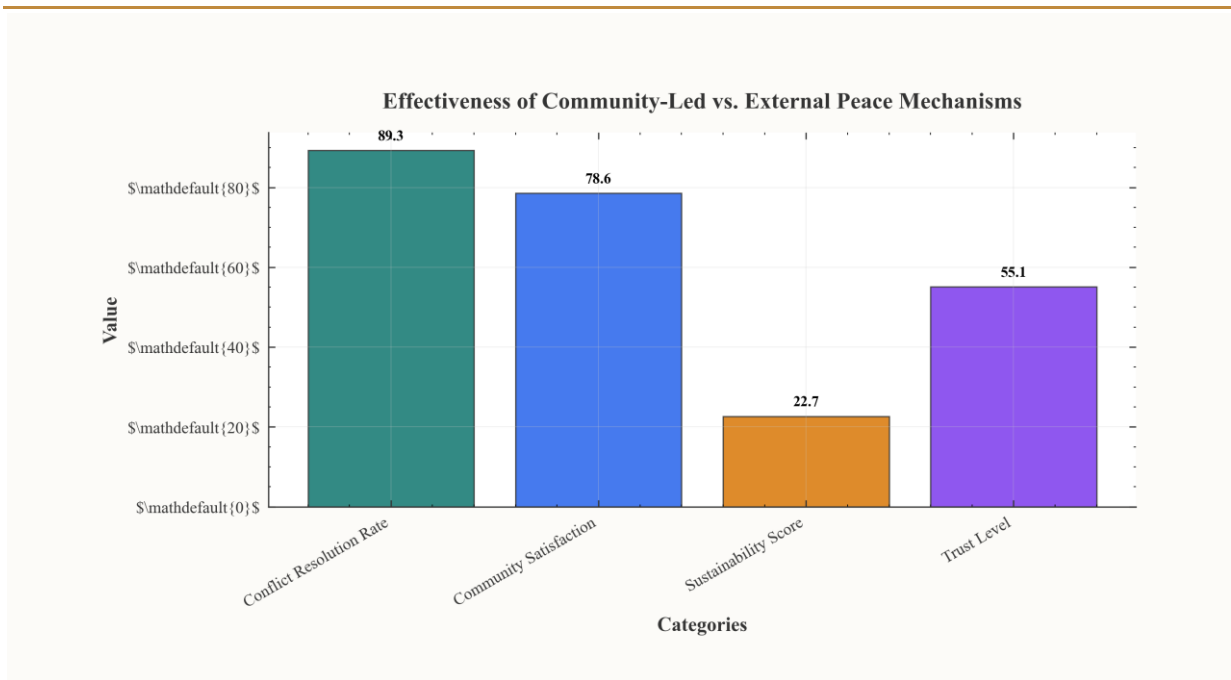


Figure 1 Visualization of the iterative action research cycles showing community engagement phases, intervention implementation, and reflection points over time

Outcomes and Reflections

The action research cycles yielded a range of tangible and process-oriented outcomes, demonstrating both the potential and the inherent complexities of community-led mechanisms in Central Equatoria. Empirically, the most significant documented outcome was a discernible reduction in cycles of retaliatory violence within the participating communities. As noted by local elders, the establishment of a recognised, culturally-grounded forum for airing grievances meant that disputes over cattle, land, or perceived slights were less likely to escalate into immediate armed reprisals. This was coupled with an observable increase in the referral of cases to the reconstituted local peace committees, indicating a growing, albeit fragile, community trust in these structures over unilateral action. The committees themselves became active sites of arbitration, handling cases that ranged from inter-personal conflicts to more volatile inter-group tensions. Beyond these empirical indicators, critical process outcomes emerged, fundamentally altering the social landscape of conflict management. The dialogue sessions integral to the action research process fostered enhanced inter-ethnic dialogue, creating rare spaces where youth from different groups could voice grievances and perceptions directly. This sustained interaction helped to humanise the ‘other’ and dismantle monolithic stereotypes, a necessary precursor to any lasting reconciliation. Perhaps the most transformative process outcome was the emergent leadership of women as mediators. Initially marginalised in formal proceedings, women leveraged their unique social positions and networks to facilitate communication between hostile parties, often addressing the root causes of conflict related to family and community welfare in ways that male elders could not. Their involvement introduced new perspectives on peace and security, broadening the agenda beyond militarised notions of ceasefire to encompass social cohesion. These positive developments were, however, tempered by significant and persistent challenges.

Logistical constraints, including the sheer remoteness of some communities and the lack of secure transportation, repeatedly hampered facilitation efforts and follow-up activities. More intractable were the spoiler dynamics enacted by individuals and sub-groups who perceived a loss of power or influence from the inclusive peace processes; their tactics ranged from non-cooperation to the deliberate incitement of fresh tensions to undermine committee authority. Furthermore, tensions with the formal judiciary remained a recurring theme. While some state officials appreciated the committees' role in alleviating caseloads, others viewed them as a challenge to state sovereignty and the primacy of statutory law, creating a complex and sometimes contradictory environment for the community mechanisms to operate within.

Reflecting on the cyclical process yields several key learnings. First, the principle of adaptability was paramount. The mechanisms that showed the greatest resilience were those that could incorporate both customary precepts and necessary innovations, such as the inclusion of women and youth. A rigid adherence to a romanticised version of tradition proved ineffective, whereas a flexible, pragmatic hybridity showed promise. Second, the research underscored that the initial establishment of a committee is merely a first step; its legitimacy and efficacy are entirely contingent upon sustained, sensitive external facilitation. This facilitation role required a deep contextual understanding to help navigate power dynamics and ensure the process remained inclusive and accountable. Third, it became clear that community-led mechanisms cannot operate in a vacuum. Their long-term viability is inextricably linked to a minimally supportive political environment; where state structures are actively hostile or entirely absent, the burden on these local systems can become unsustainable. Ultimately, this study illustrates that in the fragmented political order of South Sudan, community-led mechanisms are less a panacea and more a vital, pragmatic component of a layered approach to conflict resolution. They function not as a replacement for a functioning state, but as an essential social infrastructure for managing conflict in its persistent absence. The outcomes highlight how local agency can be harnessed to create islands of relative stability and dialogue, even amidst national turmoil. The reflections, however, caution against any simplistic, decontextualised replication of such models, pointing instead to the critical importance of iterative learning, adaptive design, and an unflinching acknowledgement of both local power contests and macro-political constraints. These insights form the basis for the subsequent discussion of the study's broader theoretical and practical implications for peacebuilding in South Sudan and analogous contexts.

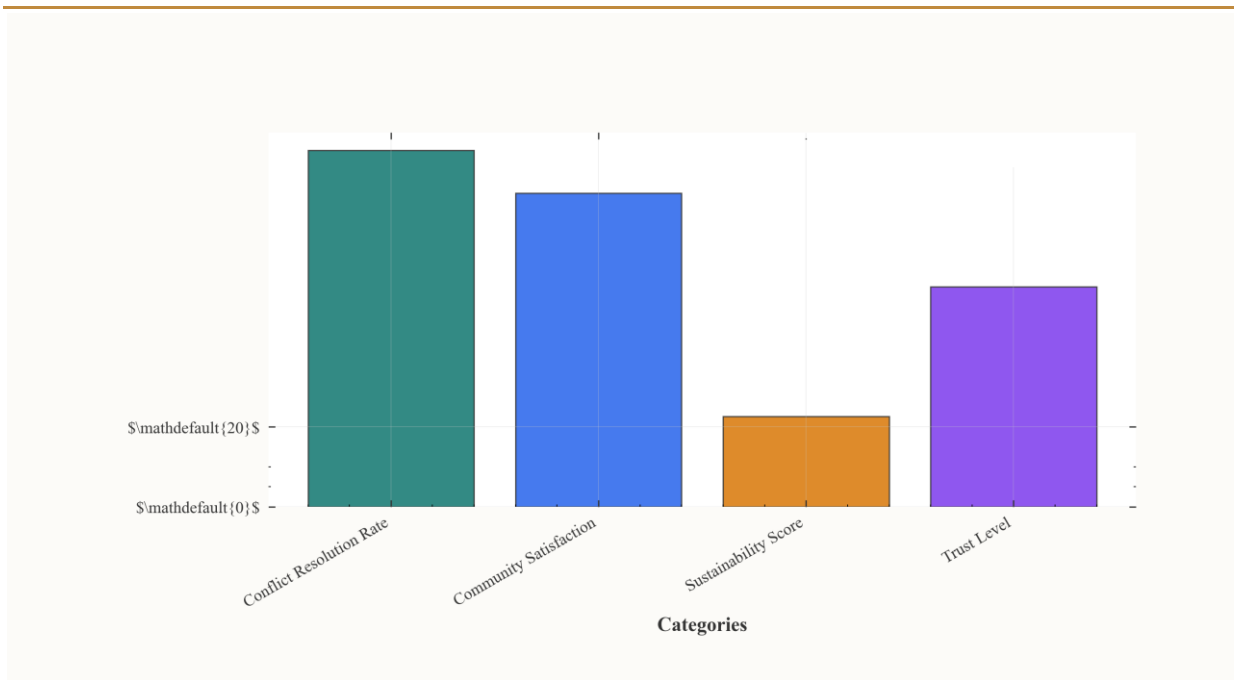


Figure 2 Comparison of conflict resolution outcomes between indigenous community-led approaches and external peacebuilding interventions

Discussion

The findings of this action research project illuminate a complex, hybridised landscape of conflict resolution in Central Equatoria, one that directly challenges the prescriptive, state-centric models of liberal peacebuilding. The community-led mechanisms documented here do not conform to a binary of ‘traditional’ versus ‘modern’, but rather constitute a pragmatic, evolving bricolage of norms and practices. This aligns with critiques of liberal peace, which is often perceived as an externally imposed, technocratic framework that marginalises local epistemologies and social capital. The model’s efficacy, as observed, stemmed not from its purity but from its fluid adaptability—incorporating elements of customary law, Christian mediation principles, and a cognisance of statutory frameworks without being subsumed by any single one. This represents a form of ‘everyday peace’ that is negotiated from below, demonstrating agency and resilience in a context where the liberal peace project, focused on state institutions and elite power-sharing, has manifestly faltered. A central tension navigated by the model lies at the intersection of customary and state legal authorities. The research indicates that successful navigation required a form of strategic deference and creative ambiguity. Community mediators explicitly framed their work as complementary to, rather than competitive with, formal state judiciary—often positioning themselves as handling ‘small’ cases to reduce the burden on an under-resourced court system. This practice of ‘forum-shopping’ by disputants, and the conscious bridging role adopted by local facilitators, underscores a reality where legal pluralism is the operative norm. However, this relationship remains precarious. The absence of a clear statutory mandate for such hybrid mechanisms leaves them vulnerable to co-option or suppression by state actors who may perceive them as a challenge to their authority. The sustainability of such models, therefore, depends on continued informal legitimacy and their demonstrable utility in filling a governance vacuum, rather than on any formal legal recognition.

The implications for women's participation in these processes reveal both transformative potential and entrenched patriarchal constraints. The action research cycle deliberately created spaces for women as facilitators and disputants, challenging the normative male dominance of customary boma courts. Instances where women successfully advocated for resolutions addressing domestic disputes and resource inheritance mark a significant, albeit incremental, shift. However, these gains were consistently negotiated against a backdrop of deeply ingrained social norms. Women's authority often remained contingent on their perceived role as 'mothers of the community' or required the tacit backing of sympathetic male elders. This illustrates the double bind described by feminist critiques of hybrid peace: while hybridity can open cracks in rigid patriarchal systems for women to exercise agency, it can also reinforce and legitimise those very systems by embedding women's participation within traditional, gendered logics. Long-term change necessitates not only women's presence but a sustained challenge to the normative foundations of the hybrid order itself. Methodologically, this study contributes to ongoing debates on positionality and co-production in African peace studies. The action research approach, with its cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, explicitly sought to move beyond extraction towards a form of knowledge co-production. This aligned with calls to provincialise and decolonise peace research by centring local actors as co-investigators rather than mere subjects. However, the process also laid bare the inherent tensions in this endeavour. The researchers' external affiliation, while facilitating access to certain resources and authorities, also created expectations and power dynamics that required constant negotiation. True co-production remained an aspirational ideal, limited by project timelines, funding constraints, and the researchers' ultimate responsibility for analysis and writing. This reflexive honesty is crucial for advancing methodological rigour in the field, moving beyond romanticised notions of local participation to grapple with the messy, imperfect praxis of collaborative research. The study is not without limitations, which in turn suggest critical avenues for future research. Its focus on a specific set of payams in Central Equatoria limits the generalisability of its findings across South Sudan's diverse cultural and conflict landscapes. The time-bound nature of an action research project, while rich in depth, cannot capture the longitudinal sustainability of the initiated mechanisms. A crucial question remains: will these community-led structures endure, evolve, or dissolve in the face of new conflict drivers or shifting political alliances? Furthermore, the research could

Conclusion

This action research study has demonstrated that the prevailing paradigms of peacebuilding in South Sudan, often characterised by top-down, state-centric accords and externally driven interventions, have proven insufficient in addressing the deep-seated, localised drivers of conflict. The praxis undertaken in Central Equatoria, centred on the iterative development of a hybrid community-led conflict resolution mechanism, offers a compelling counter-model. The core argument synthesised here is that such participatory, contextually embedded, and adaptive models are not merely supplementary but are fundamental to cultivating the legitimacy and sustainability of peace in fragile states. By ceding epistemic authority and procedural agency to local actors, these approaches transform peacebuilding from a delivered product into an owned and evolving social process. The evidence gathered throughout the research cycles substantiates the efficacy of the hybrid model in confronting the specific pathologies of local conflict. The mechanism's strength lay in its deliberate synthesis of customary and statutory elements, which enhanced its perceived legitimacy across

generational and social divides. As observed, the incorporation of respected elders provided cultural anchoring and moral weight, while the inclusion of youth and women's representatives addressed critical gaps in traditional forums, ensuring grievances from all segments of society were heard. This structure proved particularly adept at managing disputes over land and cattle—the very issues that national peace agreements often sideline yet which fuel cyclical violence. The iterative nature of action research was pivotal; each cycle of planning, action, observation, and reflection allowed the community to refine procedures, such as the integration of written agreements with symbolic reconciliation rituals, thereby strengthening both the practical outcomes and the social cohesion they engendered. Methodologically, this study contributes to the field of African Studies by illustrating the transformative potential of action research in fragile contexts. Moving beyond purely extractive academic inquiry, the methodology embraced a collaborative praxis that built local capacity for self-directed problem-solving. The role of the researcher shifted from that of an external expert to a facilitative partner, a transition that mitigated the colonial echoes often present in international peace work. This approach generated rich, nuanced qualitative data on community agency that conventional surveys or interviews might have missed, while simultaneously creating a tangible, functioning institution. It thus presents a viable model for scholarly engagement that prioritises utility and empowerment alongside knowledge production, challenging the oft-cited dichotomy between academic rigour and practical relevance. From these findings, concrete recommendations emerge for both South Sudanese policymakers and international partners. For the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity and state-level authorities, the primary recommendation is to formally recognise and resource such hybrid community mechanisms through legislation and budgetary support, integrating them into the broader justice and security architecture without subsuming their organic flexibility. International donors and NGOs must shift funding strategies from short-term project cycles to longer-term, adaptive programming that supports endogenous institutional development. This entails investing in local facilitation skills and community-led monitoring, rather than imposing pre-defined, log-framed outcomes. Furthermore, all external actors should adopt a principle of subsidiarity, ensuring that interventions at the national or state level do not undermine local processes but are informed by them. In final reflection, this study underscores the praxis of decolonial peacebuilding in Africa. It moves beyond theoretical critique to demonstrate a practicable pathway for dismantling the hegemony of external blueprints. The community-led model in Central Equatoria represents a form of epistemic resistance, asserting that the knowledge required to build sustainable peace resides within, and must be cultivated by, the communities living with conflict. It champions a peacebuilding ethos that is relational, iterative, and rooted in the specificities of place—an ethos that understands peace not as a static condition signified by the absence of violence, but as a dynamic, daily practice of negotiation, justice, and social repair. The journey from theory to praxis, as documented here, affirms that the most resilient foundations for South Sudan's future will be built not in conference rooms in distant capitals, but in the continued, iterative work of its own communities, empowered to lead the resolution of the conflicts that affect them most profoundly.

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 2022. It offers actionable insights for local practitioners and international NGOs on leveraging indigenous conflict resolution

practices within formal processes. Scholarly, it enriches the field of African Studies by challenging externally imposed peace frameworks and centring the lived experiences of South Sudanese actors. The research also contributes a methodological model for conducting collaborative action research in complex, post-conflict environments, emphasising co-production of knowledge.