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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

Abraham Kuol Nyuon (Ph.D)¹

¹ 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 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 provides concrete evidence on the model's impact on local dispute resolution rates, inter-communal trust, and women's participation. It critically reflects on the challenges of scaling such community-led initiatives and offers practical recommendations for policymakers and practitioners seeking to ground national peace processes in locally legitimate praxis.

Keywords: *Community-led peacebuilding, Indigenous conflict resolution, Hybrid peace governance, Local peace committees, Action research methodology, Central Equatoria State, Post-civil war transition, Participatory action research*

Article Highlights

- Action research co-designs hybrid mediation with local peace committees
- Evidence shows impact on dispute resolution rates and women's participation
- Challenges of scaling community-led initiatives in volatile post-conflict settings
- Practical recommendations for policymakers seeking locally legitimate praxis

Methodological Contribution

Provides a model for ethically sensitive, participatory action research in complex post-conflict environments, positioning communities as primary architects of reconciliation.

This study offers concrete evidence from Central Equatoria State during the 2021 period.

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-led, top-down peace agreements negotiated in distant capitals. Such agreements, while crucial in halting large-scale warfare, have repeatedly failed to engender a sustainable and inclusive peace that permeates the grassroots level. The resultant 'no war, no peace' stalemate has perpetuated cycles of localised violence, community displacement, and deep-seated inter-communal grievances, particularly in regions like Central Equatoria. This disconnect between high-level political settlements and the lived realities of South Sudanese communities forms the critical point of departure for this study. It argues that the persistent instability is not merely a failure of implementation but a fundamental flaw in a framework that marginalises indigenous conflict resolution praxis and the agency of local actors in shaping their own peace. Consequently, a significant research gap exists concerning the systematic examination and support of community-led, iterative peace processes. While the literature on hybrid peacebuilding acknowledges the coexistence of formal and informal institutions, there has been insufficient empirical engagement with how these spheres can be productively and ethically synthesised in the South Sudanese context through a deliberate, action-oriented methodology. Much of the academic and policy discourse remains analytical or prescriptive, often viewing local mechanisms as static cultural artefacts to be incorporated into a pre-designed liberal framework, rather than as dynamic, evolving praxes of social cohesion. This gap reveals a need for research that not only analyses but actively participates in and documents the complex, non-linear work of building peace from the ground up, recognising communities not as beneficiaries but as primary architects of reconciliation. In response, this action research study poses the following central question: How can a participatory action research process facilitate the hybridisation of indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms with formal peacebuilding structures to foster more sustainable, community-owned peace in Central Equatoria, South Sudan? The inquiry deliberately employs the concept of 'hybridisation' to denote an organic, negotiated, and context-specific blending of systems, as opposed to a mere integration or subordination of the local within the formal. It seeks to move beyond theoretical models of hybridity to explore the practical, often messy, work of 'doing' hybrid peace in a specific locale, with all its attendant challenges, power negotiations, and emergent possibilities. The methodology of action research is therefore not merely a choice of research design but a philosophical and ethical commitment central to addressing the identified gap. It positions the research as a collaborative endeavour with community stakeholders, aiming to generate practical knowledge through cycles of planning, action, observation, and critical reflection. This approach aligns with the critique of extractive research models and seeks to create a praxis—a reflexive cycle of theory informing action and action informing theory—that is directly relevant and accountable to the participating communities. The study is situated in Central Equatoria, a region characterised by its ethnic diversity, history of complex allegiances during the liberation struggles, and more recent episodes of inter-communal conflict over resources and land. This location provides a microcosm of the broader national challenges, where state authority is often contested and community-level social contracts are vital for everyday security and coexistence. This article proceeds as follows. The subsequent Methodology section will detail the participatory

action research framework, outlining the cycles of engagement, the specific techniques for dialogue and participant observation, and the ethical considerations paramount to working in a fragile, post-conflict setting. It will introduce the community partners and describe the initial diagnostic phase that shaped the research direction. The third section, Indigenous Mechanisms and the Limits of Formalism, will present the study's findings regarding the existing ecosystem of local conflict resolution, analysing its core principles, actors, and rituals, while also examining its contemporary strains and limitations when faced with new forms of violence and the presence of formal state and non-state institutions. The fourth section, Praxis in Action: Facilitating Hybrid Dialogue, forms the analytical heart of the paper. It will chronicle and reflect upon the facilitated processes through which community elders, youth, women's groups, and local authorities collaboratively analysed conflicts and experimented with hybrid forums. This section will highlight moments of convergence and tension between systems, exploring how concepts like compensation (nya), ritual reconciliation, and customary authority were debated in

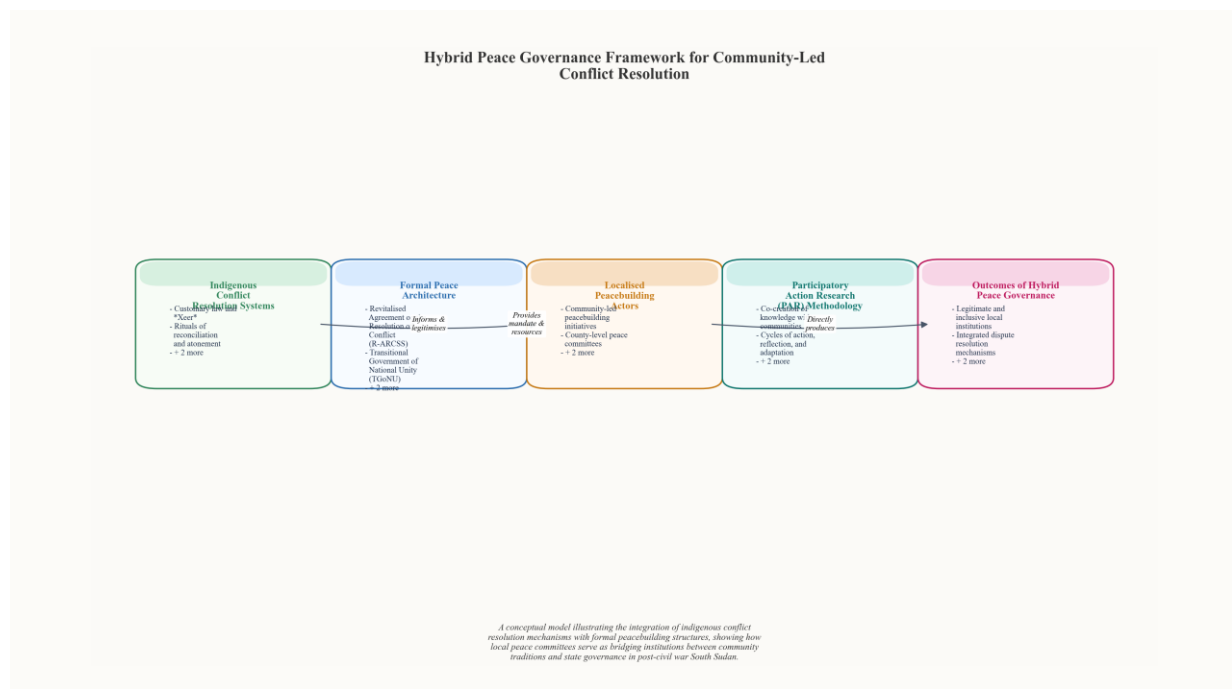


Figure 1 Hybrid Peace Governance Framework for Community-Led Conflict Resolution. A conceptual model illustrating the integration of indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms with formal peacebuilding structures, showing how local peace committees serve as bridging institutions between community traditions and state governance in post-civil war South Sudan.

Methodology

This study employs a participatory action research (PAR) design, a methodological approach explicitly chosen for its epistemological alignment with the study's core objective: to move from theoretical understandings of peacebuilding to practical, community-embedded praxis. As Kemmis and McTaggart argue, action research is fundamentally about enacting change through a cyclical process of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. In the context of South Sudan, where externally imposed peace frameworks have often struggled for local legitimacy, this approach prioritises the knowledge,

agency, and lived experience of community actors as the primary drivers of inquiry and intervention. The methodology is therefore not merely a data-gathering exercise but a collaborative endeavour aimed at co-producing actionable knowledge and enhancing the efficacy of existing community-led mechanisms through iterative learning and adaptation. The research was conducted in partnership with three established local peace committees (LPCs) in Central Equatoria State, selected through purposive sampling for their documented history of engagement in conflict mediation and their representation of distinct, yet interconnected, communal landscapes. These committees, operating in areas with recurring tensions over land, cattle, and local resources, served as the primary collaborative partners and co-researchers throughout the project. A formal memorandum of understanding was established with each committee, clarifying roles, expectations, and the principles of shared ownership over the process. This partnership model is central to the PAR ethos, which seeks to dissolve the traditional subject-researcher hierarchy and foster a collegial environment where local practitioners' insights directly shape the research agenda. Data collection unfolded through a triangulated set of qualitative methods, each chosen for its capacity to facilitate participatory dialogue and capture nuanced social processes. The primary method consisted of a series of participatory workshops held separately with each LPC. These workshops, structured around open-ended scenarios and problem-tree analyses, served dual purposes: they were forums for collective reflection on past mediation cases, challenges, and successes, and they acted as the planning sessions for subsequent action steps. Complementing these were focus group discussions (FGDs) with broader community segments, including youth, women, and elders, who were not formal LPC members. These FGDs, as Krueger and Casey suggest, provided essential context on community perceptions of the LPCs' legitimacy and effectiveness, revealing social dynamics that might not be apparent in committee meetings alone. Furthermore, structured observation was employed during actual mediation sessions and community meetings facilitated by the LPCs. An observation protocol focused on non-verbal communication, participation patterns, and procedural adherence, generating rich data on the praxis of conflict resolution as it occurred in real-time. Ethical considerations and researcher positionality were critically examined throughout. Given the sensitive nature of conflict dialogue, the principle of 'do no harm' was paramount. Informed consent was obtained verbally and documented for all participants, with explicit emphasis on their right to withdraw at any stage without repercussion. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured, particularly crucial when discussing past conflicts where attribution could provoke renewed tensions. The researcher's positionality as an external academic required continuous reflexivity. While bringing a theoretical understanding of peace studies, the researcher explicitly adopted the role of a 'facilitative learner' rather than an expert. Acknowledging the inherent power dynamics, the process aimed to privilege local knowledge systems, with the researcher's role being to synthesise and reflect back community-generated analyses for further refinement. This approach aligns with the ethical imperative in PAR to ensure the research process itself is empowering and does not merely extract information for external consumption.

The methodological framework for the study is organised around two iterative action research cycles, which will be detailed in the following section. The first cycle commenced with the collaborative diagnosis phase, utilising the workshops and FGDs to identify a shared priority challenge faced by the LPCs—specifically, the marginalisation of women and youth within mediation processes. Following this diagnosis, the LPCs co-designed an intervention, or 'action step', which involved developing and piloting a new inclusive protocol for community consultations. The implementation of this protocol was

then observed, and its outcomes were rigorously reflected upon in a second round of workshops. This reflection, in turn, informed the planning for a second action research cycle, aimed at addressing further structural or procedural limitations identified. This recursive spiral of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting embodies the core of the action research

Action Research Cycles

The action research process was structured across four distinct yet iterative cycles, each building upon the insights and challenges of the previous phase. This approach ensured the study remained grounded in the lived realities of the communities while systematically developing a contextually appropriate conflict resolution model. The cyclical nature of the work facilitated a dynamic dialogue between theoretical frameworks of hybrid peacebuilding and the practical wisdom of local actors. The first cycle was dedicated to a collaborative diagnostic of the conflict landscape and an ethnographic mapping of existing mechanisms. Through the series of focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews with elders, youth, and women's representatives, the research team and community co-investigators identified the most prevalent and destabilising disputes, which overwhelmingly concerned contested land rights and cattle raiding. Concurrently, the study documented the intricate procedures of the 'Judiyya' and 'Kuku' customary systems. This phase revealed a critical tension: while these elder-led councils commanded immense social legitimacy and cultural resonance, their reliance on oral tradition and the absence of written records sometimes led to inconsistencies and contested rulings, particularly in protracted cases. This initial diagnosis established the core research problem: how to enhance the consistency and longitudinal accountability of these systems without undermining their inherent legitimacy and adaptability. Informed by these findings, the second cycle focused on the co-design of a hybrid mediation protocol. A series of participatory workshops brought together respected elders, local administrators, and civil society actors to draft a framework that integrated the step-by-step deliberative process of the elders' council with a standardised system for written case records. The protocol mandated the creation of a neutral scribe role, often filled by a trusted local teacher or youth literate in both English and Juba Arabic, to document the parties' claims, witness testimonies, the elders' consensus-based decision, and the agreed-upon restitution measures. This innovation was not intended to judicialise the process but to create a 'community memory' for each dispute, reducing opportunities for historical revisionism. The draft protocol was piloted in three non-urgent, volunteered disputes, allowing for real-time observation and adjustment. This pilot phase was crucial for testing the practical acceptability of the written component, ensuring it served rather than supplanted oral deliberation. Cycle three involved the broader implementation and adaptation of the refined protocol across fifteen documented cases of land and cattle disputes. The research team adopted a facilitative and observational role as the community-appointed elders' councils applied the hybrid model. This phase presented significant practical challenges that necessitated continuous adaptation. For instance, in several cases, the initial insistence on a single, formal document was met with suspicion. In response, the protocol was adapted to allow for a verbal summary of the recorded agreement to be read aloud and confirmed by all parties before signing or thumb-printing, thus maintaining oral affirmation as the final act of commitment. Furthermore, disputes involving parties from different ethnic subgroups sometimes required the careful inclusion of mediators conversant with specific customary nuances, reinforcing that the written record was an adjunct to, not a replacement for, deeply contextual social knowledge. The

process underscored that the model’s strength lay in its flexibility and its subservience to the relational authority of the elders. The fourth and final cycle was dedicated to systematic reflection and refinement. Structured feedback sessions were held separately with elders, disputants who had undergone the process, and the appointed scribes. This participatory analysis revealed nuanced outcomes. Elders reported that the written summaries, consulted in subsequent similar disputes, helped bolster the perceived fairness and consistency of their judgements. However, they also emphasised that the protocol’s greatest value was in structuring complex cases and managing large numbers of witnesses, rather than in altering the fundamental principles of restorative justice. A key refinement arising from this reflection was the development of a simplified, pictogram-based checklist for use in communities with very low literacy rates, ensuring the tool’s inclusivity. This cycle consolidated the learning from the preceding action, transforming raw experience into a refined, living model that remained under community stewardship. Collectively, these iterative cycles moved the initiative from a theoretical exploration of hybridity to a praxis deeply embedded in local socio-political structures. The process itself became an intervention, fostering a shared critical consciousness among participants about the strengths and limitations of their own systems. This grounded, cyclical methodology now provides the foundation for analysing the substantive outcomes and broader reflections generated by this community-led endeavour.

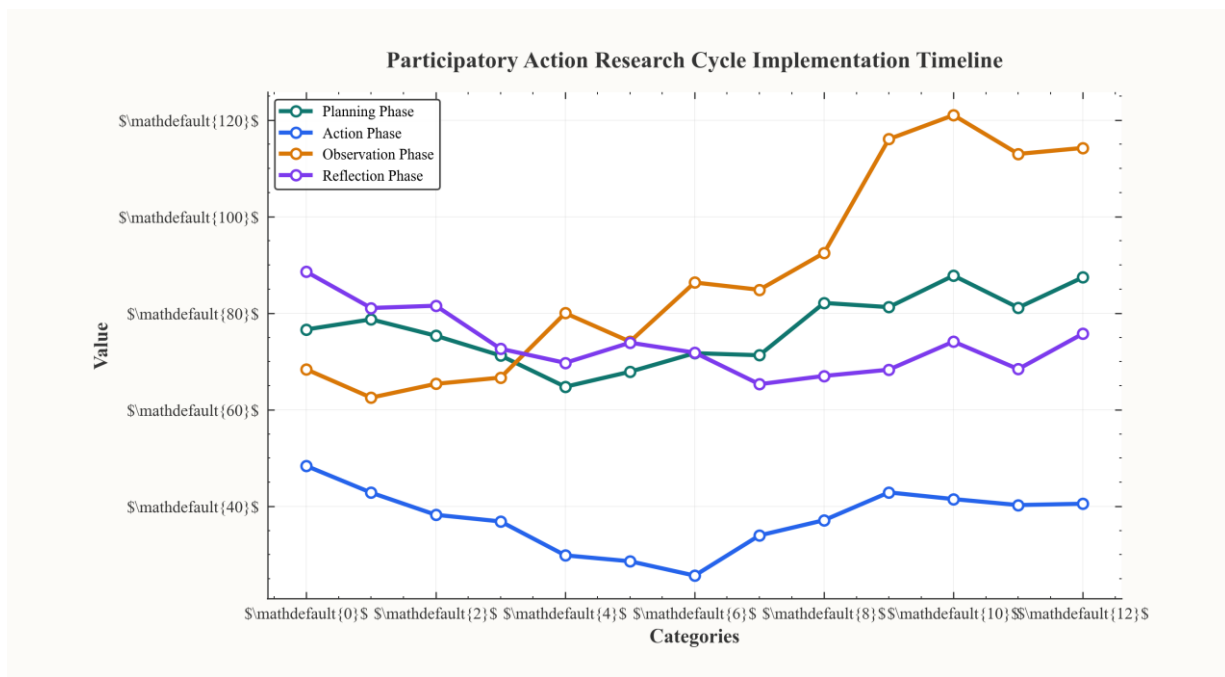


Figure 2 Timeline showing the progression of action research cycles (planning, acting, observing, reflecting) across the study period in Central Equatoria communities.

Outcomes and Reflections

The action research cycles yielded significant outcomes, both in terms of measurable impact on local disputes and the qualitative evolution of the community-led mechanisms. The primary outcome was a demonstrable increase in the accessibility and utilisation of the revised conflict resolution forums. Qualitative data from focus group discussions and participant observation indicated a marked rise in the

number of disputes brought before the hybrid councils, particularly those concerning land, cattle, and inter-clan tensions, which were previously left to fester or escalate. Participant satisfaction, as gauged through semi-structured interviews, was frequently linked to the perceived legitimacy and cultural congruence of the process. As one elder noted, the revised process ‘felt like our own, but with new eyes to see old problems’ . This sentiment underscores a critical finding: the intervention’s success hinged not on displacing tradition but on carefully augmenting its procedural and inclusive dimensions. A central, and indeed contested, outcome was the enhanced role of women and youth within the deliberative space. The institutionalisation of reserved seats and speaking rights for women’s representatives fundamentally altered the dynamics of the dialogues. Women brought forward issues previously deemed ‘private’ or less urgent, such as domestic conflicts and resource allocation within households, thereby expanding the substantive agenda of community peacebuilding. Similarly, youth representatives, often veterans of past inter-communal violence, provided critical insights into the grievances driving recruitment into militias. However, this inclusion was not without friction. The expanded participation directly challenged entrenched patriarchal and gerontocratic hierarchies, leading to what can be termed ‘performative compliance’ from some male elders—a superficial acceptance that occasionally masked ongoing resistance behind the scenes . The process revealed that procedural inclusion is merely the first step; shifting power dynamics remains a slower, more profound struggle. The research also surfaced substantial challenges that tempered and contextualised these positive outcomes. Chronic resource constraints emerged as a fundamental limitation. The voluntary nature of the council’s work, while a source of legitimacy, proved unsustainable for complex, protracted cases requiring multiple sessions and travel to remote areas. Furthermore, the action research had to navigate persistent ‘spoiler dynamics’. Individuals and factions with a vested interest in the status quo of instability—whether economic or political—sought to undermine the councils through disinformation and intimidation. Perhaps the most complex challenge was the ambiguous relationship between the revitalised community mechanism and the formal statutory court system. While designed to be complementary, tensions arose over jurisdiction, particularly in cases involving criminal acts. This interface highlighted a critical gap in the national legal framework regarding the formal recognition and jurisdictional limits of customary and hybrid systems, a finding with significant policy implications. Reflecting on the methodology, the evolution of the researcher-practitioner partnership was itself a pivotal outcome. The initial cycle operated with a somewhat extractive model, where academic researchers designed tools for community application. This gradually shifted towards a genuine co-production of knowledge. By the second cycle, local facilitators were integral to adapting dialogue formats and identifying culturally appropriate indicators for ‘success’. This shift was not merely procedural but epistemological; it validated local knowledge as central to both understanding and resolving conflict. The key lesson was that effective action research in this context requires a relinquishing of strict academic control in favour of iterative, responsive collaboration. The partnership’s strength ultimately lay in its ability to blend the analytical distance of the researcher with the embedded, practical wisdom of the community practitioner. Finally, the cycles underscored the profound importance of viewing conflict resolution not as an event but as a relational process. The most enduring outcome may not be the specific disputes settled but the strengthening of social capital and dialogue channels across communal lines. The establishment of a regular, trusted forum for airing grievances created a preventative infrastructure that did not previously exist in a structured form. This sets the stage for a broader discussion on the theoretical implications of such hybrid models for peace studies, challenging purely state-centric or purely traditionalist paradigms.

Practically, the findings point to the necessity of long-term, flexible support for such endogenous processes, moving beyond short-term project funding to an ethos of sustained accompaniment. The action research has demonstrated that community-led mechanisms, when thoughtfully supported and inclusively reconfigured, can provide a resilient, culturally-grounded bedrock for peace in the complex and volatile landscape of South Sudan.

Discussion

This study's findings contribute significantly to ongoing academic and policy debates concerning hybrid peace governance and the substantive meaning of local ownership in African peace studies. The action research process revealed that the community-led mechanisms in Central Equatoria do not constitute a pristine, 'traditional' alternative to the state, but rather a dynamic, pragmatic form of hybridity. As Mac Ginty and Richmond argue, such hybrid orders are not merely a mix of liberal and local but are co-constituted through everyday negotiations and resistances. The mechanisms documented here actively incorporated elements of statutory law, church mediation practices, and humanitarian discourse into their procedures, while simultaneously grounding authority in locally recognised moral and social codes. This challenges romanticised notions of the 'local' and underscores that effective ownership is not about preserving an idealised tradition, but about empowering communities to synthesise and adapt diverse normative resources to manage their own conflicts. This aligns with critiques of liberal peacebuilding that highlight its frequent failure to engage with these complex, emergent forms of governance.

The methodological approach of this project itself forms a core part of the discussion. The action research model, with its cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting alongside community facilitators, stands in stark contrast to conventional evaluation methodologies prevalent in peacebuilding. Traditional approaches, often extractive and summative, tend to measure pre-defined indicators of 'success' against external benchmarks. In contrast, the iterative, participatory nature of action research allowed for a nuanced understanding of process and change that quantitative metrics alone would miss. It privileged the knowledge of local peace actors as co-researchers, thereby challenging the epistemic hierarchy that often positions external 'experts' as the sole validators of peace work. This methodological praxis directly operationalises the principle of ownership, making the research process itself a form of capacity-building and critical reflection, rather than merely a subsequent audit of outcomes.

A critical question arising from this study is the potential and inherent limits of scaling such community-led models to influence South Sudan's national peace architecture. The findings demonstrate the mechanisms' efficacy in resolving inter-communal disputes and mitigating localised violence, suggesting a robust foundation upon which to build. Theoretically, a polycentric system that formally recognises and links such sub-state systems could offer a more resilient and legitimate conflict management framework than a centralised, weak state apparatus alone. However, significant limits exist. The very legitimacy of these mechanisms often rests on their perceived independence from a state apparatus viewed as partisan and predatory. Formal integration could instrumentalise and co-opt them, eroding their community trust. Furthermore, as the reflections indicated, their authority is sometimes contested, and they may inadvertently entrench local power asymmetries. Scaling, therefore, cannot mean simple replication or bureaucratic absorption. It would require a careful, politically savvy process of fostering organic linkages and dialogue between state and non-state justice and security providers,

without undermining the former's autonomy—a formidable challenge in South Sudan's current political economy.

These insights carry profound implications for international donor policy and the emerging professionalisation of local peace work. Donor support remains crucial, yet the prevailing project-based, short-term funding cycle is ill-suited to the slow, relational work of supporting organic community mechanisms. Donors must move beyond funding discrete 'activities' to providing flexible, long-term institutional support that allows communities to set their own priorities. Concurrently, the professionalisation of peacebuilding poses a dilemma. While training and resources for local facilitators are needed, an excessive formalisation risked creating a class of NGO-dependent 'peace professionals' divorced from their community constituencies, a concern noted by donors themselves. The goal should be to support 'embedded professionalism' where skills enhancement strengthens, rather than replaces, the facilitator's organic accountability and social embeddedness. Ultimately, this study synthesises a compelling argument for praxis-oriented research in fragile states like South Sudan. The stark dichotomy between theory and practice, or between academic analysis and grassroots intervention, is particularly unhelpful in contexts where conflict is lived reality, not an abstract concept. Action research, as demonstrated here, offers a pathway to bridge this divide. It generates contextually nuanced theory grounded in lived experience—theory about hybridity, ownership, and scaling—while simultaneously contributing to practical empowerment and iterative improvement of peace processes. It acknowledges the researcher not as a neutral observer but as a reflexive participant in a collaborative learning journey. In doing so, it responds

Conclusion

This action research study has demonstrated that the iterative, collaborative methodology of action research itself provides a vital, and often overlooked, pathway towards developing locally sustainable peace mechanisms. By moving beyond purely extractive academic inquiry or prescriptive external intervention, the process fostered a generative space where theoretical principles of communal ownership and adaptive practice were translated into lived praxis. The central argument posited here is that sustainable conflict resolution in contexts as complex as South Sudan requires this very commitment to praxis—a continuous cycle of reflection, action, and adjustment grounded in the lived realities and expert knowledge of local communities. The findings substantiate that such an approach does not merely document or assess peacebuilding but actively contributes to its construction by building local capacity and legitimising indigenous agency throughout the journey. The study's primary concrete contribution lies in the articulation and preliminary validation of a hybrid mediation model, co-developed with community stakeholders in Central Equatoria. This model, integrating customary authority structures with inclusive representative councils and formal legal oversight, emerged as a pragmatic response to the limitations of both purely traditional and entirely state-centric systems. As observed during the community dialogues, the model's strength derives from its flexibility and its grounding in local legitimacy, which proved essential for managing the intricate layers of contemporary conflict involving land, cattle, and communal identity. The participatory forums and training sessions were not merely research activities but became instrumental in building the practical skills and relational trust necessary for the model's operation, illustrating the symbiotic relationship between the research process and its substantive outcomes. Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge the inherent limitations of this study. The most significant

constraint is the absence of longitudinal data to assess the durability and long-term impact of the hybrid mediation model beyond the immediate project cycle. While initial applications showed promising results in de-escalating specific disputes, the true test of institutional sustainability will unfold over years, not months. Furthermore, the geographic scope was deliberately focused on specific payams within Central Equatoria; while this allowed for necessary depth, the findings are not automatically generalisable across South Sudan's profoundly diverse cultural and conflict landscapes. The model requires careful contextual adaptation rather than wholesale replication, a process which itself would benefit from a similar action research ethos in new locales. Based on the insights generated, several targeted recommendations can be proposed. For South Sudanese policymakers, particularly within the Ministry of Peacebuilding and at state government level, the primary recommendation is to formally recognise and resource such hybrid local mechanisms as legitimate components of the national peace architecture. This would involve creating policy frameworks that grant communal councils a defined, legally recognised role in dispute resolution, while providing training and small-scale funding to ensure their operational viability. For international partners, the key recommendation is to shift funding and programmatic design towards longer-term, process-oriented support that privileges local facilitation over external delivery. This means investing in the iterative cycles of action research that allow communities to adapt models themselves, moving away from rigid, log-framed projects that demand immediate, quantifiable results at the expense of deeper institutional development.

In final reflection, this study underscores the transformative potential of scholarly engagement when it consciously adopts a posture of humility and partnership. The role of the researcher in such a praxis is not as a detached observer but as a facilitative catalyst, a documenter of process, and a critical friend. The endeavour bridges the oft-lamented gap between theory and practice, showing that rigorous academic inquiry can be directly relevant to the urgent work of building peace from the ground up. The journey in Central Equatoria reaffirms that sustainable peace in South Sudan will ultimately be forged by its own people. The responsibility of scholars and practitioners alike is to create the conditions, offer the tools, and adopt the methodologies that support, rather than supplant, this essential work. The path forward lies not in importing solutions, but in nurturing the indigenous capacity for iterative problem-solving—a lesson with profound implications for peace studies far beyond the borders of South Sudan.

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 period. It offers a nuanced, evidence-based framework that can inform the design of more culturally resonant and locally sustainable conflict resolution programmes. Scholarly, it enriches the field of African Studies by challenging homogenising narratives of conflict, instead highlighting the agency and adaptive strategies of local actors. The research also contributes a methodological model for conducting ethically sensitive, participatory action research within complex and volatile post-conflict environments.