

# CSRF Analysis: A Review of Area-Based Nexus Programming in South Sudan

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Area-based approaches are increasingly utilised in conflict-affected contexts and in combination with humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) nexus interventions. In South Sudan, the United Nations Reconciliation, Stabilization, and Resilience Trust Fund (RSRTF) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) are implementing such programming. Both models are beginning to yield short- or medium-term results, revealing opportunities and limitations to area-based approaches being applied to peacebuilding or Nexus programming in South Sudan. This report reflects on the early impact of these programmes to gain an understanding of how area-based programming (ABP) may address root causes of conflict and contribute to community resilience. It reviews a body of projects to report trends and good practices and puts forth a series of recommendations to maximise the impacts of area-based HDP nexus programming.

## Introduction: Purpose and Context

Area-based approaches are those that define a geographical area as the point of entry for humanitarian, development, and/or peacebuilding programming, rather than a specific programmatic sector or problem. Within a defined area, programmes are designed to be multi-sectoral, multi-stakeholder, and participatory.<sup>1</sup> Many reflect a shift in humanitarian programming adapting more development-type approaches,<sup>2</sup> especially in protracted humanitarian crises, including in South Sudan.

Various area-based programmes (ABPs) are being implemented in South Sudan. This analysis discusses two case studies; i.e. the ABP intervention by the United Nations Multi-Partner Trust Fund for Reconciliation, Stabilisation, and Resilience in South Sudan (RSRTF), and the thirteen-priority county approach articulated in the United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) Strategic Framework for South Sudan. The choice of the two case studies helps in gaining a better understanding of the successes and challenges of area-based approaches, specifically in addressing root causes

of conflict and enhancing resilience in the South Sudan context.

### RSRTF

The goal of the RSRTF projects is to build more stable conditions through the reduction of conflict drivers and increased community resilience. It intends to catalyse and generate space for other peacebuilding and development activities.<sup>3</sup> Its area-based approach enables multiple partners to cooperate on integrated activities designed to address root causes of conflict stemming from various causes. As detailed in the fund's name, successful interventions promote enhanced reconciliation, stabilisation, and resilience in the targeted areas, while linking up to state-level and national-level peace processes.<sup>4</sup> Since its inception in 2018, nine projects integrating the three pillars have been implemented through ABPs in five states and one administrative area including Warrap (previously coupled with two counties in Wau), Unity (initially in Koch County, now in southern Unity), Central Equatoria, and Jonglei States and the Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA). Projects in four areas are ongoing as of January 2025, with two projects scheduled to close in March 2025.

<sup>1</sup> Haider, H (2021), 'Area-based Programming in Fragile- and Conflict-affected Contexts,' Knowledge, Evidence and Learning for Development (K4D), 19 November, p 2.

<sup>2</sup> Sanderson D (2017), 'Implementing Area-based Approaches (ABAs) in Urban Post-disaster Contexts,' *Environment & Urbanization* **29** (2) October, p 352.

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Multi-Partner Trust Fund for Reconciliation, Stabilization, and Resilience in South Sudan (RSRTF) (2021), 'Revised Terms of Reference,' 1 December, p 5-7.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, pp 1-2.

## USAID's focus counties

USAID's note to implementing partners on the humanitarian-development-peacebuilding (HDP) nexus recommends area-based strategies where appropriate, highlighting the benefits of focusing on problems contextualised to certain geographies with sequenced, layered, clustered and/or integrated activities.<sup>5</sup> Its Strategic Framework for South Sudan for 2020 to 2025 echoes this suggestion and identifies thirteen counties spanning five states and one administrative area in which USAID intends to focus its resilience programming. These include Budi and Kapoeta North (Eastern Equatoria), Akobo, Duk, and Uror (Jonglei), Pibor (Greater Pibor Administrative Area), Leer, Mayendit, and Panyijar (Unity), Baliet and Ulang (Upper Nile), and Jur River and Wau (Western Bahr el Ghazal). USAID's overall strategy for South Sudan aims to increase household-level resilience while decreasing reliance on humanitarian aid.<sup>6</sup> This analysis will focus on nine Activities implemented within the thirteen focus counties, and within the timeframe of the 2020-2025 strategic framework, for the desk review. These include Activities directly implementing services and the Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Support (MELS) Activity established to aid the implementation of USAID's strategy with targeted monitoring and evaluation services, including the collection of resilience data. Five of the activities are ongoing as of December 2024.

## Opportunities and Limitations of Area-based Programmes

Area-based approaches have long been used in development programming and are increasingly being employed in conflict-affected contexts. A number of recent reports and studies discuss factors pertaining to successes and challenges of ABPs implemented in conflict settings and/or in conjunction with HDP nexus integration.

Successful area-based programming employs intentional criteria to identify a target area in which whole communities share common challenges and can come together to implement common solutions. The selection of the area and the ultimate success of the intervention rely significantly on continuous context monitoring and updating,<sup>7</sup> understanding the role of each partner within the area and how their activities contribute to larger impacts. While there is no prescribed ideal size, the scope of the area should: include communities which are well enough connected to collaborate, take care to include adjacent communities with similar problems, and be contained in size to not jeopardise consensus making.<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, lack of justification or understanding as to why the area was chosen may lead to lack of consensus amongst the stakeholders.<sup>9</sup> As with other types of programming, local government departments must be involved and supported to participate and promote short- and long-term success of the programme.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, ensuring that the ABPs link to regional or national-level contexts and programmes is critical to building

<sup>5</sup> Resilience Leadership Council and Technical Working Group, United States Agency for International Development (2022), 'Programming Considerations for Humanitarian-Development-Peace Coherence: A Note for USAID's Implementing Partners,' p 14.

<sup>6</sup> United States Agency for International Development: South Sudan (2023), 'Strategic Framework,' 6 June (<https://www.usaid.gov/south-sudan/document/south-sudan-strategic-framework>)

<sup>7</sup> Adlparvar N, Gill A, LoGiudice M, Pelter Z, Renda L, Rizk S, Ruiz C, Sepka M (2023), 'Fit for Purpose?: Area-based Programming in Contemporary Crisis and Development Response,' United Nations Development Programme (UNDP): Development Future Series, November, p 4.

<sup>8</sup> Haider, H (2021), 'Area-based Programming in Fragile- and Conflict-affected Contexts,' Knowledge, Evidence and Learning for Development (K4D), 19 November, p 15.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p 14.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid (Haider), pp 14-15; Adlparvar N et al. (2023), 'Fit for Purpose?: Area-based Programming in Contemporary Crisis and Development Response,' UNDP: Development Future Series, November, p 4; Sanderson D (2017), 'Implementing Area-based Approaches (ABAs) in Urban Post-disaster Contexts,' *Environment & Urbanization* 29 (2) October, p 352.

sustainability and contributing to larger systemic issues.<sup>11</sup>

Evidence also suggests benefits in combining area-based and HDP nexus approaches. These benefits include: complementing goals (focus on bottom-up methods centring community groups and local understandings), promoting collaboration amongst communities, government, and implementing organisations, and enhancing resilience moving towards development. Increased area-based coordination has been recommended as a strategy for augmenting impacts of HDP programming by other CSRF research.<sup>12</sup>

The desk review revealed many strengths and a few limitations in the design and implementation of the ABPs funded by both the RSRTF and USAID. To begin with, the two case studies provide two different models for selecting the area. Except for the first pilot project, which focused on one county, Koch County, the RSRTF has identified areas, each comprised of three to five adjacent counties, including in some, specific payams targeted as part of the area without including the entire county. Proposals detail the context and problems in the area, justifying clearly why the specific geographies were chosen and how they relate to one another. The pilot project grew from Koch County to five counties in Unity State in its second phase, and to three counties in Unity State, plus “hotspot” areas in four other counties in Unity and Lakes states. This is an example of the context influencing the progression of the project design.

Differently, USAID selected the thirteen counties for its area-based approach ahead of the development of the Strategic Framework for 2020 to 2025. As such, USAID had already predefined the geography for most of its requests for information and proposals within these thirteen counties. Implementing partners do have the ability to seek approval to expand the projects to relevant counties outside the thirteen, and indeed

a few activities did implement in adjacent counties where the conflict or development context warranted. For instance, Shejeh Salam conducts national-level advocacy, civic engagement, and media training in Juba.<sup>13</sup> Also, the Accelerating Recovery and Resilience in South Sudan activity implemented in Melut and Nasir counties, neighbouring Ulang and Baliet counties in Upper Nile which experience interrelated conflict dynamics and environmental challenges.<sup>14</sup>

USAID does not articulate the selection criteria for the thirteen counties in its strategic framework, and partners received varying answers when inquiring about the rationale from USAID. Thus, the method and criteria used to choose the thirteen target counties remains unclear. Partners demonstrate strong understanding of the context within the counties, as demonstrated in the desk review materials. Nevertheless, lack of clarity of the selection criteria could dissuade partners from understanding potential enablers or spoilers, or external factors that promote or deter an intervention’s achievements, present in neighbouring counties or payams outside of the selected counties.

Most projects reviewed involve multiple implementing partners, including some consortiums comprised of both international and national non-governmental organisations (I/NNGOs). In the case of RSRTF, the fund supported one project per area, with timelines between two and three years, with roles and objectives of each partner detailed in the project proposal. RSRTF projects also contain built-in coordination mechanisms in the form of area reference groups (ARGs). As explained in the fund’s Terms of Reference, the lead implementing partner in each area convenes the ARG which is intended to coordinate and synergise the project implementation.<sup>15</sup> Reports and evaluations reveal successful coordination within RSRTF consortium partners, and in some cases, with select relevant

<sup>11</sup> Ibid (Haider), pp 15-16; Ibid (Adlparvar), p 5.

<sup>12</sup> CSRF, Detcro Research & Advisory (2023), ‘Community Engagement and Inter-Agency Collaboration across the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) Nexus in South Sudan,’ April, pp 5-6.

<sup>13</sup> DT Global (2023) ‘Shejeh Salam: 2023 Annual Report,’ October, pp 14-15.

<sup>14</sup> Mala J, Okeny D (2023), ‘Performance Evaluation for Accelerating Recovery & Resilience in South Sudan (ACCESS) Project – Upper Nile State, South Sudan,’ Infoscope Consulting Limited, December, pp 10-11.

<sup>15</sup> RSRTF (2021), ‘Revised Terms of Reference,’ 1 December, p 14.

partners outside of the consortia operating in the same area. The recent Comprehensive Evaluation of the RSRTF advocates for bottom-up coordination in ABPs. However, it also notes that ARGs do not always include all relevant external partners in the ABP, and that the ARGs in some areas were viewed as exclusive to RSRTF consortia partners.<sup>16</sup>

USAID employed a method of layering and sequencing multiple activities with timelines between three and five years, with complementary, though at times seemingly overlapping, goals in the same counties. For instance, in fiscal year 2023, USAID funded at least five<sup>17</sup> unique activities in Budi, Kapoeta, and Wau counties. These included Shejeh Salam, Afia Water, Sanitation and Hygiene, Resilience through Agriculture in South Sudan, and Sustainable Independent Media Activity in all three counties and the Pathways to Resilience activity in Budi and Kapoeta North and the Complementary Action for Resilience Building activity in Wau. Two or more of these projects included peacebuilding, WASH, livelihoods, and nutrition objectives. Similarly, reviewed reports show strong collaboration amongst USAID implementing partners and select other organisations, especially when bolstered by the “backbone coordination” provided by the USAID-funded MELS activity. Here too, the USAID coordination mechanism focuses on USAID partners, and it is unclear how its networks liaise with other mechanisms for coordination outside of USAID, for example the ARGs formed by the RSRTF projects or the humanitarian cluster system.

Nevertheless, it is notable that the desk review found little evidence of coordination between the RSRTF and USAID area-based projects in the five

counties where the areas overlap, despite having similar goals and objectives related to resilience.

The projects reviewed employ varied strategies to involve or build capacities of government departments and staff, primarily at the local level. The USAID-funded projects are limited by USAID guidelines from providing funding to or directly supporting certain government activities and officials. Across the body of projects, government links are frequently mentioned as enablers of success and continuity. For example, the endline evaluation for the RSRTF Restoring Peaceful Coexistence for Better Livelihoods in Koch County Phase II project notes that buy-in from county-level government, including the county commissioner who garnered much respect from local youth, positively impacted safety in the target areas.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the Mitigating Cattle-related Violence in the Tri-State Border Areas of Gogrial, Tonj and Wau project observes that when new state governors arrived in the project area, cattle movements happened more peacefully, and support to project implementation increased.<sup>19</sup> These could be lessons for other projects to reflect on.

At the same time, a majority of projects reviewed acknowledged the limitations of fully engaging local government. As is true for all types of interventions in South Sudan, the inconsistency and inadequacy of government salary payments and other financing significantly hinders government involvement. Additionally, lack of public investment in roads and other key infrastructure makes it difficult to link ABPs, while investment in roads enhances the impacts of livelihood and other resilience-building activities. For instance, the final evaluation of USAID’s Pathways to Resilience activity cites the positive impact of road improvement interventions on

<sup>16</sup> Deng D, Kuyang H, Posposil J (2024), ‘Comprehensive Evaluation of the United Nations Multi-Partner Trust Fund for Reconciliation, Resilience, and Stabilisation (RSRTF),’ Detcro, December, pp 31-32.

<sup>17</sup> The USAID-funded Youth Empowerment Activity, which includes peacebuilding and livelihoods objectives, was also planned for fiscal year 2023, but the desk review was unable to confirm whether it was implemented in these three counties in this time period.

<sup>18</sup> World Relief (2023), ‘Report for the End-Line Assessment of Reconciliation, Stabilization, and Resilience Trust Fund (RSRTFII) Koch Area-Based Program,’ November, p 27.

<sup>19</sup> United Nations Multi-Partner Trust Fund for Reconciliation, Stabilization, and Resilience in South Sudan (RSRTF) (2022), ‘Final Narrative Report,’ Mitigating Cattle-related Violence in the Tri-state Border Areas of Gogrial, Tonj and Wau project, p 5.

market access for agricultural producers and value chain development.<sup>20</sup>

## Early Impacts

### Addressing root causes of conflict

As indicated above, a primary goal of the RSRTF is to address root causes of conflicts in its areas of implementation. The Comprehensive Evaluation conducted on the RSRTF mechanism in late 2024 indicates that, “in its six years of operation, the RSRTF has demonstrated impact in helping to reduce violence and promote stabilisation in the areas where it operates. While the structural drivers of conflict remain largely intact, there is less conflict today in the five subnational locations where the RSRTF has implemented [ABPs] than when the RSRTF intervened.”<sup>21</sup> The Evaluation found strong anecdotal evidence that RSRTF projects, along with other factors, contribute to localised conflict mitigation stability in target areas. At the same time, it raises concerns about sustainability of RSRTF projects, particularly with low government capacity and scarcity of development funds to link to.<sup>22</sup> The Evaluation also looked at the ABP approach specifically and found that it strengthened the funds goals and allowed for more holistic and agile programming.<sup>23</sup>

One example is worth discussing to better understand the nature of conflict and impact of conflict mitigation activities. An endline evaluation for the Restoring Peaceful Coexistence for Better Livelihoods in Koch County Phase II project notes that nearly three-quarters of project participants surveyed reported a perception of decreased violence over the course of the project, reporting also increases in certain behaviours

associated with higher perceptions of safety, such as returning to their home village at nighttime.<sup>24</sup> The same report showed a 20% decrease in participants’ perceptions of the effectiveness of the conflict resolution mechanisms supported by the project. The endline report comments that the differing results of these two indicators highlight the intricacies of the conflict dynamics in the targeted communities.<sup>25</sup>

This example exhibits the need for organisations to understand the different types and natures of conflict in their operating areas. Studies suggest that the peacebuilding pillar of HDP nexus programming is best suited to address community disputes at hyperlocal levels in conflict-affected contexts and note challenges to peacebuilding activities where local conflict dynamics are linked to or caused by issues outside of the locality.<sup>26</sup> Depending on the exact context, hyperlocal in South Sudan could be a payam, a county, or two specific people groups on two sides of an administrative border.

Final reporting from the RSRTF Locally-Driven Solutions for Social Cohesion and Promoting Early recovery in the Country’s Former Breadbasket project aligns with these findings from the studies. The project facilitated a de-escalation meeting in Liwolo payam in Kajo-Keji County which succeeded in cattle keepers from another area peacefully leaving the payam and enhanced intergroup cooperation.<sup>27</sup> Recommendations from the third-party final evaluation report for the RSRTF’s Community Violence Reduction in Central-southern Jonglei and GPAA project exhibit similar findings. The evaluation affirms that the project’s support to a local peace process in Pieri helped to strongly root the peacebuilding pillar in

<sup>20</sup> Catholic Relief Services (2024), ‘P2R Pathways to Resilience Final Evaluation Report,’ p viii.

<sup>21</sup> Deng D, Kuyang H, Posposil J (2024), ‘Comprehensive Evaluation of the RSRTF,’ Detcro, December, p 52.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, pp 44-50.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 19-23.

<sup>24</sup> World Relief (2023), ‘Report for the End-Line Assessment of RSRTFII Koch Area-Based Program,’ November, pp 17-18.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, pp 19-20.

<sup>26</sup> Norman JM, Mikhael D (2023), ‘Rethinking the Triple-Nexus: Integrating Peacebuilding and Resilience Initiatives in Conflict Contexts,’ *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* 18 (3), pp 249, 258-259.

<sup>27</sup> United Nations Multi-Partner Trust Fund for Reconciliation, Stabilization, and Resilience in South Sudan (RSRTF) (2023), ‘Final Report,’ Locally Driven Solutions for Social Cohesion and Promoting Early Recovery in the Country’s Former Breadbasket Programme, p 12.



and link other interventions to local conflict dynamics with positive outcomes.<sup>28</sup>

At the same time, the evaluation of the RSRTF Jonglei and GPAA project points out some logical problems linking certain specific activities with violence reduction. For example, the assumption that better opportunities for education may reduce conflict amongst youth is likely legitimate, and literacy and education activities benefit individuals and communities regardless. However, the impact of youth education on conflict reduction is unlikely to be adequately realised or measured in the short-term project timeline.<sup>29</sup> This example further illustrates the different levels and complexity of conflict in each community. Interrogating assumptions provides deeper understanding of conflict dynamics within and across ABPs. This also applies to the link between livelihoods, especially for youth, and incidence of conflict. Most projects report positive short-term outcomes on livelihoods indicators, attributed to more stable or peaceful environments, but also note the need for more time to measure sustained outcomes.

Lastly, related to addressing root causes of conflict, many of the RSRTF reports and evaluations reviewed contain outcome indicators for peacebuilding pillar activities which were measured through participant surveys through which individual participant perceptions are queried. Many of these indicators measured positive progress over the course of the intervention. These types of indicators are important for understanding the effectiveness and suitability of the project activities as well as for monitoring the projects' accountability to affected populations. Partners could consider some comparison between these types of indicators with data on instances of conflict in the targeted areas to further contextualise the impacts of peacebuilding pillar activities. Some of the more recently approved project proposals in second or third project phases do include

additional indicators regarding numbers and types of incidents of conflict, which is one way that implementors could gain or communicate better understanding of outcomes.

Though USAID does not explicitly mention addressing root causes as a goal of its strategic framework, a brief observation on USAID-funded activities is warranted given that most of those reviewed include integrated peacebuilding objectives, and one focuses on peacebuilding as its main goal. Most of the projects report progress on output-level peacebuilding indicators related to establishing or building the capacity of peace committees and/or hosting trainings or dialogues aimed at building community cohesion. They also show minor improvements to outcome-level indicators (which is discussed further in the subsequent section). Simultaneously, the projects mention conflict as a challenge to project access, implementation, and/or performance, which is expected in the context of South Sudan. This too suggests that more needs to be done to analyse the varying levels of conflict present in counties and areas and what types of conflict can reasonably be addressed by these interventions. This is echoed in MELS' household survey report which finds that more households experienced conflict, severity of conflict reduced, and trust in local conflict resolution mechanisms increased in the same time period.<sup>30</sup>

### Contributing to resilience

Resilience is a term and concept with many definitions. As such, it can be measured using a variety of measures and indicators, as exhibited in the pool of projects reviewed for this analysis. USAID uses the definition of resilience as, "the ability of people, households, communities, countries, and systems to mitigate, adapt to and recover from shocks and stresses in a manner that reduces chronic vulnerability and facilitates inclusive growth."<sup>31</sup> USAID funded the Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning Support activity to conduct household surveys measuring

<sup>28</sup> Deng D, Logo KH, Posposil J (2022), 'Evaluation Report: RSRTF Area-Based Program in Jonglei and the Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA),' Detcro Research & Advisory, November, pp 6-7.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, pp 6-7.

<sup>30</sup> Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning Support (MELS) Activity (2023), 'Resilience Recurrent Monitoring Survey Wave 1,' December, pp 6-8.

<sup>31</sup> Management Systems International (MSI) (2022), 'Baseline Household Survey: Republic of South Sudan,' Monitoring and Evaluation Support Project (MESP), April, p 26.

a series of resilience-related indicators in the thirteen target counties. These surveys look at the overall situation in each county, focusing primarily on factors related to absorptive capacity, or capacity to employ preventive or effective coping strategies to mitigate exposure to or avoid long-term consequences of shocks and stressors. They also monitor the types of shocks and stressors present in the targeted areas and their frequency and severity.

A baseline conducted in two phases in calendar year 2021 (when many of the USAID projects funded under the 2020-2025 strategic framework were commencing) recorded an absorptive capacity score of 32.5 in the low to moderate range of capacity.<sup>32</sup> The first follow-on survey conducted in May 2023 reported that the absorptive capacity score improved to 53.2.<sup>33</sup> These two scores cannot be compared directly because the baseline score includes all thirteen counties, while the first follow-on only covered six counties (Akobo, Budi, Jur River, Kapoeta North, Pibor, and Wau) with the remaining seven planned for calendar year 2024. That limitation being acknowledged, the two scores may still suggest some improvement, because the six counties selected had varying degrees of high or low incidences of conflict and shocks generally reflective of the range of the thirteen counties as a whole.<sup>34</sup> The baseline report available publicly does not contain data disaggregated by county which could be used in further analysis to create a more relevant comparison.

Also, USAID, through its Bureau for Humanitarian Affairs (BHA), funded three multi-year humanitarian activities<sup>35</sup> designed to implement similar objectives and sets of interventions through five areas comprising the thirteen target counties (noted above) and, in some areas, additional counties adjacent to the thirteen. The

design of these activities aligns more closely with the best practices of selecting relevant scopes for ABP. Given that the three activities also share many of the same indicators, they provide a strong model for monitoring and evaluation in and across ABPs.

Some of the common indicators help to assess the activities' contributions to resilience. First, in relation to food security, the projects measured significant increases in acceptable-level food consumption scores, though the baseline values for each project and its respective areas varied. Additionally, all three projects realised decreases in moderate household hunger levels and marginal changes in severe household hunger levels. These trends align with indicators from the MELS surveys conducted in similar timelines, which reported slight decreases in the percentages of households experiencing moderate hunger and slight increases in the percentage of households experiencing severe hunger,<sup>36</sup> again with the caveat that geographical coverage of the evaluations do not completely align.

The Resilience through Agriculture in South Sudan project plans to measure food consumption scores in the thirteen counties at the end of its project period in 2025, which will provide a good opportunity for comparison and further learning for USAID and implementing partners. The project's mid-term evaluation indicates that its activities, which are designed to contribute to resilient agriculture, are on track to meet targets, and suggests that the project is contributing to resilience. However, its key outcome indicators are only planned to be measured at its endline (in September 2025), so it is difficult to verify these assertions at this stage of the project.

Secondly, the three multi-year humanitarian activities also measured impacts related to social

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p 28.

<sup>33</sup> MELS Activity (2023), 'Resilience Recurrent Monitoring Survey Wave 1,' December, p 15.

<sup>34</sup> MSI (2022), 'Baseline Household Survey: Republic of South Sudan,' MESP, p 33.

<sup>35</sup> These include the Accelerating Recovery and Resilience in South Sudan (ACCESS) activity led by World Vision International in Balia, Melut, Nasir, and Ulang counties in Upper Nile State; the Complementary Action for Resilience Building (CARB) activity led by Norwegian Refugee Council in Guit, Leer, Mayendit, Mayom, Panyijar, and Rubkona counties in Unity State and Jur River and Wau counties in Western Bahr el Ghazal State; and the Pathways to Resilience (P2R) activity led by Catholic Relief Services in Akobo and Duk counties in Jonglei State and Budi and Kapoeta North in Eastern Equatoria State.

<sup>36</sup> MELS Activity (2023), 'Resilience Recurrent Monitoring Survey Wave 1,' December, p 18-19.

cohesion, namely the social capital index at household level and the ability of households to recover from shocks and stressors. All three projects reported only minor improvements to these two indicators, some of which were noted as being statistically insignificant. All projects noted conflict as a challenge to project implementation and outcomes, alluding again to the complex and multilevel nature of conflict in South Sudan. It should also be noted that in the documents included in this desk review, all indicators were aggregated for all counties. More can be learned by USAID and its partners by studying the data disaggregated by county and comparing it with patterns of conflict.

RSRTF projects also integrate a resilience pillar, operating on the assumption that reconciliation and stability foster conditions for resilience and that the three mutually reinforce one another. The Comprehensive Evaluation of RSRTF notes that the integrated interventions were most successful when sequenced intentionally and according to the context of the conflict within the ABP.<sup>37</sup> Most of the RSRTF projects reviewed pursue resilience through livelihoods and report encouraging short-term achievements of those activities, especially at community levels. They also identify challenges in linking livelihoods to markets because of conflict and poor infrastructure, especially in the short project timelines. This suggests that more time and more adequate linkages across ABPs and forward to development initiatives could foster conditions for enhanced sustainability.

### Monitoring and evaluation approaches

The majority of materials reviewed used attribution monitoring, correlating specific activities and outputs with change in the target area. In one extreme example, a USAID-funded project linked its mid-term achievements to a reduction in integrated food security phase classification, ignoring that other USAID-funded and other projects with food security objectives were implemented in the same counties. Contrastingly, the final evaluation report for the Pathways to Resilience activity more closely reflects contribution monitoring by

acknowledging potential enablers and spoilers that may have affected the project's outcomes.<sup>38</sup> Attribution monitoring limits donors' and partners' understandings of how individual interventions foster change, disregarding also how external factors influence project success or hinder opportunities to learn from and design effective strategies.

Specific to USAID projects, the desk review suggests that USAID's overall monitoring strategy in South Sudan could do more in evaluating the integrated impact of its projects in given counties. The MELS surveys note the USAID-funded projects that are present in the surveyed county, including those funded outside of the thirteen-county strategy. We consider this an important aspect of monitoring the impact of USAID's strategic framework in its targeted counties, while acknowledging that it is also important to measure how individual projects are performing. However, the surveys do not discuss the interaction of specific activities or consider how the multiple activities funded by USAID or other donors contribute to impacts in one area. Meanwhile, the individual activities maintain their own evaluation plans for mid-term and final evaluations and unique sets of indicators. The desk review suggests that aligning indicators or conducting joint monitoring and evaluation for similar sectors or activities across projects could be done more widely. Also, partners can compare impacts of projects in the same counties, which could reveal more nuanced strengths and weaknesses of USAID's area-based approach and of individual activity models.

### Recommendations

A short list of recommendations emerges from the desk review and analysis. They aim to complement one another and to affirm the use of area-based approaches, including with HDP nexus programming in South Sudan. They include suggestions both to fill noted gaps and to build on best practices seen in the reviewed projects.

<sup>37</sup> Deng D, Kuyang H, Posposil J (2024), 'Comprehensive Evaluation of the RSRTF,' Detcro, December, pp 23-25.

<sup>38</sup> Catholic Relief Services (2024) 'P2R Pathways to Resilience Final Evaluation Report.'



## Shift to horizontal coordination

To enhance ABPs and to more closely align with HDP nexus programming, we propose to refocus coordination horizontally. South Sudan is already one of four countries piloting the United Nations Flagship Initiative which includes repositioning to decentralised area-based coordination,<sup>39</sup> and new mechanisms were mobilised in Wau (Western Bahr el Ghazal), Bentiu (Unity), and Malakal (Upper Nile) in 2023. However, recent learning reports raises concerns that new area-based coordination was added on top of other mechanisms with no efforts or plans to dismantle or integrate other structures, causing confusion amongst roles.<sup>40</sup> To maximise benefits of this initiative, at a minimum roles and delegations of authority must be clarified, and ideally, systems should be streamlined and consolidated at the subnational level. The Center for Global Development (CGD) promotes one such area-based coordination model which could be considered (among others) to guide this shift. The CGD framework, for instance, suggests concentrating coordination infrastructure in sub-national areas with coordination hubs that manage needs assessments, project planning, integration and funding appeals, and monitoring and evaluation all at the local level while focusing national-level structures on technical support.<sup>41</sup> Decentring coordination can enhance area-based programming overall. First, horizontal coordination facilitates joint conflict analysis, needs assessment, and outcome monitoring. Coordination staff based at local levels have better understanding of local context, access to local officials, and more rapid response times. Second, the focus shifts to local context and away from sector and donor siloes. Third, sub-national and area-based coordination supports localisation. It elevates the voices and knowledge of NNGOs as well as local government officials, unions, or faith-based institutions that lack representation in or strong links to Juba and may

otherwise be excluded from vertical processes. Finally, this approach has the potential to expand the options for organising ABPs beyond administrative borders. For example, areas may be organised based on water catchment areas, livelihoods zones, market areas, social communities, or others as defined by communities themselves.

## Harmonise collaboration with local authorities and community stakeholders

Close cooperation with local government officials is crucial for the success and sustainability of any type of intervention. Buy-in from government is especially important when interventions include peacebuilding and conflict resolution objectives, as demonstrated by the examples reviewed in this analysis. As much as possible, partners should exploit area-based coordination mechanisms to organise joint planning and consultation with local authorities. Where appropriate, local stakeholders, NNGOs, and community-based organisations may play lead roles in horizontal coordination mechanisms.

Partners can also do more to collectively map, strengthen, and cooperate with civil society organisations and committees within ABPs, rather than creating new groups for individual projects or duplicating capacity-building efforts. Doing so may also increase community ownership and sustainability. Awareness campaigns and messaging approaches can also be harmonised amongst partners and interventions to increase effectiveness and efficiency.

## Move towards collective and contribution-focused monitoring and evaluation

We recommend the use of contribution monitoring approaches for all HDP nexus programming in South Sudan and suggest that it is especially relevant for area-based programming. Monitoring strategies should mirror design strategies, with geographical area

<sup>39</sup> Website of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs' (OCHA) Flagship Initiative: <https://www.unocha.org/flagship-initiative>

<sup>40</sup> Sida L, Nelis T, Proudfoot P, Cannon M, Audrey P, Almanza M, De Vera M, Rambang Tai N (2024) "Flagship Initiative Mid-Year Learning Report," Institute of Development Studies, November, pp 37-38; Sida L, Proudfoot P, Cannon M, Almanza M, De Vera M, Rambang Tai N (2024) "Flagship Initiative First Year Learning Report," Institute of Development Studies, March, pp 44-45.

<sup>41</sup> Konyndyk J, Saez P, Worden R (2020), 'Inclusive Coordination: Building an Area-Based Humanitarian Coordination Model,' Center for Global Development, Policy Paper 184, October.

rather than sector or project as the entry point. The *Contribution to Change* manual could be a useful pragmatic guide to designing monitoring and evaluation systems that aid partners in measuring their work's contributions, positively or negatively, to change in target areas.<sup>42</sup>

Partners should do more collaborative conflict analysis and joint monitoring of conflict dynamics in each area. Donors and partners may consider utilising common peace and resilience indicators across their projects or activities to jointly analyse outcomes and impacts also taking into consideration external enablers and spoilers. The horizontal coordination structure suggested here can facilitate this type of interaction and help partners coordinate more effectively outside of their own consortiums or donor groups. We suggest that donors and partners seek ways to bring individual project or activity evaluation and area-level impact evaluation into closer proximity, also to increase programmatic and financial efficiency. For example, implementing partners and initiatives like the USAID-funded MELS could jointly monitor impact indicators at set intervals rather than funding individual grants to conduct separate studies.

### **Strengthen conflict analysis and interrogate linkages between root causes and peacebuilding**

It is clear from the desk review that the majority of projects reviewed have conducted robust conflict analysis and mapping at the beginning of the intervention. The RSRTF projects and USAID's Shejeh Salam project demonstrate a number of best practices related to using conflict data and analysis to adjust programming, which go beyond access and advocacy issues. Deep and comprehensive conflict analysis, conducted in cooperation with stakeholders, including local government, is critical. It allows partners not only to maintain staff and participant safety but also to verify or adjust assumptions behind interventions which are designed to mitigate or prevent conflict.

Analysis should identify where different interventions target different levels of conflict and note the complexity of conflict in the targeted area. A helpful starting place is WFP's and CSRF's analysis on "Adjusting Terminology for Organised Violence in South Sudan." It provides a practical framework for comprehending and classifying organised violence into three levels of national, state and local, and grassroots.<sup>43</sup> Reiterating the reporting that shows that HDP peace pillar activities are most effective at the grassroots level,<sup>44</sup> this framework for understanding conflict serves to design activities that can contribute at the grassroots level and link up to higher-level initiatives. This also aligns with the contribution monitoring model also recommended in this analysis.

### **Extend project timelines and plan for long-term monitoring**

For the past several years, humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding stakeholders in South Sudan have recognised the need to shift towards resilience and development interventions while continuing to respond to severe humanitarian emergencies and work towards community-level peace and stability. Both case studies reviewed in this report implement along the HDP nexus, but neither intend to provide long-term development interventions by design. They suggest that progression along the HDP nexus is not linear and that, with adequate time, transitional steps to build resilience have the potential to create space for development initiatives within the current context of South Sudan. Multi-year timeframes are required to sustain resilience outcomes and link ABPs to development and peacebuilding programming. Donors should carefully consider the impacts of these programs and ways to introduce increased development funding to build on progress made. To that end, RSRTF plans to design three-year projects in its subsequent phases, starting with the Southern Unity ABP launched in 2024.

<sup>42</sup> Few R, McAvoy D, Tarazona M, Walden VM (2014), *Contribution to Change: An Approach to Evaluating the Role of Intervention in Disaster Recovery* (Rugby, UK: Practical Action Publishing and Oxford).

<sup>43</sup> CSRF, World Food Programme (2020), 'Adjusting Terminology for Organised Violence in South Sudan,' September, p 3.

<sup>44</sup> Norman JM, Mikhael D (2023), 'Rethinking the Triple-Nexus: Integrating Peacebuilding and Resilience Initiatives in Conflict Contexts,' *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* 18 (3), pp 249, 258-259.

We suggest that longer project timelines can also be combined with and facilitate contribution monitoring. Partners pooling staffing, knowledge, and financial resources to evaluate certain area-level outcome and impact indicators at regular frequencies enhances cooperation, efficiency, and effectiveness of area-based programming.