

EVALUATION REPORT

RSRTF Area-Based Programme (ABP) in Jonglei and Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA), Phase 2

David Deng, Harriet Kuyang, Samuel Maliamungu and Jan Pospisil

October 2025

Abstract

The ABP in Jonglei/GPAA represents one of the RSRTF's most ambitious experiments in integrated peacebuilding under extreme constraints. It succeeded in reducing mass violence and building nascent governance structures but struggled to transcend the boundaries of short-term conflict prevention. Its legacy lies in operational learning – how to localize multi-pillar programming, target drivers of violence effectively, and balance ambition with context. Any future programming in the region should therefore consolidate rather than expand, focusing on sustainability, structural anchoring, and leaner institutional design.

Acknowledgements

This evaluation was made possible through the generous collaboration and support of the many individuals and institutions who contributed their time, insights, and expertise. The evaluation team extends its deep appreciation to the members of the RSRTF Secretariat for their guidance and facilitation throughout the process, and to the consortium partners – including WFP, UNDP, IOM, UNMISS, UNHCR, and Peace Canal – for their openness in sharing data, field access, and reflections on implementation. We are particularly grateful to the local authorities and community members in Bor, Akobo, and Pibor, whose candid perspectives and lived experiences form the foundation of this report. Special thanks are also due to the ICGS, PCRCs, protection and peace committees, and women and youth groups who shared their stories and lessons from the ground. Finally, the team acknowledges the invaluable contributions of the evaluation support staff, enumerators, and translators who ensured that voices from even the most remote locations were heard and accurately represented.

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About the Authors

David Deng is a South Sudanese researcher with over 15 years of experience leading studies and evaluations on peacebuilding, governance, and transitional justice across South Sudan.

Dr. Harriet Kuyang is a senior consultant on rule of law and democratic governance and a senior lecturer at the University of Juba, teaching international law and international human rights law.

Dr. Jan Pospisil is an Associate Professor (Research) at the Centre for Peace and Security at Coventry University and a co-investigator of the PeaceRep program.

Samuel Maliamungu is a South Sudanese peacebuilding and development specialist with extensive experience in program design, monitoring, and evaluation, focusing on community security, resilience, and governance initiatives.

About Detcro

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Acronyms

ABP	Area-Based Program
ARG	Area Reference Group
CBO	Community-Based Organization
CBPP	Community-Based Participatory Planning
CES	Central Equatoria State
CRA	Compensation and Reparation Authority
CSRF	Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility
DG	Director General
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GPAA	Greater Pibor Administrative Area
HLP	Housing, Land, and Property
ICGS	Inter-Communal Governance Structure
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IOM	International Organization for Migration
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
KII	Key Informant Interview
MEL	Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NP	Nonviolent Peaceforce
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
PBF	Peacebuilding Fund
PCRCs	Police–Community Relations Committees
POF	Peacebuilding Opportunities Fund
RSRTF	Reconciliation, Stabilization, and Resilience Trust Fund
SGBV	Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
ToC	Theory of Change
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNMISS	United Nations Mission in South Sudan
VSLA	Village Savings and Loan Association
WFP	World Food Programme
WPT	Women's Protection Team
YPT	Youth Protection Team

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Executive Summary

This report presents key findings and recommendations from an independent evaluation of Phase 2 of the United Nations Multi-Partner Trust Fund for Reconciliation, Stabilization and Resilience (RSRTF) Area-Based Program (ABP) in Jonglei and the Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA). Conducted between September and October 2025, the evaluation assessed the program's performance, relevance, and strategic contribution to violence reduction and local governance across one of South Sudan's most volatile regions.

Drawing on fieldwork in Bor, Akobo, and Pibor, as well as document review and consultations with 182 stakeholders, the evaluation examined how the ABP adapted from its first to second phase, what results it achieved, and what lessons can inform future RSRTF programming. The findings are organized thematically around learning, ambition, coherence, gender, and sustainability.

Program Adaptation and Learning

The ABP demonstrated strong institutional learning and adaptive management in its transition from Phase 1 to Phase 2. The reduction of consortium membership from sixteen to nine organizations allowed for greater strategic focus, stronger internal coordination, and improved layering of interventions across the Reconciliation-Stabilization-Resilience (RSR) pillars.

Phase 2 targeted conflict hotspots along the Jonglei-GPAA border and deliberately focused on armed youth – an approach that directly addressed key drivers of violence. This shift yielded tangible results, including a significant decline in mass mobilizations, reunification of abducted women and children, improved access to justice (notably through the establishment of a statutory court in Pibor), and strengthened early-warning and response through inter-communal governance structures (ICGS).

These achievements underscore the ABP's capacity to learn from earlier weaknesses and adapt to a highly volatile context. Enhanced joint work-planning, community-based participatory planning (CBPP), and greater geographic focus contributed to a more coherent and responsive program design.

Ambition and the Theory of Change

The ABP's overarching ambition – to move from conflict mitigation to durable peacebuilding – proved over-extended given contextual and institutional constraints. In practice, the program's theory of change oscillated between competing objectives: conflict prevention, peace-making, reconciliation, and long-term peacebuilding. While RSRTF interventions inevitably touch on all four, the absence of a clear hierarchy or sequencing weakened strategic focus.

The behavioral and social-change model underpinning Phase 2 was particularly ambitious for a short-term, resource-intensive intervention in an environment with limited state capacity. Future programmes should calibrate their theories of change to generational timeframes and clearly define the specific outcomes sought within the relatively short timeframes of the RSRTF program – prioritizing achievable conflict-prevention gains over transformative ambitions that the context cannot sustain.

Integration, Coherence, and the Challenge of Structure

Although the ABP improved coordination and reduced duplication compared with Phase 1, structural fragmentation persisted. Positive examples of 'layering' emerged, particularly where livelihood support was combined with peace and governance functions, but coherence varied across partners and locations.

The Area Reference Group (ARG) – envisioned as a cornerstone of RSRTF coordination – underperformed and, in practice, became largely symbolic. Joint work planning improved operational alignment but was constrained by institutional siloes, subcontracting complexities, and bureaucratic delays. These lessons point to the need for a leaner and more unified structure in future: one or two UN leads supported by a small number of technically specialized partners operating under a single management and monitoring framework.

Gender, Power, and Participation

The ABP's gender strategy was pragmatic and context-specific, focusing on those most directly engaged in violence while recognizing women's complementary peace roles. The deliberate targeting of armed male youth was essential to reduce raids and retaliatory attacks. In parallel, women's unions and protection teams played visible but secondary roles within ICGS and peace committees.

This approach was defensible in the short term but risked reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies. While women's participation contributed meaningfully to dialogue and local reconciliation, transformative gender inclusion remained limited. Future programming should retain the strategic focus on male youth while embedding gender equality as a cross-cutting objective that challenges, rather than reproduces, unequal power relations within peace structures.

Sustainability and Institutional Anchoring

The program's achievements in conflict prevention and community governance are significant but fragile. ICGS and peace committees remain dependent on external partners for transport, communication, and allowances. Once donor funding declines, their ability to function autonomously will likely diminish.

The evaluation identifies sustainability as the principal weakness of the ABP. Sustained peace will require stronger government participation, functional linkages between local peace structures and justice-chain institutions, and modest community-managed logistical arrangements that reduce reliance on external facilitation. A realistic goal for future programming is incremental institutional anchoring – ensuring that local and government actors can manage tensions and maintain peace without continuous international mediation.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The RSRTF ABP in Jonglei and GPAA stands as one of the Fund's most ambitious efforts to operationalize an integrated peacebuilding model under extreme conditions. It achieved measurable violence reduction and fostered local governance innovations, but its reach was constrained by structural fragmentation, overambitious objectives, and fragile sustainability.

Its enduring contribution lies in operational learning: how to localize multi-pillar programming, target conflict drivers effectively, and balance ambition with context. The next phase of RSRTF engagement should consolidate rather than expand – anchoring peace structures, simplifying delivery mechanisms, and sustaining progress through locally grounded, politically realistic approaches.

The conclusions of this evaluation include the following:

1. Adaptive Success, Structural Fragility – The ABP effectively adapted its design to context and learned from prior shortcomings. Its tangible peace dividends confirm the value of area-based, hotspot-focused approaches. Yet, its gains remain fragile due to overreliance on external facilitation and short-term funding cycles.
2. Overambitious Vision vs. Contextual Constraints – The program's theory of change was ambitious in seeking to transition from conflict prevention to peacebuilding and reconciliation. The scale of objectives exceeded what was feasible within a two-year period and a highly unstable political environment.
3. Improved Integration, Persistent Fragmentation – Coordination and joint planning improved considerably in Phase 2, but institutional siloes and inconsistent partner engagement limited the depth of integration. The ARGs, intended as a signature coordination innovation, failed to function as envisioned.
4. Pragmatic Gender Approach with Limited Transformative Impact – Targeting armed male youth was the right strategy for immediate conflict prevention, while women's involvement in peace structures ensured inclusion. However, the approach remained instrumental rather than transformative, reinforcing rather than reshaping gender roles.
5. Sustainability as the Central Challenge – The sustainability of peace and governance mechanisms is uncertain. Local committees and ICGS remain dependent on donor support and partner facilitation. Without institutional embedding and government co-ownership, their durability is limited.

Drawing on evaluation findings and the cross-learning workshop discussions, the evaluation proposes the following strategic and operational recommendations for RSRTF, consortium members, and donors:

1. Plan a Gradual, Structured Exit – Develop a phased transition strategy that links ABP-supported peace and governance structures to local government systems, maintaining light-touch technical accompaniment to ensure continuity beyond program closure.
2. Design a Successor Program Consolidated Around Conflict Corridors – Build on ABP gains by focusing the next phase along cross-border conflict corridors connecting Jonglei and GPAA, anchoring interventions around established intercommunal linkages and trade routes for sustained dialogue and stability.
3. Streamline the Consortium and Strengthen Strategic Coherence – Reduce consortium size to one or two UN leads with a few technical NGOs, unified under a single theory of change and harmonized management, monitoring, and reporting framework.
4. Deepen Government Ownership and Accountability – Engage government and security actors as active co-implementers, linking donor funding to clear government contributions such as operational police posts, payment of staff, and logistical support to justice institutions.
5. Reinforce Integration Across RSR Pillars – Strengthen sequencing and layering between reconciliation, stabilization, and resilience interventions so that livelihood and service delivery directly reinforce peacebuilding and justice outcomes.

6. Maintain Balanced, Conflict-Sensitive Targeting – Continue engaging armed youth and hotspot communities while preserving equitable geographic and ethnic balance across Dinka, Nuer, and Murle areas, guided by continuous conflict analysis and adaptive management.
7. Invest in Local Logistics and Communication – Provide modest, community-managed logistical and communication support – such as transport and satellite connectivity – to enable peace structures to function effectively and sustain intercommunal coordination in hard-to-reach areas.

Introduction

This report presents findings, conclusions and recommendations from an evaluation of Phase 2 of the United Nations Multi-Partner Trust Fund for Reconciliation, Stabilization and Resilience (RSRTF) Area-Based Program (ABP) in Jonglei and Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA). The information in this report is drawn from a review of relevant literature, including program documents and secondary sources, and qualitative data, including key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) held in Juba, Bor, Akobo and Pibor in September 2025. The findings are meant to inform consortium members as they approach the end of phase 2 of the ABP in December 2025 and the RSRTF Steering Committee as it considers options for future programming in South Sudan.

Among the key findings from this evaluation are that the ABP demonstrated strong learning in its transition to its second phase of programming in January 2023, overcoming many of the constraints that it faced in the first phase, including an unwieldy 16 organization large consortium that lacked strategic direction in how it worked across the reconciliation, stabilization and resilience (RSR) pillars. The consortium's ability to adapt and refocus its intervention around hotspots in the border areas between the three conflicting communities in Jonglei/GPAA, better layer its programming across pillars, more deliberately target armed youth in program activities, and reduce the consortium size to nine organizations, are among the factors that contributed to its impact. Indeed, the ABP made significant strides in addressing key conflict drivers in Jonglei/GPAA, including:

- A reduction in the frequency and severity of mass mobilizations among Dinka and Nuer armed youth;
- Reuniting abducted women and children with their families and promoting peace messaging to discourage abductions during conflict;
- Strengthening local capacities for conflict mitigation by supporting inter-communal governance structures (ICGS) and other community structures which have played a critical role in early warning and response, information sharing and reconciliation.
- Increasing access to rule of law institutions, including the establishment of a statutory court for the first time in Pibor and the deployment of judges and prosecutors elsewhere in Jonglei, and;
- Building the skills, capacity and resilience of program participants through Functional Adult Literacy (FAL) programs, agricultural support, and animal health interventions.

These successes notwithstanding, there were areas where the ABP still struggled to overcome the weaknesses that it inherited from the initial ABP design. The underlying logic of the program at times seemed to vacillate among several competing objectives, and it was not always clear whether activities were primarily geared towards *conflict mitigation* (i.e., reducing the immediate risks of violence and preventing escalation, or 'damage control'), *peace-making* (i.e., bringing conflicting parties to a political settlement through dialogue), *peace-building* (i.e., addressing the underlying structural causes of conflict and building institutions, relationships, and norms that sustain peace over time), or *reconciliation* (i.e., healing relationships and rebuilding trust between divided groups after violence).

RSRTF interventions inevitably touch on many of these logics, but the specific characteristics of the context will determine where to focus a program's attention. For example, if it is not possible to bring conflicting groups into the same space due to safety concerns, it may limit the extent to which peacebuilding or reconciliation objectives can be integrated into resilience or

stabilization programming. Design ambiguities such as these, coupled with the difficulties that organizations face in overcoming institutional siloes, uneven understandings of the unique aspects of the RSRTF approach across consortium members and subcontractors, challenges in maintaining a functional area reference group (ARG), and the difficulty of sustaining gains that have been made by the RSRTF in a context of donor fatigue and waning international support, are among the challenges that the ABP faces as it winds down its operations.

This evaluation report is structured in six sections. After the introduction, an overview of the purpose and scope of the evaluation and the methodological approach is provided in Sections 2 and 3. Section 4 provides relevant background information, including the context in Jonglei/GPAA and an overview of the RSRTF ABP. Section 5 presents findings across the six OECD-DAC criteria, and Section 6 offers a series of conclusions and recommendations for the RSRTF and its stakeholders to consider moving forward.

1. Purpose and Scope

The purpose of this evaluation is threefold:

1. To assess the overall performance and impact of the Jonglei/GPAA ABP.
2. To critically examine the relevance, effectiveness, and strategic validity of the RSRTF's area-based programming approach.
3. To document critical lessons learned applicable elsewhere in South Sudan and beyond.

The evaluation aims to expand the evidence base supporting area-based interventions under the RSRTF and guide future strategic decisions, particularly regarding continued engagement in the GPAA and similar fragile settings. Specifically, the evaluation aims to:

- Assess the collective impact and performance of the Jonglei/GPAA ABP across its reconciliation, stabilization, and resilience pillars, in line with the OECD-DAC evaluation criteria.
- Evaluate the RSRTF's area-based programming approach, including: (i) whether it contributes to greater coherence in delivering collective outcomes and violence reduction, and (ii) whether the RSRTF's three-pillar framework – reconciliation, stabilization, and resilience – is contextually appropriate and effective in enabling whole-of-system program design.
- Identify and document good practices, innovations, and key lessons learned, with particular attention to implementation, coordination, and operational challenges encountered during program delivery in the last five years.
- Provide actionable, forward-looking recommendations on how to sustain the gains of the ABP to date.

2. Methodology

2.1. Evaluation Methods

The evaluation employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative elements to capture the complexity of programming in Jonglei/GPAA. It was structured around the OECD-DAC evaluation criteria – relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability – while also paying close attention to conflict sensitivity, gender equality, and the participation of women and youth.

Data collection included a systematic review of program documents such as proposals, monitoring and financial reports, partner activity reports, Secretariat and Steering Committee records, contextual analyses, and external evaluations. KIIs were conducted with a wide range of stakeholders, including community leaders, women's and youth representatives, local authorities, implementing partners, government officials, donors, RSRTF Secretariat staff, and UNMISS representatives. FGDs were held to capture collective perspectives and dynamics within communities, ensuring representation across gender and age groups and exploring perceptions of peace dividends, inclusivity, and the functioning of governance structures. These methods were supplemented by direct observation of program sites and activities, including community infrastructure, livelihood initiatives, peace dialogue forums, and governance structures, which provided context-specific evidence and helped triangulate findings.

Purposive sampling was used to capture diverse perspectives across the Jonglei and GPAA context, with fieldwork concentrated in Akobo, Bor, and Pibor. Participants were identified in consultation with local governance structures and implementing partners, while maintaining the independence of the evaluation team and ensuring balance across gender, age, and social groups, including displaced populations.

Data analysis was guided by an evaluation matrix linking questions to indicators, sources, and methods of data collection. Qualitative data from interviews and group discussions were transcribed and coded thematically using both deductive categories from the OECD-DAC framework and inductive themes emerging from the fieldwork. Quantitative monitoring data and descriptive counts were incorporated to support qualitative evidence. Triangulation across sources, methods, and sites enhanced validity and reliability.

Key findings were shared at a cross-learning workshop in Juba on 22-23 October 2025 to further enrich and validate and refine the evaluation's findings, conclusions and recommendations.

2.2. Sample

The evaluation team engaged a total of 182 individuals in KIIs and FGDs (45 female and 137 male), both virtual and in-person, in Juba, Akobo, Bor and Pibor. The table below provides an overview of the sample population.

Table 1: Sample Population

Location	KIIs		FGDs		Total	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Juba	8	7	-	-	8	7
Akobo	11	5	22	1	33	6
Bor	14	1	54	21	68	22
Pibor	12	1	16	9	28	10
Total	**45**	**14**	**92**	**31**	**137**	**45**
	59		**123**		**182**	

2.3. Limitations

The evaluation was conducted in a challenging and dynamic context, which placed certain limitations on the scope of inquiry and interpretation of findings. First, insecurity in parts of Jonglei and GPAA restricted access in some locations and communities, limiting the diversity of perspectives captured. Second, logistical constraints linked to flooding, poor road conditions, and limited flight availability affected the timing and reach of fieldwork. Third, respondent bias posed a risk, in that community members or local authorities may have had expectations of continued assistance that potentially inhibited frank discussion. To mitigate this, the evaluation team applied conflict-sensitive facilitation techniques, emphasized confidentiality, and conducted separate focus groups for women and youth to encourage open dialogue. Fourth, the compressed timeframe for fieldwork and the difficult travel conditions during the rainy season necessitated prioritization of certain stakeholder groups, including a more urban population, which limited the depth of engagement with other actors (e.g., direct engagement with program participants in conflict hotspots along the Jonglei/GPAA border was not possible). Finally, limitations in the availability and quality of program monitoring data constrained the team's ability to assess quantitative changes over time. Triangulation across multiple sources and methods helped to strengthen the credibility of findings despite these constraints, and the learning workshop helped to further enhance the analysis.

3. Context

3.1. Political, Security and Humanitarian Context in Jonglei/GPAA

Phase 2 of the ABP in the Jonglei and GPAA was launched in a context of entrenched instability, compounded by weak institutions, humanitarian crisis, and intensifying climate-stress. Although some marginal improvements had been recorded by 2021, the region remained trapped in cycles of communal violence – cattle raiding, abductions of women and children, revenge attacks and large-scale youth mobilizations. According to the UNMISS Human Rights Division, 2022 alone saw at least 3,469 civilians across South Sudan subjected to killing, injury, abduction or conflict-related sexual violence. Jonglei and GPAA together accounted for a substantial share of that toll.

One flashpoint occurred in December 2022 when youth from Dinka, Nuer and Murle communities mobilized along the corridor and attacked towns in GPAA triggering large-scale displacement and reinforcing intercommunal fault-lines. As a Small Arms Survey report observed, "*[T]he [government's] failure to prevent that mobilization represents a broader crisis of political legitimacy."* Aside from high levels of violence, the humanitarian and governance context remained deeply constrained. Offices at state and county level lack resources and capacity, salaries routinely go unpaid, and control over remote payams is often left to youth networks rather than formal authorities. As one focus-group participant in Pibor put it:

> *"We have lost so many of our young people in internal conflicts and conflicts with Nuer and Dinka. The main issue is cattle, women and children… People hate each other… we are calling ourselves brothers but we fight because of cattle. Because people are hungry and poverty is too much among the youths."*

In 2025 the political and security environment in Jonglei and GPAA deteriorated further, as national-level rivalries between the South Sudan People's Defence Forces (SSPDF) and the

Sudan People's Liberation Movement-in-Opposition (SPLM-IO) spilled into the region. In May 2025 an aerial bombardment in Old Fangak County reportedly killed at least 27 individuals and displaced thousands, drawing condemnation from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).[1] Meanwhile, ground and riverine operations intensified under the pretext of countering opposition affiliated forces and enforcing state authority.[2] Although much of the reporting identifies Upper Nile as the epicenter of the air-strikes, the ripple effects in Jonglei/GPAA are substantial: militarization, increased movement of armed units, and local fear of renewed large-scale mobilization all undermine the stabilization gains made under the ABP. The involvement of external actors – notably the Uganda People's Defence Forces (UPDF) in support of the SSPDF, including gunship operations, further complicates the region's security calculus and raises serious humanitarian and rule-of-law concerns.[3]

Compounding the security challenges, the region has been hit repeatedly by extreme flooding and climate-driven hazards. According to UNICEF, Jonglei is among the most flood-affected states in South Sudan; floods and dry spells severely disrupt access, livestock movement, crops, and services.[4] Together, violence, marginal governance, humanitarian need and environmental shocks form a tightly-interlinked risk environment: weakened institutions cannot manage conflict; the poor livelihoods drive raids and abductions; flooding reduces mobility and market access and increases competition over resources; and youth engagement in conflict remains both a symptom and a driver.

3.2. Overview of the RSRTF ABP in Jonglei/GPAA

The RSRTF launched its ABP in Jonglei and GPAA in December 2020 to address these drivers of instability. Phase 1 (2020–2022) engaged a broad consortium of 16 UN agencies, INGOs, and NNGOs to deliver interventions across the pillars of reconciliation, stabilization, and resilience. An independent evaluation of phase 1 found that the program helped avert mass mobilizations, supported intercommunal dialogue, and piloted community-based governance mechanisms such as the ICGS.[5] However, insecurity, weak state presence, and logistical challenges constrained impact.

Phase 2 (2023-25) was implemented by a reduced consortium of nine organizations led by WFP and including UNDP, UNMISS, IOM, UNHCR, Save the Children, VSF-Germany, Nonviolent Peaceforce, and Peace Canal. With USD $16.5 million in funding, Phase 2 targeted specific conflict corridors and hotspots, including Wuno, Bichbich, Pulbura, Manyabol, Kadiang, and Lekuangole, where risks of communal violence were particularly acute. The program focused on six outcomes in line with the RSRTF results framework (see Table below).

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[1] U.N. Secretary-General, *Report on the Situation in South Sudan*, ¶ [insert paragraph number], U.N. Doc. S/2025/504 (June 2025), https://docs.un.org/en/S/2025/504 .

[2] Xinhua, Uganda Sends More Military Support to South Sudan, May 8, 2025, https://english.news.cn/africa/20250508/9ed3ae0e14a14362abac6c164577c5f7/c.html.

[3] Peace & Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform (PeaceRep), *"Never Let a Good Crisis Go to Waste: The Militarisation of South Sudan's Eastern Border"* (April 4 2025), https://peacerep.org/2025/04/04/never-let-a-good-crisis-go/.

[4] U.N. Children's Fund (UNICEF), *Climate Change and Flooding*, Key Facts, UNICEF South Sudan, https://www.unicef.org/southsudan/what-we-do/climate-change-and-flooding .

[5] David Deng, Kuyang Harriet Logo & Jan Pospisil, Evaluation Report: RSRTF Area-Based Program in Jonglei and the Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA) (Nov. 2022) [hereinafter Jonglei/GPAA ABP Phase 1 Evaluation Report].

Despite progress, phase 2 was implemented in a fluid and often hostile environment marked by sporadic violence, political interference, climate shocks, and persistent humanitarian needs. The end-of-program evaluation assesses not only the ABP's results but also its ability to adapt to these dynamic conditions, and the extent to which it has laid foundations for sustainable peace and resilience in Jonglei/GPAA.

Table 2: Overview of Jonglei/GPAA ABP Results Framework

Results		Description	Indicative Activities
R	Outcome 1	Reduced Violence: Individuals, particularly children and women are facing less violence at the community and local level.	
	Output 1.1	Drivers of conflict are identified by communities and mitigated.	Conduct participatory conflict analysis and mapping in hotspot areas; facilitate community dialogues to identify drivers of violence; establish early warning and rapid response mechanisms; engage armed youth in peace sensitization and livelihood initiatives; support local peace committees to monitor and mediate emerging tensions.
	Output 1.2	Sustainable community-based approaches to prevent abduction of women and children affected by conflict are established.	Form and train community protection committees; conduct awareness campaigns on abduction prevention and child protection; support family tracing and reunification mechanisms; strengthen collaboration between communities and law enforcement; establish safe spaces and referral pathways for survivors.
	Outcome 2	Intercommunal Conflict Management: Community-oriented mechanisms are perceived as legitimate and effective governance forum, successfully preventing, mitigating and resolving conflict issues peacefully, as well as supporting conflict sensitive decision-making for community development.	
	Output 2.1	Community-led and community-based conflict mitigation and social cohesion systems established and strengthened.	Support formation and training of Inter-Communal Governance Structures (ICGS) and Peace Committees; facilitate inter-communal peace dialogues and joint problem-solving forums; provide logistical and technical support for mediation; promote inclusive decision-making involving women and youth; establish monitoring and feedback systems for conflict incidents.
S	Outcome 3	Accountability & Rule of Law: A strong and integrated justice chain offers lawful redress for victims and trust exists between citizens and state security apparatus, justice, and law enforcement institutions.	
	Output 3.1	Community based dispute resolution mechanisms are strengthened and linkages between the informal and formal justice systems built.	Train traditional leaders and paralegals on mediation and customary law; organize joint workshops for traditional and formal justice actors; support local courts with case documentation and infrastructure; facilitate community awareness sessions on access to justice; promote legal aid and case referral mechanisms.

	Output 3.2	Accountability for intracommunal violence, including SGBV, is promoted through community-based justice and judicial mechanism(s) and increased presence of rule of law actors.	Train police, prosecutors, and judicial officers on handling SGBV and intercommunal violence; strengthen gender desks and community policing units; support mobile courts and legal outreach missions; enhance survivor referral and protection systems; conduct public awareness on rights and justice processes.
	Outcome 4	Civic participation & Governance: Government is accountable, transparent, and responsive and citizens, including women, youth and disadvantaged groups exercise their rights to meaningfully participate in public debate and civic engagement.	
	Output 4.1	Increased level of local government officials engaging communities in political, peace and security decision making.	Facilitate local government–community dialogue forums; train officials on participatory planning and conflict sensitivity; support joint security and peace committees; promote civic education campaigns on governance and rights; strengthen coordination between local authorities and traditional leaders.
R	Outcome 5	Human Capital Development: Individuals, youth in particular, are empowered and incentivized to shift from violence and criminality as a means of economic survival to productive participation in socio-economic processes.	
	Output 5.1	Targeted population has increased access to career development and livelihood opportunities.	Implement vocational and technical training for youth and women; support establishment of small businesses and cooperatives; provide starter kits and seed funding for livelihood activities; link trainees to markets and private sector opportunities; promote public works through food/cash-for-assets programs.
	Output 5.2	Targeted population has increased access to non-formal education opportunities.	Establish and support Functional Adult Literacy (FAL) centers; train facilitators and develop context-specific curricula; integrate literacy with life skills and peace education; organize peer learning groups and mentorship schemes; provide learning materials and safe learning spaces.
	Outcome 6	Peace Dividends: Reconciled communities enjoy socio-economic improvements that increase interdependency, social cohesion and self-reliance and mitigate catalysts of violent resource-based competition.	
	Output 6.1	Improved community assets and enhanced access to socio-economic opportunities for targeted populations.	Construct and rehabilitate feeder roads, water points, and peace centers; implement community-driven asset creation programs; support cash-for-work or food-for-assets schemes; promote joint community projects enhancing interdependence; ensure sustainability through local management committees.

4. Findings

4.1. Program Adaptation, Learning and Impact

Phase 2 of the ABP demonstrates clear institutional learning and programmatic adaptation from the fragmented structure of Phase 1. The first phase involved a consortium of sixteen partners implementing largely independent streams of activity that struggled to achieve coherence. As the phase 1 evaluation noted, "the structure of the ABP as four distinct projects with different budgets, reporting lines and, partially, even project locations, was a flaw in its design."[6] Learning from these limitations, the consortium undertook a redesign process at the end of phase 1, resulting in a leaner nine-member partnership, a sharper geographical and thematic focus, and greater integration across the Reconciliation, Stabilization, and Resilience (RSR) pillars.[7]

The changes made in Phase 2 produced discernible improvements in coherence and impact. By concentrating efforts in the Nanaam corridor – particularly in border areas such as Anyidi, Bichbich, and Wuno – the program targeted a hotspot of intercommunal conflict and reached communities previously excluded from sustained peacebuilding engagement. Respondents described the deliberate sequencing of interventions: resilience activities provided entry points for livelihoods and adult literacy, stabilization introduced early warning and governance mechanisms, and reconciliation deepened through community dialogues and the work of peace and justice structures. Activities were layered with a focus on armed youth and members of the various community structures involved with the program (e.g., ICGS, PCRCs, protection teams, etc.), providing them with livelihood support that helped to strengthen their participation in program activities.

In Pibor, armed youth enrolled in Functional Adult Literacy (FAL) classes eventually stopped bringing their guns to lessons – a visible sign that the program's capacity-strengthening efforts in peacebuilding and conflict resolution were beginning to take root and that trust was gradually being rebuilt among groups that had long been divided by conflict.

> *"We didn't have classrooms. They sat in chairs under the trees. Youth would come with their guns and it was sensitive in terms of safeguarding. At the end, they agreed that whoever comes with arms set them against the tree. In Bichbich they agreed that next time we come to the learning space, we leave the arms at home."*
>
> (Consortium member, Juba)

Stakeholders consistently reported a decline in mass mobilizations, revenge attacks, and abductions during Phase 2.

> *"After phase 1 there was a revamp… clear instructions to cut the consortium into a smaller group… At the beginning there was a lot of intentionality to learn from the mistakes of phase 1."*
>
> (Consortium Member, Juba)

[6] Jonglei/GPAA ABP Phase 1 Evaluation Report.
[7] The Consortium in phase 1 consisted of 12 UN entities – WFP, WHO, UNHCR, UNICEF, IOM, UNDP, UNMISS RoLAS, UNMISS HRD, OCHCR, UNMISS CAD, UNMISS PAD, UNPOL – 3 INGOs – NP, VSF-G, SC – and 1 NNGO – CEPO.

"We agreed to change the focus… to hotspot areas. This has been a great success… it targeted the right people – armed youths – and… reduced the level of communal violence."

(Consortium Member, Pibor)

"In general, the situation in Akobo has gotten better… people now look into things before they decide to mobilize… large revenge attacks don't happen anymore."

(Consortium Member, Akobo)

The ICGS and other community mechanisms actively discouraged planned mobilizations, and shuttle diplomacy by local and state authorities prevented escalation in several instances. More than 570 abducted women and children were traced and reunited with their families through coordinated efforts by local authorities and consortium members. According to field reports, humanitarian access improved dramatically as security along key corridors increased and feeder roads were reopened, allowing regular aid deliveries and cross-line engagement. At the same time, formal rule of law institutions began to take root through the deployment of a mobile court, the establishment of the first ever statutory court in Pibor, and plans for the deployment of a public prosecutor in the near future. That said, in September 2025 there were credible reports of a mobilization led by Nuer spiritual leader Makuach Tut, who advanced from Ayod County toward Pigi and reportedly aimed to cross toward Malakal in Upper Nile State to recapture stolen cattle and confront Dinka and government-aligned forces.[8]

Evidence from casualty and injury data supports these perceptions of improving security. Reported deaths and injuries fell across most counties from 2023 to 2024, with the total number of casualties declining from 359 to 284 (see Table 3 below). While 2025 witnessed renewed political violence linked to dynamics outside the program area, respondents maintained that intercommunal fighting within the Jonglei-GPAA corridor had continued to wane.

Table 3: Casualties in Jonglei/GPAA in 2023-24

County	2023			2024		
	Killed	Injured	Total	Killed	Injured	Total
Akobo	56	20	76	40	37	77
Bor	11	15	26	13	16	29
Duk	50	26	76	60	47	107
GPAA	16	28	44	16	13	29
Twic East	11	10	21	3	4	7
Uror	51	65	116	16	19	35

[8] *Spiritual leader Makuach rejects dialogue, advances towards Pigi*, Radio Tamazuj (6 Sep. 2025), https://www.radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/spiritual-leader-makuach-rejects-dialogue-advances-toward-pigi?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

Total	**195**	**164**	**359**	**148**	**136**	**284**

Internal event-tracking data also suggest a consistent downward trend in large-scale mobilizations and intercommunal clashes, replaced by smaller-scale incidents driven by isolated actors. The shift from organized violence to sporadic criminal activity represents a notable improvement in conflict dynamics and reflects the effectiveness of the program's early warning and rapid response mechanisms.

Beyond security outcomes, program adaptation also yielded social and institutional gains. Armed youth involved in literacy and livelihood initiatives reported increased motivation to pursue peaceful livelihoods, while market exchanges and dialogue meetings helped rebuild trust among Dinka, Nuer, and Murle communities. Local leaders and police began to collaborate more closely, and mobile courts enhanced accountability and fairness in justice processes. During its most recent session in Pibor, the mobile court adjudicated between 80 and 100 cases related to SGBV, cattle theft, and other serious crimes. Though this is relatively small compared to the demand for justice services, and mobile courts are far more expensive than a statutory court with a permanent presence, the symbolic value of accountability in these relatively remote parts of the country should not be underestimated.

> *"In phase 2… partners decided to work together in the hotspots… opening of roads and an airstrip made it accessible… Income generating activities for armed youth have been a plus… child abduction has decreased to some extent."*
>
> (Consortium Member, Juba)

> *"There hasn't been a mass mobilization in a while… attacks now are isolated… the county has worked towards peace."*
>
> (Local Government Official, Akobo)

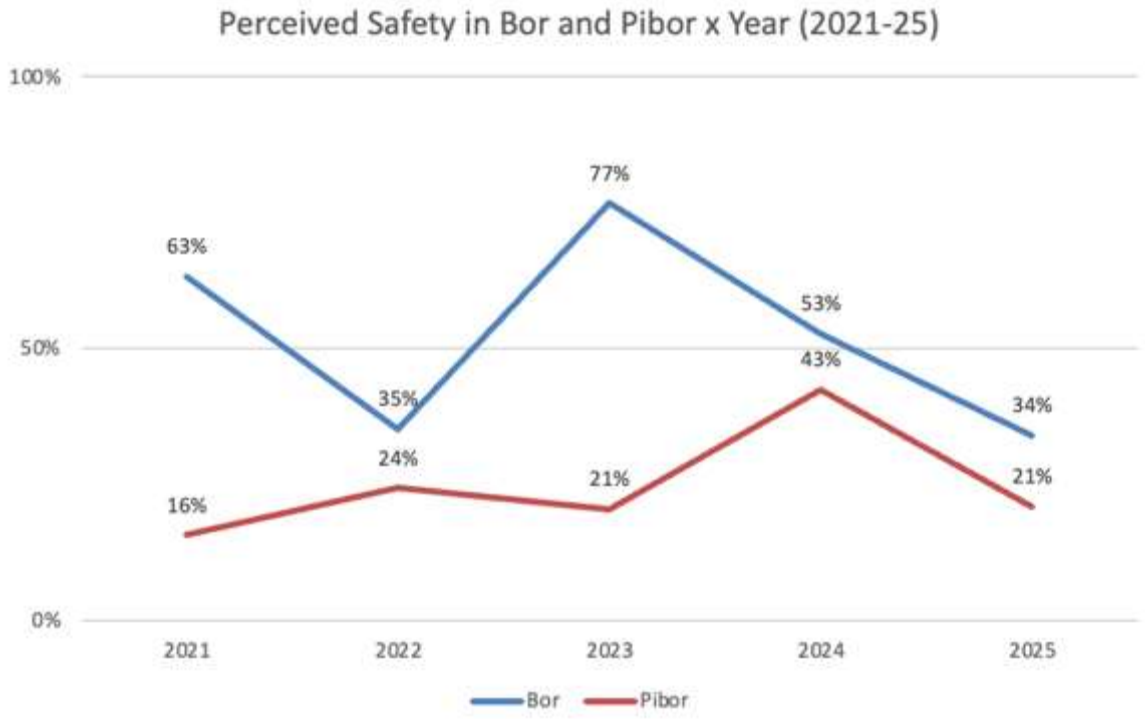
Despite these notable impacts, the ABP's draft endline study finds that food insecurity remains persistently high in Jonglei and GPAA, despite modest improvements compared to baseline data. According to the report, 60% of respondents fall into the 'poor' food consumption group, showing inadequate dietary diversity and quantity; 25% are in the 'borderline' category, and only 15% have 'acceptable' food consumption levels.[9] This means that nearly three-quarters of households face food insecurity or are highly vulnerable to it. The study attributes these conditions to displacement, conflict, and recurrent climate shocks, including flooding that destroyed livestock and crops. It notes that current flooding and erratic rainfall patterns continue to threaten recovery and risk pushing borderline households into severe food insecurity. The report also cautions that with RSRTF resilience interventions ending in 2025, the absence of follow-on livelihood and agricultural support could erode the limited gains achieved.

Text Box 1: Trends in Perceived Safety in Bor and Pibor

Data from an opinion poll on perceptions of peace conducted by Detcro, the Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform (PeaceRep), and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) offer an additional lens on evolving safety and security trends in Jonglei and GPAA. Over the past five years, the survey has reached more than 22,000 respondents in 15 locations

[9] WFP South Sudan Co MEAL, P4DGM, *Endline Study Report* (Draft) (Sep. 2025), p. 12.

across South Sudan, tracking perceived safety through five locally defined indicators of peace, alongside questions on people's broader views of peace and peace processes. From 2021 to 2024, perceptions of safety and peace steadily improved across the national sample. However, in 2025 these indicators declined for the first time, with Bor South and Pibor registering their lowest perceived safety levels in several years. Although inter- and intra-communal violence has reduced markedly in recent years, the decline in perceived safety likely reflects the surge in political violence between government and opposition forces – including aerial bombardments by the UPDF – as well as worsening humanitarian and economic conditions affecting daily life.



4.2. Ambition and Theory of Change

Phase 2 of the ABP was conceived as an ambitious effort to consolidate lessons from the first phase and articulate a unified theory of change for the consortium. In contrast to Phase 1 – where four separate theories of change guided a fragmented program – Phase 2 sought to establish a single, integrated logic organized around four criteria: relevance, coherence, effectiveness, and efficiency. The intent was to ensure that activities under the RSR pillars were strategically sequenced, layered, and co-located to reinforce one another. In practice, however, the program's ambition outpaced contextual and institutional realities. The new theory of change provided distinct logics for each pillar but did not fully define how they combined into a cohesive pathway to peace. This gap in conceptual clarity mirrored broader ambiguity about whether the ABP's overarching goal was conflict mitigation, peace-making, peacebuilding, or reconciliation.

Respondents across agencies and tiers of implementation described this ambiguity as both conceptual and operational. For some, the ABP's core work lay in *damage control* – preventing the escalation of violence through shuttle diplomacy, early warning, and rapid response. Others viewed it as a vehicle for *reconciliation and institution-building* through joint community structures and rule-of-law mechanisms. In reality, the program oscillated among these modes,

reflecting the fluidity of the context and the wide-ranging mandates of its partners. As one respondent put it:

> *"From the beginning we were very innovative … but the resilience pillar did not pick up and the stabilization pillar was 50-50. Overall, there was acceptance of the model, but there were a lot of distractions."*
>
> (Consortium Member, Juba)

This tension was also evident in the program's reliance on the Pieri peace process as a reference point for its design and theory of change. While there was a general consensus on the importance of the Pieri process as an organizing framework for the ABP at the start of Phase 2 – a position acknowledged in the evaluation of Phase 1 – RSRTF stakeholders have increasingly begun to question the wisdom of anchoring the entire program to an agreement that had shown signs of weakness from the outset.[10] Indeed, a few months after the signing of the Pieri agreement in March 2021, renewed clashes already began to undermine its legitimacy. Yet, Pieri continued to occupy a central place in reporting and strategic discussions, even as its practical relevance was beginning to wane. As one respondent reflected:

> *"Pieri is always mentioned in reports and it was the basis of everything done. It's there in every report. How successful is it? I don't know. We might need to focus more on small successes and village-to-village conflict… where people meet regularly and create social relations that can last."*
>
> (RSRTF, Juba)

Another respondent noted:

> *"I at times feel Pieri was overstated… Everyone clinged on to the Pieri process… and I struggled to think why we cling to this one which couldn't stop the violence two months later."*
>
> (Consortium Member, Juba)

The program's behavioral-change ambitions further illustrate the gap between vision and feasibility. The Functional Adult Literacy (FAL) initiative in particular embodied an innovative approach that combined literacy and numeracy training with modules on trauma healing, conflict mitigation, and life skills. Its design reflected the program's integrated intent – linking FAL participants to Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) and targeting armed youth in conflict hotspots. However, while transformative for individuals, its scale – approximately 500 participants – was insufficient to drive behavioral change at a population level or to measurably reduce the risks of communal violence. As one respondent observed,

> *"In phase 1, we redesigned the FAL program to target armed youth… It was contextualized to Jonglei/GPAA, but the question remains how much that actually disincentivizes mobilization."*
>
> (Consortium Member, Juba)

[10] The evaluation of Phase 1 found: "The Pieri peace process and other grassroots peace efforts helped to anchor the ABP in local priorities. In terms of RSR and HDP programming, this is notable for its strong emphasis on peacebuilding and social cohesion as a foundation for humanitarian, development and resilience-oriented programs." Jonglei/GPAA ABP Phase 1 Evaluation Report, p. 5.

Several interviewees emphasized that the program's ambitions for social transformation and institutional strengthening were unrealistic given the short project cycles, persistent insecurity, and weak state presence. As one consortium member noted:

> *"The lifespan of the ABPs is too short – two to three years is a short time to work on stabilization, resilience, and reconciliation. These interventions are development-type interventions and need investment in longer timeframes."*
>
> (Consortium Member, Bor)

Similarly, the RSRTF's integration model was challenged by the highly fragmented operating environment and limited absorptive capacity of local actors. "The way we conceptualized coordination," one consortium member explained, "was that the reconciliation pillar determines community priorities and the resilience and stabilization pillars follow through… The question is to what extent did that system work."

Ultimately, Phase 2 demonstrated both the strength and fragility of ambition in a context as volatile as Jonglei and GPAA. The integrated RSR framework provided a coherent starting point for joint programming, but its translation into practice exposed persistent gaps in sequencing, coordination, and realism. In hindsight, the ABP's theory of change might have been better calibrated to focus on achievable, context-specific outcomes – such as localized conflict prevention, capacity strengthening of peace infrastructures, and pragmatic partnerships with state authorities – rather than broad behavioral or structural transformation. Future iterations of RSRTF programming should adopt tiered theories of change that clearly distinguish between *preventive*, *peacebuilding*, and *reconciliation* functions, and define which can be achieved within project timeframes and which require longer-term efforts.

> *"Because of the enormity of the crises, it's difficult to find quick wins for this kind of work… Sustainability is always a question."*
>
> (RSRTF, Juba)

> *"If we can create financial incentives together, that trust will be built. It's better than sitting at a table with a mediator and then leaving."*
>
> (RSRTF, Juba)

Text Box 2: ABP Effectiveness at Meeting Output Targets

Based on the Results Framework, the ABP achieved substantial progress against most of its output targets, though performance varied somewhat across pillars and geographic locations. Under the reconciliation pillar, targets related to the establishment and functionality of community peace structures were largely met or exceeded. ICGS, peace and protection committees, and early warning networks were established and active in all hotspot locations, with regular coordination and engagement between Dinka, Nuer, and Murle representatives. Similarly, targets on dialogue facilitation and abduction response were met: over 570 abducted women and children were reunited with their families, surpassing expectations and demonstrating tangible peace dividends.

Progress under the stabilization pillar was moderate. The ABP successfully rehabilitated feeder roads, constructed peace centers in Bichbich and Wuno, and extended mobile court operations, which heard roughly 80-100 cases during the reporting period. However, as of the last reporting period, several infrastructure and governance-related outputs – such as full

integration of community mechanisms into formal administrative systems – had not yet been completed due to delays, insecurity, and resource constraints. Under the resilience pillar, livelihood and literacy interventions reached the intended beneficiaries, with hundreds of participants completing vocational training, adult literacy (FAL), and VSLA programs. Yet, targets related to agricultural productivity and sustained market access were only partially achieved, largely due to flooding, inflation, and supply chain disruptions.

4.3. Integration, Coherence, and Structural Challenges

Phase 2 of the ABP made important strides in improving operational coherence through co-location, layering, and better sequencing of activities across the reconciliation, stabilization, and resilience pillars. Respondents involved in the design stages described the program as getting off to a strong and coordinated start, with joint work planning and learning reviews setting a consistent tone for collaboration. Activities were concentrated in key conflict hotspots where partners worked deliberately to engage the same target groups across multiple pillars. Program participants involved in peace and protection structures, such as ICGS, PCRCs, Women's Protection Teams (WPTs), and Youth Protection Teams (YPTs), were simultaneously included in resilience activities such as Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) and agricultural livelihood projects.

While the program's design reflected this integrated intent, coherence proved difficult to sustain over time. In some locations, partners coordinated closely and shared information regularly, while in others collaboration waned. As one consortium member observed:

> *"There was a lot of momentum in the beginning. In the first few months, around May 2023, we did the CBPP… it was a good start. The consistency with the learning reviews was helpful in the beginning. At some point things began to diverge and get more pillar- or agency-segregated. Agencies felt like they needed to move ahead and get things done."*
>
> (Consortium Member, Juba)

Engagement with the Area Reference Group (ARG) – a key coordination mechanism in Phase 1 – also declined, becoming largely symbolic as coordination shifted to pillar-specific working groups. The reconciliation pillar continued to provide informal leadership, often serving as a bridge between the various implementing agencies and a central point of contact for planning and communication.

Although program activities were broadly relevant and strategically targeted, several respondents noted that aspects of the design reflected conventional programming approaches already in use by the same agencies elsewhere in South Sudan. This was not necessarily a weakness – many of these interventions were effective and contextually grounded – but it represented a missed opportunity to experiment with more innovative or locally driven approaches that could have pushed the boundaries of integrated peacebuilding. As one respondent in Juba explained:

> *"RSRTF have good staff and personnel, but somehow when they go into starting a program it becomes a traditional roll-out of resilience programming, a standard procedure. I'm not criticizing that but saying that what remains is to consolidate that into the overall project."*

(RSRTF, Juba)

Joint work planning and learning reviews helped mitigate siloed tendencies, but coherence was undermined by parallel reporting lines, bureaucratic rigidity within UN systems, and human resource turnover. Coordination also weakened as leadership changed within government counterparts – both in Jonglei State and GPAA – and within participating agencies. Each change of governor, chief administrator, or international staff brought delays and required new rounds of relationship-building.

Nevertheless, several operational achievements highlighted the benefits of cross-pillar cooperation and resource sharing. WFP and UNMISS logistics capacity, including the use of SHERPs and aircraft, enabled partners to reach previously inaccessible areas. WFP, for example, extended its operations into the Nanaam corridor and Bichbich for the first time, constructing an airstrip that improved access and introduced new opportunities for service delivery. As one WFP representative reflected:

> *"We decided to use the learning from RSRTF to intentionally target these areas in General Food Assistance. Nanaam corridor and Bichbich, we were not strong before, but through this we were able to invest and penetrate, and we will continue. This experience has opened doors for us to go to the border areas."*
>
> (Consortium Member, Juba)

At the same time, subcontracting under the resilience pillar proved a weak point. Partners engaged through sub-grants were not always adequately oriented on the RSRTF's integrated model or on its accountability requirements, leading to uneven implementation. Recognizing this, the RSRTF Secretariat has since resolved to eliminate subcontracting in future programs.

Coordination with other funding instruments and bilateral programs – such as PBF and the USAID-funded Shejah Salam program – was tactical rather than strategic. The PBF program, implemented by IOM, FAO, and UN Women, intentionally avoided overlap with the RSRTF by excluding reconciliation programming and focusing instead on urban youth and digital peacebuilding in Bor and Pibor. While this complemented the RSRTF's rural youth focus, coordination between the two funds remained limited during implementation. The Peacebuilding Opportunities Fund (POF) was an exception, working more closely with RSRTF through its shared partnership with Peace Canal.

Finally, structural and political incoherence further constrained performance. Frequent turnover among government officials disrupted continuity, and overlapping mandates within the UN system blurred lines of accountability.[11] Overhead costs were also cited as a persistent issue, with respondents noting that excessive administrative expenditures within some UN agencies limited the flow of funds to local partners and reduced overall efficiency.

Text Box 3: The Crisis Modifier – Adaptive Flexibility, Operational Confusion

The crisis modifier was designed as an adaptive financing mechanism within the RSRTF to

[11] Jonglei State had three different governors over the course of the ABP: Denay Jock Chagor until May 2024, Mahjoub Biel Turuk from May 2024, and Riek Gai Kok from March 2025. GPAA also had three different chief administrators: Lokoli Ame Bullen until April 2024; Gola Boyoi Gola from April 2024, Peter Guzule Maze from January 2025, and Gola was re-appointed in July 2025.

allow partners to respond rapidly to emerging shocks and escalations without requiring lengthy reprogramming or budget revisions. Under Phase 2, specific procedures and ToRs were developed to guide its activation. These included a process for partners to propose crisis-response actions through a shared online platform, discussion among consortium members, and approval by the RSRTF. This framework aimed to ensure transparency and collective decision-making while maintaining the agility needed to address urgent issues.

In practice, the modifier proved its worth in several instances. Peace Canal used it effectively to prevent multiple armed mobilizations, including interventions in Bichbich and Wuno, and to support confidence-building activities such as a women's peace conference and the excavation of a water reservoir in Makuach that helped defuse a local dispute. As one respondent explained: "Bichbich and Wuno were purely crisis modifier and POF contributions. It prevented 2-3 mobilizations… and helped establish administration in this corridor."

However, consortium members expressed confusion and frustration about its modalities. Many were unclear on who could access the funds and how decisions were made. The perception that the modifier was being 'awarded' to non-consortium strategic partners created resentment and mistrust. As one partner noted, *"There seemed to be challenges around the crisis modifier and complaints from some partners that it was awarded to POF which wasn't part of the consortium."* Others admitted that turnover among staff and limited familiarity with the ToR contributed to misunderstanding: *"Most of the partners did not go through the document… they kept changing focal persons who were not familiar with the whole thing."* Ultimately, these ambiguities led to the underuse of the crisis modifier, despite it being one of the RSRTF's most valuable tools for adaptive management.

4.4. Gender, Power and Participation

The ABP's gender strategy was pragmatic and context-sensitive, centering on those most implicated in cycles of violence – armed youth – while engaging women primarily in supporting roles. This approach was contextually justified but limited in scope: it reflected a certain realism about who holds power and drives violence in Jonglei and GPAA, but it also risked reinforcing existing gender hierarchies by positioning women mainly as auxiliary peace actors rather than as central decision-makers.

Across program components, men – especially young men – were the dominant participants and targets of behavioral and livelihood interventions, while women were engaged through women's unions, protection teams, literacy and savings groups, and the social service system. This division of roles was not accidental; it mirrored both cultural norms and security realities in the corridor, where armed youth determine local security outcomes. Yet, within these constraints, the ABP created new and meaningful spaces for women's participation, particularly in community safety, reporting of gender-based violence (GBV), and cross-line communication during periods of heightened tension.

Women's Protection Teams (WPTs), Youth Protection Teams (YPTs), and Police-Community Relations Committees (PCRCs) provided an avenue for women to exercise leadership in protection and early-warning functions. As a program participant in Pibor explained:

> *"When we formed the Women Protection Team and Youth Protection Team, all the members of the teams were women and youths. This enabled the active participation of women and youth in project activities… now when you go to customary courts in Pibor, you will find women taking active part in the court processes and decision-making, especially in cases of rape or domestic violence."*

Similarly, the Ministry of Gender in GPAA reported:

> *"Before this program there had been limited participation of women, but the program provided training on leadership and women's rights. Before, women were fearing to report GBV cases, but when they received training, they started reporting freely through our social workers."*

Despite these gains, participation was still largely additive rather than transformative. Women were included in meetings and community dialogues, but decision-making remained concentrated among male chiefs, elders, and administrators. As one woman in Lekuangole noted,

> *"We women participate in meetings and discussions about community issues, but decisions are made by the chiefs and leaders. We wait for the outcomes and then do the communal work."*

Even in areas where women's voices grew stronger—such as peace dialogues and abduction response—these gains remained localized and dependent on facilitation by partners.

Nonetheless, the program demonstrated the potential for women to play direct roles in peace enforcement and social cohesion. In 2022, when conflict erupted between youth age-sets in GPAA, women successfully mediated after government and chiefs failed to do so. *"People were laughing, saying if the government failed, what can women do?"* recalled a consortium member. *"But the women insisted, spoke to the youths, and they resolved the fighting."* Similarly, members of the Women's Union described how relationships built under the ABP now serve as an informal early-warning system: *"When the women hear about mobilizations, they call their counterparts to prevent escalation of violence. This is very helpful and has been used several times."*

At an operational level, the ABP also mainstreamed gender through dual staffing models in service delivery spaces such as Interim Care Centers and through the inclusion of women in CAHW, VSLA, and FAL activities. These interventions not only supported livelihoods but also fostered confidence and social visibility. As one respondent observed:

> *"Those women who are widows before could not go to bring firewood for their families. Now they can move freely. Even the youths are not raping women in the bushes and we are not fearing Nuer or Dinka—people believe these acts are wrong, and if you do them, the police will come."*

Structural barriers, however, persisted. All Director General positions in local government remained occupied by men, limiting institutional collaboration on gender and protection issues. Local officials acknowledged the need for deliberate efforts to appoint women to leadership positions, both to improve coordination with implementing partners and to model inclusive governance.

Text Box 4: Understanding Higher Personnel Costs in UN Agencies

Personnel costs account for a significant share of expenditure in UN-implemented programs, including under the RSRTF. Several structural and institutional factors explain why these costs are systematically higher than in NGO-implemented activities. UN agencies operate under internationally standardized salary scales that include hazard pay, hardship allowances, and other benefits linked to UN duty-station classifications. These scales apply to both international and national staff and are often two to three times higher than comparable NGO salary levels for similar functions. Moreover, UN agencies maintain a heavier international staffing footprint, with regionally or globally recruited personnel occupying key management and technical positions. The associated relocation, security, and insurance costs further inflate overall personnel expenditure.

UN systems also carry additional administrative and compliance requirements. Payrolls are processed through centralized global systems and supported by multiple layers of management, finance, and human resources personnel – functions that NGOs often consolidate locally at lower cost. Even temporary or consultancy contracts (e.g., through CTG or SSA modalities) come with significant administrative overhead.

Evidence from the RSRTF evaluations and Jonglei–GPAA strategy discussions confirms this pattern: personnel costs in some UN agencies (e.g., WFP, IOM) absorb a higher proportion of total budgets, with remuneration for international staff reaching up to three times that of national counterparts. While this structure ensures accountability and compliance within the UN system, it also highlights a key cost driver that differentiates UN implementation from NGO delivery.

Several respondents in the evaluation process complained of high 'overhead' costs among UN agencies in the RSRTF Area-Based Programmes. However, this perception likely conflates overhead with personnel costs. In reality, indirect costs (overheads) are capped at 7% under UN pooled fund rules and are similar across all implementing partners, including NGOs. The visible difference arises from the higher proportion of staff-related costs in UN budgets rather than from excess overhead recovery.

4.5. Sustainability and Institutional Anchoring

The ABP delivered short-term stabilization and localized peace gains, yet these remain fragile because core functions still hinge on external facilitation and logistics that communities and local authorities cannot (or do not) sustain. Stakeholders widely acknowledged that RSRTF resources created the stability needed for dialogues, abduction response, and early-warning to take root; however, once allowances, transport, and convening costs recede, momentum stalls. Skills and knowledge acquired through FAL, VSLAs, farmer groups, PCRCs and justice trainings are among the most durable legacies, but they do not substitute for the logistical backbone – boats, vehicles, fuel, communications, DSAs and DFAs – that enables structures to function in dispersed and hard-to-reach areas. Some ICGS meetings, for example, reportedly cost upwards of $50,000 to convene safely and inclusively across the corridor; without modest but reliable logistics, even well-trained committees cannot meet, verify information, or de-escalate. As a youth leader in Anyidi put it:

> *"We've been trained to patrol Anyidi and engage with the Murle community… but our greatest fear is sustainability: when the funding ends, who will maintain these local structures? The government simply lacks the capacity to continue this work."*

This challenge is compounded by the shrinking fiscal space for international aid in South Sudan. Major donors – including Sweden and the Netherlands – have withdrawn or sharply reduced support, while the United States and the United Kingdom have announced further cuts on the horizon. Within the UN system, agencies are operating under unprecedented austerity: UNMISS faces a 41 percent budget reduction by 2026, and WFP has already reduced its 2025 budget by 30 percent with plans to scale down to roughly half that again in 2026. These cuts directly affect the logistical and security frameworks that allow peace actors to reach remote conflict areas. As one UNMISS official in Bor noted: *"It is unclear how the situation will develop should UNMISS indeed have to downsize… whether the Bor field office would be sustained or phased out."*

At the same time, the habitual claim that government has no resources must be viewed critically. A 2025 report by the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan shows that Jonglei State collects substantial non-oil revenue, largely from taxing dollar-denominated humanitarian salaries – hundreds of thousands of dollars per month over several years – yet produced no public budgets or expenditure reports under the last administration and did not channel funds to basic services, salaries, or conflict-mitigation functions.[12] This pattern underscores a political choice, not merely incapacity: resources exist but are not allocated to citizen needs or to sustaining the very peace infrastructures on which day-to-day stability depends. The disconnect is captured in a state official's plea in Bor – *"We have not received our salaries for 17 months and we don't even have offices… if the program ends, the conflicts will start again"* – which illustrates how frontline counterparts are left without operating budgets even as state revenues are captured elsewhere.

Partners also emphasized that the end of the program is arriving too abruptly and during the rainy season, complicating handovers of assets such as the Bichbich and Wuno peace centers and interrupting routines of joint meetings and patrols. As a local stakeholder in Pibor observed:

> *"The partners did not have a clear pathway for exit… many partners need to rethink how to exit ABP in a more strategic manner that allows the local communities and government to pick up from where partners have stopped."*

A structured exit is now under discussion and should prioritize: time-bound accompaniment to keep early-warning networks active at low cost; clear assignment of responsibility for convening cross-line meetings; and minimum logistics lines (transport, comms, fuel) that match the actual price-tag of corridor-wide engagement.

Looking ahead, national partners are pivotal to continuity. Organizations such as Peace Canal and others have proximity, legitimacy, and year-round presence that international actors cannot replicate; their institutional and financial strengthening is therefore central to any credible sustainability plan. As one consortium member summarized:

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[12] U.N. Human Rights Council, *Conference Room Paper on the Situation of Human Rights in South Sudan*, U.N. Doc. A/HRC/60/CRP.5 (Oct. 2025), https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/conference-room-papers/ahrc60crp5-situation-human-rights-south-sudan.

"Even if the consortium is not going to continue, Peace Canal could be supported… Sustainability has to be ingrained in establishing the financial sustainability of NNGOs and CSOs, not having them as subordinate to international organizations that have little incentive to see the status quo change."

Where skills have taken hold – FAL graduates managing savings groups, PCRCs reporting to police, CAHWs operating on cost-recovery – the task is less about inventing new activities than underwriting the connective tissue that lets these capacities work together in real time. *"Sustainability is the elephant in the room,"* a field officer reflected. *"Committees have been trained and capacitated… once we exit, these youth may not continue on their farms or engage peacefully across borders."*

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The RSRTF ABP in Jonglei and GPAA made measurable progress in stabilizing a historically volatile region. The program's focus on conflict hotspots, adaptive design, and layered interventions across peace, stabilization, and resilience pillars produced tangible dividends – most visibly in reduced revenge attacks, improved coordination between community and state actors, and the strengthening of local governance and peace mechanisms. At the same time, the evaluation finds that these gains are inherently fragile. The program's success relied heavily on donor-funded logistics, UN facilitation, and an operational tempo that local institutions cannot maintain on their own. With the contraction of aid budgets and the absence of viable successor programming, there is a real risk that the progress achieved under the ABP may dissipate if not accompanied by a deliberate strategy for transition and institutional anchoring.

In many respects, the ABP reflects the evolution of the RSRTF model itself: learning from early fragmentation, strengthening joint planning, and achieving coherence in the field despite the complexity of working across multiple agencies. Yet structural weaknesses remain. Coordination across pillars and agencies, though improved, was uneven; sustainability planning came too late; and while the gender approach was contextually grounded, it did not fundamentally shift entrenched power relations. The evaluation concludes that area-based, multi-pillar programming remains a powerful approach in fragile and conflict-affected settings, but its effectiveness depends on realistic objectives, structured exit strategies, and stronger linkages to domestic institutions and revenue systems.

Conclusions

1. Adaptive Success, Structural Fragility – The ABP demonstrated strong adaptive capacity and learning from Phase 1, tailoring its interventions to local conflict dynamics and achieving visible peace dividends. However, these successes remain precarious, dependent on external logistics, short-term funding, and the continued presence of UN and INGO partners. Without local institutional ownership or sustained financing, the stability achieved risks reversal.
2. Overambitious Vision vs. Contextual Constraints – The program's theory of change sought to move from conflict prevention to peacebuilding and reconciliation within a two-year period—an ambition that far exceeded what was feasible given weak governance, ongoing insecurity, and limited fiscal space. The vision was aspirational but insufficiently grounded in the structural realities of Jonglei and GPAA.
3. Improved Integration, Persistent Fragmentation – Phase 2 achieved important improvements in coherence through co-location and joint planning. Yet coordination

still faltered in practice due to parallel reporting lines, personnel turnover, and the bureaucratic rigidity of UN systems. The Area Reference Groups, intended as flagship coordination mechanisms, were underutilized and gradually lost their convening role.

4. Pragmatic Gender Approach with Limited Transformative Impact – The ABP's gender approach was pragmatic, targeting armed youth as the primary drivers of violence while involving women through protection teams, literacy groups, and peace dialogues. This ensured inclusion and contextual realism but did not transform gender relations or decision-making structures, where men continued to dominate formal authority.
5. Sustainability as the Central Challenge – The most pressing challenge for the ABP lies in sustainability. Peace and governance structures such as the ICGS, PCRCs, and community patrols remain dependent on donor support. Government counterparts continue to claim resource constraints despite evidence of significant unspent or misallocated revenues at state level. Without government co-financing, clear institutional embedding, and gradual transition planning, the ABP's gains will be difficult to preserve.

Recommendations

1. Plan a Gradual, Structured Exit – Develop a clear, time-bound transition strategy that links ABP-supported peace structures to local government systems. Avoid abrupt withdrawal by maintaining light-touch technical mentoring and remote accompaniment for peace committees and ICGS. Early planning should include clear milestones for handover, budget lines, and communication protocols to sustain cross-corridor dialogue after partner exit.
2. Design a Successor Program Consolidated Around Conflict Corridors – Leverage the lessons and networks established under the ABP to develop a successor program focused on the key conflict and trade corridors connecting Jonglei and GPAA. Concentrating interventions along nodes such as Nanaam, Anyidi, and Wuno will preserve the cross-line relationships and practical trust built during the ABP.
3. Streamline the Consortium and Strengthen Strategic Coherence – Rationalize the number of implementing partners and designate one or two UN lead agencies supported by a limited number of specialized NGOs. Operate under a unified theory of change, shared branding, and harmonized monitoring and reporting systems to reduce duplication and transaction costs.
4. Deepen Government Ownership and Accountability – Move from consultative to co-implementing roles for government actors. Tie donor funding to concrete, verifiable government commitments – such as funding police deployments, maintaining mobile courts, or supporting peace centers. Strengthen fiscal transparency by tracking how state-generated revenues are allocated to public and peace-related functions.
5. Reinforce Integration Across RSR Pillars – Deliberately sequence and layer interventions across reconciliation, stabilization, and resilience pillars. Ensure livelihood, governance, and peacebuilding components reinforce one another rather than operate in parallel. The joint planning and adaptive review processes piloted in Phase 2 should be institutionalized in all future RSRTF programs.
6. Maintain Balanced, Conflict-Sensitive Targeting – Continue to prioritize armed youth engagement in hotspot areas while maintaining an equitable distribution of activities across Dinka, Nuer, and Murle communities. Ground all programming in continuous conflict analysis, participatory feedback mechanisms, and adaptive management to ensure responsiveness to emerging dynamics.

7. Invest in Local Logistics and Communication Capacity – Recognize that logistics are central to sustainability. Provide modest, performance-based logistical support—such as motorcycles, fuel stipends, or satellite communications—to enable community peace structures to meet and communicate. Build on existing infrastructure, including Starlink connectivity in Bichbich and Wuno, and explore community-managed income generation to offset operational costs.
8. Institutionalize Learning and Adaptive Management – Formalize periodic reflection and cross-learning processes between RSRTF sites. Capture lessons from adaptive management and integrate them into program design cycles. A shared evidence platform could help refine the area-based model and ensure knowledge transfer across contexts.
9. Adopt a Realistic Outlook – Recognize the RSRTF's core function as a short- to medium-term stabilization mechanism, not a vehicle for achieving outcomes that depend on sustained, long-term investments in conflict transformation and governance reform. Future programming should calibrate its ambitions accordingly – focusing on consolidating existing peace gains, strengthening the functionality of local institutions, and creating the enabling conditions for longer-term actors to engage. By aligning expectations with the RSRTF's mandate and timeframe, the Fund can ensure its resources are used strategically to bridge the gap between immediate stabilization and the gradual processes of institutional and societal transformation.

The RSRTF ABP in Jonglei and GPAA stands as a proof of concept for integrated, locally grounded peacebuilding in highly volatile contexts. Its achievements underscore what is possible through adaptive, area-based programming – but also what remains at risk without continuity, national ownership, and longer-term time horizons. The next phase must consolidate these gains by anchoring peace mechanisms within domestic institutions, ensuring fiscal responsibility, and sustaining local leadership long after external funding recedes.

Annex 1 - Theory of Change

Under the reconciliation pillar, key interventions include support to local peace structures, institutions and peace processes, peace messaging and awareness raising, abduction prevention and response, and rapid response to avert mobilization and the escalation of violence. These interventions will target youth, armed youth, chiefs, women, state and local government structures, leaders, including religious and spiritual leaders, youth who abduct, Women Protection Teams (WPTs), and Youth Protection Teams (YPTs). If ABP reconciliation interventions are implemented, then chiefs, state and local government structures, leaders including religious and spiritual leaders, and community-led mechanisms such as WPTs and YPTs will have the capacity to prevent and respond to communal violence, engage in peace processes, and reconcile differences, misunderstandings and unresolved conflicts. These interventions will also contribute to behavioral changes including local governance structures to strengthen ownership of the peace process by use of nonviolence conflict resolution mechanisms; willingness, and acceptance to support the tracing and re-integration of abductees; and local peace structures resort to peaceful means in community violence by using non-violent conflict resolution mechanisms.

Under the stabilization pillar, key interventions include support to formal justice and law enforcement institutions and informal justice mechanisms, and community-based security as well as capacity strengthening of community governance structures and women and youth for increased civic participation. These interventions will target actors in the formal justice chain that exists in targeted areas, inter-community governance structures, and informal justice mechanisms in project locations. If ABP stabilization interventions are implemented, then formal and informal justice actors will have the capacity to participate in the ongoing rule of law interventions, engage and participate in decision making platforms, and provide increased access to justice for the population using established frameworks and mechanisms. Increased capacity of formal and informal justice actors will contribute to behavioral changes such as increased implementation of judiciary services, accountability, respect for the limited mandate and jurisdiction of customary courts (in particular the limitation on adjudication of criminal cases); enhanced professionalism and mutual respect; increased coordination and communication on peace processes between formal and informal mechanisms, and between community representatives within mechanisms; existing informal and formal mechanisms and systems used to report and adjudicate intercommunal violence cases; and reduced carrying and visibility of guns.

Under the resilience pillar, key interventions include community assets creation, especially access roads, conflict hotspots, livelihood support, including alternative livelihoods for armed youth and women in conflict hotspots, informal learning opportunities for armed youth and cattle camp populations, and local capacity for resource management. These resilience interventions will primarily target armed youth, women, populations in cattle camps, and will be informed by the reconciliation and stabilization pillars. If resilience interventions are implemented, then communities will increase access to and utilization of community assets, thereby reducing physical marginalization; armed youth and women will have the capacity to engage in positive livelihood activities; they will effectively utilize acquired skills and knowledge; and their capacity in natural resource management will be enhanced. Increased capacity of target groups will contribute to behavioral changes such as increased productive capacity, increased agency and self-reliance, increased youth and women engagement in peace promotion, functional resource management structures, and increased peace dividends.

The reconciliation, stabilization and resilience interventions will be co-located, layered, sequenced and integrated to the greatest extent so that they contribute to capacity and behavioral changes which will result in the resolution of communal conflict. The ABP will promote the use of non-violent means for conflict resolution, trust between populations and communities in informal and formal mechanisms in targeted areas, participation of marginalized groups, and strengthened socio-economic resilience of targeted populations. These will collectively contribute to reduction of inter- and intra-communal violence in targeted areas contributing to improved safety and security in Jonglei and GPAA.