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Addressing Root Causes of Instability: Influence of Village Savings and Loans Associations on Social Cohesion in South Sudan

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Introduction

CARE Nederland, in an effort to learn more about the link between economic development and peacebuilding, commissioned a study to investigate **how men and women's participation in Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLAs)¹ affects social cohesion in South Sudan**. The study found that while VSLAs act primarily as an approach for reducing poverty and improving financial well-being, they have localised influence over reducing conflict and improving peacebuilding. Their influence is especially powerful for women and young men, who are able to shift their traditional community roles as a result of economic empowerment. These findings and more, along with targeted recommendations for practitioners and donors, are detailed below.

Background

Addressing Root Causes (ARC) Programme

Launched in 2016 by CARE Nederland with funding by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Addressing Root Causes of Conflict (ARC) programme in South Sudan seeks to build the resilience of 19 communities (payams) of diverse and sometimes conflicting ethnic groups in three counties of Jonglei state (Bor South, Duk, Twic East) and the Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA) to endure economic or conflict-induced shocks through peacebuilding and economic development.

A key lesson learnt to date from ARC's work in South Sudan has been the link between peacebuilding and local economic development. Linking local economic development and peacebuilding is the framework on which the theory of change for the ARC programme was built. VSLAs were introduced in the programme in order to assist women and men to save and invest money in launching (small) economic enterprises; the goal was to contribute to reduced conflict as a result of economic empowerment and social cohesion.² ARC established 170 VSLAs with more than 4,000 members at its peak.³ Due to flooding in 2020, members were displaced; as of April 2021, 96 VSLAs with 2,206 members remain functioning.⁴

Context in South Sudan

Decades of **conflict and instability** have plagued South Sudan, despite securing a Peace Agreement in 2005 and achieving independence in 2011. Since independence, periods of renewed conflict and violence erupted in 2013, 2016, and intensified localised communal violence in 2020; additional peace agreements have followed each of these periods. Agreements to stabilise and work toward peace at the national level that resulted in the formation of a transitional national government on 22 February 2020 have not sufficiently addressed the intra- and inter-communal conflicts, distrust, animosity, and power vacuums that remain at the local levels.

South Sudan is one of Africa's most diverse countries: **more than 60 major ethnic groups⁵, multiple religions, strong political divisions, and scores of internally or forcibly displaced persons as well as refugees** call it home. These divides, as well as the local power vacuum, have resulted in violence including revenge killings, sexual violence, abductions, cattle raids, and destruction and theft of property. The root causes of these tensions include lack of, uneven distribution of, and/or competition over resources (e.g., land, water); insufficient employment and economic opportunities (especially for youth); feelings of marginalisation (especially among minority groups); and a culture of gender inequality.⁶ The situation has worsened by the non-performance of South Sudan's economy, which has been facing inflation due to devaluation of the local currency and COVID-19 border closures that have halted trading of goods and placed restrictions on movement.

In **Jonglei state and GPAA** specifically, these tensions and challenges are grim. In 2020, violence and looting increased with a resurgence of armed groups; hundreds died, and thousands were displaced, abducted, and injured. Furthermore, in mid-2020, severe flooding wiped out 11,916 metric tonnes of cereal, 26,892 hectares of land, and affected 72% of livestock. VSLAs were severely affected: **43.5 percent of VSLAs became non-functional and nearly half of the VSLA members discontinued** or had to work to continue as individuals or in very small groups due to displacement.⁷

Methodology

Through document review and data collected from 120 VSLA members, 23 community leaders, and 8 CSO staff in four counties (Bor, Duk, Pibor, Twic East), the study sought to answer the question: **"How does men and**

¹ Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLAs) are self-managed savings groups of individual members from within a community who regularly meet to save their money in a safe space and access small loans or insurance.

² Social cohesion is defined by citizens collaborating with each other, having positive relationships, and experiencing trust within and beyond their communities. It fosters inclusiveness, trust, the willingness of citizens and communities to cooperate in mutually beneficial ways.

³ CARE Nederland. (2020). "ARC Programme Annual Report 2019."

⁴ CARE Nederland. (2021). "ARC VSLA Verification Report 2021"; CARE South Sudan. (2021). "CARE ARC VSLA, Peace Committees and Peace Clubs Verification Report 2021"; HDC. (2021). "HDC ARC VSLA, Peace Committees and Peace Clubs Verification Template 2021."

⁵ BBC News. (6 August 2018). "South Sudan country profile."

⁶ Lopidia, R. (2020). "Working Paper on Peacebuilding in South Sudan." CARE Nederland and CARE International in South Sudan.

⁷ CARE Nederland. (2021). "ARC VSLA Verification Report 2021."

women's participation in VSLAs affect social cohesion in the community?" The participants in the study were purposefully sampled to ensure representativeness of different genders, ages, positions in the community, and geographic locations. However, there are several key limitations for consideration:

- *Response bias:* Participants likely provided responses that were positively biased because of the study's affiliation with CARE, which respondents associated with a source of income.
- *Sample bias:* The participants were all selected through CARE and HDC (ARC partners), so were likely more informed about and/or engaged in the elements of focus in this study.
- *Enumerator experience:* The enumerators responsible for data collection were programme staff, not researchers, which impacted the quality of the KIIs. Enumerators did not deeply probe the respondents.

However, this study expands the limited body of knowledge on how VSLAs can influence individuals and communities beyond economic outcomes, and how economic empowerment can be leveraged in peacebuilding.

Key Findings

ARC experience and other research demonstrates that **VSLAs have a positive influence on social cohesion in communities**. Indeed, the mid-term review for ARC (2019) found that 74% of survey respondents felt that there was a reduction in intra-societal conflicts as a result of women and youth engaging in income-generating activities (IGAs) and micro-enterprises and the creation of market linkages with traders across different ethnic communities.⁸ In this study, 87% of community leaders felt that their **communities had changed since the emergence of VSLAs**. They felt that the standard of living had improved and there are more profit-making businesses. VSLA members said they are able to better provide for their families (e.g., pay school fees, medical

"VSLAs might have the potential to help with peacebuilding in the future. This is because the activities have created sense of financial independence, a mechanism in the society that makes people's voices to be recognised and respected, it has managed to bring people from different backgrounds to operate jointly, something that used to be impossible."

- County RRC in Twic East

bills), which reduces the need for people to turn to violence to provide for their households. Only in Pibor did some respondents feel that the community had not changed. This is because Pibor experienced significantly intensified inter-communal fighting, severe flooding that led to displacements, and the negative perception of the community members towards business activities. ARC staff explained that men prefer to save their money earned rather than make investments (whereas women are more interested but lack sufficient capital).

Across all groups and counties, participants in this study agreed that **VSLAs have already – or likely have the future potential to – support improved peace and reduce conflict between groups and communities**. Improving economic status and equity can contribute toward improved social cohesion and peace as groups are not forced into conflict out of economic necessity. Women in Duk were most cautious, though, saying that VSLAs may have indirect potential to contribute to peacebuilding, but their purpose is for eradicating poverty and they cannot bring peace alone. This is likely because Duk is the most conflict-affected and remote county, with the most limited access to market opportunities and peace building activities.

Economic incentive for trust and cooperation.

It is well-documented in literature that economic strife, and economic inequalities across divisions, are causes for fragility and conflict.⁹ Poor socio-economic conditions are the key reasons that distrust between groups forms, weakening social cohesion.¹⁰ **When inequality exists across peer groups – such as divisions within and between communities – conflict is more likely to develop.**¹¹ In contexts like South Sudan with a labour market that is poorly functioning, the VSLAs and resulting IGAs provide a minimum level of economic opportunity for members representing all demographics to utilise.¹²

ARC's VSLA members increasingly trust people from other tribes when engaging in economic activities. Study participants agreed that the **access to finance through VSLAs was the key reason that their communities had changed since VSLAs were introduced, followed by increased levels of trust due to VSLAs interactions**. In fact, 87% of community leaders and all INGO staff said people trust each other more because of VSLAs. In Pibor, however, people trust each other more only *within* the group, but are suspicious of those outside the group. This is likely due to strong cultural norms regarding age groups; people are assigned to age groups within which

⁸ Atem, D., Aluma, G. F., Ayiik, J. K., Andi, R. J. (2019). "Addressing Root Causes Project in South Sudan Mid Term Review Report." Innovation for Impact Solutions.

⁹ Spearing, M. (2016). "Addressing state fragility from the bottom up through inclusive community governance: Exploring theories of change." The Hague: CARE Nederland.

¹⁰ Laurence, J., Schmid, K., and Hewstone, M. (2019). "Ethnic diversity, ethnic threat, and social cohesion: (re)-evaluating the role of perceived out-group threat and prejudice in the relationship between community ethnic diversity and intra-community cohesion." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 45:3, 395-418, DOI: 10.1080/1369183X.2018.1490638.

¹¹ Hoffmann, A. Lange, P. (2016). "Growing or Coping? Evidence from small and medium sized enterprises in fragile settings." The Hague: Clingendael Research Institute.

¹² CARE Nederland. (2020). "ARC Programme Annual Report 2019."

must show solidarity and strong rivalry between groups remains. VSLA members self-select only within their age group, further reinforcing this segregation.

IGAs catalysed by VSLAs have become an impetus for engaging in external trade relationships, creating market linkages that members did not have the financing, connections, and/or capacity to initiate before with traders across different communities. Although most inter-community relationships have been between people of the same ethnic group, some evidence exists of connections between tribes (see Box 1).

Unfortunately, many of these improvements in inter-community market linkages were halted due to the floods and conflicts of late 2019-early 2020.¹³ This demonstrates the **possibility of VSLAs and resulting IGAs to enhance market linkages, but their reach is reliant upon stable conditions in the external environment** (see Box 2).

Resilience incentive for trust and cooperation.

VSLAs build bridges with people within and beyond their communities by acting in a shock-absorption capacity. VSLAs collectively manage a social fund. With this fund, members collectively decide how to support other members in need or even others in their community who need financial support. Between January-April 2021 alone, VSLA members in Bor South, Duk, and Twic East¹⁴ lent money 302 times for food, school fees, and medical bills. Members said that such actions have de-escalated tensions that might have increased conflict – especially at the household level for women – or involvement of vulnerable individuals in criminal activities – particularly for young men. However, the support a social fund can offer is limited. During the instances of severe conflict and natural disasters, nearly half of ARC’s VSLAs were forced to disband¹⁵ as members were displaced. Thus, the extent of social cohesion that VSLAs can support is limited by the extent of the disaster being experienced.¹⁶

2020 and early 2021 brought on a host of severe contextual challenges for VSLAs including intensified conflict and insecurity, severe flooding, and the COVID-19 pandemic. All of these challenges impacted VSLA operations in Jonglei and GPAA (see Box 2), however Twic East and Duk experienced the greatest impacts with 72% and 53% of VSLAs pausing functions as of April 2021. Despite challenges, VSLAs supported resilience of members, especially women. When many VSLAs were forced to disband due to displacement, the proportion of women (compared to men) in ARC VSLAs increased by 4.5 percentage points in early 2021. This demonstrates that **in extreme circumstances, women are more likely than men to retain their active VSLA engagement**. This may be due to the roles men had to play during such challenges that took them away from their VSLA membership, the stronger commitment of women to the VSLA, the reliance women have on the VSLA as a support network, or other reasons. More research is needed on this finding.

Box 1: Evidence of IGA Connections Built Between Communities Due to VSLAs

- buying fish from different groups in swampy areas and highlands and between Nuer and Dinka in Bor
- cattle trading between Murle and Dinka—including the establishment of a cattle trading market by youth—in Pibor
- mango selling between Mundari women and Dinka Bor women

Box 2: Contextual Impacts on VSLA Operations

Conflict and Insecurity

81% reported VSLA and business operation impacts (most in Duk: 94%) resulting in displacement and relocation of members, closure of businesses, restriction of movement, and diminishing capital to invest. Adaptations included:

- pausing or reducing NGO activities;
- operating with smaller memberships;
- identifying safer business opportunities closer to home;
- friends supporting each other more with IGAs.

Natural Disaster (Flooding)

73% reported VSLA and business operation impacts (most in Pibor: 86%) resulting in displacement and relocation of members, closure of trade routes, diminishing capital to invest, destruction of business/shops, farms and crops, and livestock. Adaptations included:

- operating with smaller memberships;
- focusing on restoring lost agriculture and livestock;
- displaced members engaging with VSLAs from a distance or forming smaller VSLAs in new location;
- establishing more diversified and resilient IGAs.

COVID-19 Pandemic

87% reported VSLA and business operation impacts (most in Duk: 100%) resulting in restriction against gathering and free movement, closure of social gathering spaces and markets. Adaptations included:

- pausing or reduction of VSLA meetings (from weekly to fortnightly);
- members sending in savings with others to minimise number of people gathered;
- practicing health guidelines such as social distancing, wearing of masks, hand washing/sanitising;
- increased use of social funds for medical support;
- producing masks to sell in the market.

¹³ CARE Nederland. (2020). “ARC Programme Annual Report 2019.”

¹⁴ Data from Pibor is not available.

¹⁵ VSLAs may be only temporarily non-functional during times of severe flooding as they may come back together when members move back to their communities. In fact, some non-functioning VSLAs retain active members that operate individually or in small groups with others who have also been displaced.

¹⁶ CARE & HDC. (2020). “Addressing Root Causes Programme Annual Plan 2021.”

Factors Related to VSLAs that Influence Social Cohesion Within and Between Communities

Characteristics of the community.

- **Involvement in Other Community Groups.** Three-quarters of respondents were members of other community groups beyond their VSLA. Women were most typically involved in other groups (94%) and girls were the least likely to be in another group (56%). Only a few young women in Twic East and women in Pibor said the VSLA influenced them to join other groups in order to expand their business. 25% said the other groups influenced them to join the VSLAs due to its perceived importance and to expand their businesses. Clearly, VSLAs are just one piece of a saturated ecosystem of community groups in Jonglei and GPAA, making the influence of VSLAs compared to other groups difficult to isolate. Likely, *the network of groups together contributes toward social cohesion rather than one group alone.*
- **Safe Spaces for Interaction.** Participants shared that they experience risks in their communities that limit social cohesion such as misunderstandings when interacting with people from groups or communities, especially at communal gatherings such as wrestling events or at communal spaces such as water points, that could lead to (deadly) fighting. When traveling between communities, people can be robbed (especially women and children), injured, or even killed according to many respondents. The risk of being robbed is higher when people are known to have money, so VSLA members may actually risk becoming a target when traveling if carrying more money. Because of these risks, *finding safe spaces for interaction is essential in improving social cohesion.* Participants found the church and the market as the two community locations with the most positive interactions. In the market, people are motivated by profit to interact peacefully with people from other communities. At the church, many said they were able to access important information about the community that influenced their business decisions. Other social spaces (e.g., wrestling matches, culture days, dances, etc.) are also widely agreed by respondents as places for positive interaction between people from different tribes and communities. They also provide spaces for VSLA members to network and promote their IGAs.
- **Shifts toward “Town Life”.** Across all demographics, the biggest change reported has been a switch to “town life”. *More and more people are moving into towns over villages, which leads to more education and formal employment for all genders and ages.* As a result of education, men are diversifying their IGAs, including taking up jobs with NGOs. Young men are choosing education and employment and doing more communal cattle raising and other businesses, although some young men perceive this to be disrespectful or a sign of them abandoning their parents. Women are becoming more independent with more freedom of expression due to their increased financial status. They are spreading more peace messages, taking more initiative, and forming stronger groups with other women.
- **Support from Influential Leaders.** *When powerholders such as traditional leaders call for the increased participation of citizens – especially women and youth – in economic activities, the interest in joining VSLAs is boosted.* In many cases, traditional leaders in ARC payams have even joined the VSLAs themselves.¹⁷ Of the community leaders in the study, 33% were VSLA members (spread across all counties and leader types). Of those in a VSLA, they are overwhelmingly grateful for its positive financial impacts on their personal lives, but none expressed that their membership supported them in their role as a community leader to further social cohesion. Thus, leaders play a role in influencing the community to join VSLAs to improve economic well-being, but are not yet viewing them as a tool for social cohesion.

VSLA group structure and rules.

- **Formal and Informal Rules.** By design, members come together regularly – typically weekly – giving them ample opportunity to understand their common needs and goals and build group cohesion even amongst diverse members.¹⁸ Also, VSLAs have rules and regulations and also when building connections;

“The emergence of VSLAs [through ARC] made people to initiate borrowing of money between different communities, unlike before. This has happened because the VSLA activities managed to first build trust and unity between group members, then later introduced group income generating activities like group farming, exchange program, which paved way for improved peace, as people look at themselves as VSLA members rather than being identified based on the community where one comes from.”
- Traditional leader in Twic East

members must avoid conflict otherwise they risk expulsion from the group. This creates an incentive for members to maintain peace.

- **Shared (Economic) Goals.** When asked about plans and goals for their VSLAs, members were clear about what they wanted to do together. In this study, *all groups described economic goals*, and many were focused on group IGAs (e.g., group cultivation of vegetable farms). However, no members brought up any initiatives that were related to social cohesion.

- **Selection of Members.** Groups are comprised of members that are selected by the other members of the group. *Due to the selection process itself, there is a high level of trust inherent in the group composition.*¹⁹ Building high intra-group cohesion is one strength of the VSLA model. However, this may also contribute to homogeneity of the group. ARC VSLA participants overwhelmingly

¹⁷ CARE Nederland. (2020). “ARC Programme Annual Report 2019.”

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ CARE International. (2015). “Our small peace cannot survive alone - Lessons in peacebuilding and economic development in South Sudan.”

join VSLAs due to influence by their friends. On average, 61% of people (primarily in Duk and Twic East) said that it is not hard to become a member. However, everyone in Bor and Pibor said that it was hard to join primarily because people did not have the sufficient start-up capital required to become a member. Beyond formal entry requirements, members in all counties except for Duk describe some *informal rules* that prevent or support community members' from joining VSLAs. Things such as alcoholism, known history of violence, history of theft, and history of financial troubles prevent people from becoming members. In other words, existing VSLA members needed to trust the applicants before they were admitted as new members. While this is likely beneficial for cohesion within the group, it may pose a risk of deepening already existing divides within the community.

- **Demographics of Groups.** Participants in the study share many similarities such as being a similar age (average age of 28 for young women and men and 43-46 for men and women), having no education (45%) or some primary education only (29%), and being income-earners (71%). Most (68%) have moved in their lives, with many internally displaced or refugees. However, these varied by gender and age: most women had no education (87%) whereas most girls (64%) and many men (38%) had primary education, most men and girls (both 76%) had income whereas boys were less likely (62%). *Most ARC VSLA members felt they were very similar with similar views and beliefs.* The only groups that noted differences amongst members were those who said their VSLA had members who spoke different languages at home (except young men in Bor who also recognised some differences in the ways members viewed their personal contributions and actions).²⁰ Also, in the ARC programme, nearly three-quarters of the VSLAs were mixed gender groups. Mixed gender VSLAs have been found to be advantageous to women's empowerment and shifting norms between men and women,²¹ including related to peacebuilding.
- **Trainings.** *Studies have shown that when VSLA members receive training and capacity development, they tend to view women's empowerment more favorably and become more involved in their communities.*²² ²³ For example, when a CARE programme in Sudan introduced peacebuilding trainings prior to launching VSLAs, forming the VSLAs across divisions (e.g., religious, ethnic, etc.) became possible when it was not possible before. The VSLAs became a way to open up dialogue between groups such as farmers and pastoralists and restore relationships.²⁴ Most commonly, ARC study participants in all counties mentioned receiving trainings on business skills, such as how to choose the type of business to start and financial management. Also, most (except for those in Pibor) said that they engaged in capacity building related to leadership and decision-making skills. Fewer – young men and women in Twic East and young men in Pibor – said they participated in trainings related to peacebuilding.

"I attended trainings on Peaceful Conflict Resolution, Human Rights and community dialogue, which made me personally intervene in resolving conflicts and disputes. [...] Things could have been bad with me; I could have been a causer of conflict in the community. But today, I am a peace maker because of the experience I gained as VSLA member."
- Female VSLA member in Pibor

Building trust and friendship.

- **Changed Negative Perceptions.** Community members coming together into a group of people with common goals enables members who previously did not interact to develop trust and understanding. Research has found that members of savings groups experience "greater friendships, trust, and solidarity, more involvement in community life and higher self-esteem."²⁵ ARC VSLA members said that *increased interaction in group activities and engagement in IGAs have minimised (or removed) negative perceptions of people*, thus, allowing people to welcome others from different genders, communities or tribes. VSLAs – and the resulting increased interaction in meetings and in IGAs – changed the old mindset that was based on discrimination and tribalism.
- **Increased Cross-Community Interactions.** Through ARC activities (including but not limited to VSLA), the amount of people who reported having personal interactions with members of another tribe grew from 48% at baseline to 80% at mid-term.²⁶ In this study, *most VSLA members (88%) said that their personal interaction has increased with people from other communities.* This was true across all communities, however, it ranged from 100% of VSLA members in Pibor and Twic East to just 67% in Duk. The increase was sharpest for young women (94%), young men (93%), and women (92%). Men did not experience as drastic of an increase likely because they were already engaging with others outside of their community

²⁰ Almost all groups said members spoke the same home language except those in Duk (Nuer and Dinka), men in Twic East (Dinka, Arabic and Nuer), women in Bor (Dinka, Bari, Arabic), and young women in Bor (Dinka, Moro, Anyuak, Arabic).

²¹ Whipkey, K. and Kakal, F. (2021). "Beyond Economic Empowerment: The Influence of Savings Groups on Women's Public Participation." The Hague: CARE Nederland.

²² *ibid.*

²³ Chivasa, N. (2018). "Village Savings and Loan Associations Schemes: Contributions to Peace." Southern African Journal of Social Work and Social Development, 24:15-5829, 2646. DOI: 30.20.10.25159.

²⁴ Whipkey, K. (2021). "Beyond Economic Empowerment: The Influence of Savings Groups on Women's Public Participation. The Case of Sudan." The Hague: CARE Nederland.

²⁵ Jahns-Harms, E. (2017). "Coping with Shocks: The Role of Savings Groups in Rural El Salvador Working Paper."

²⁶ Atem, D., Alumai, G. F., Ayiik, J. K., Andi, R. J. (2019). "Addressing Root Causes Project in South Sudan Mid Term Review Report." Innovation for Impact Solutions.

due to their roles prescribed by cultural and gender norms. Increased business activity for women, young women, and young men gave them more opportunity for interaction at places like markets across all communities than they had before. Also, women said there has been a reduction in violence in communities, thanks in part to trust built through the VSLA, so they can interact more safely with others.

- **IGAs Supporting Greater Trust.** Across all ARC participants, just 48% of respondents reported having personal interactions with members of another tribe at *baseline*, but 69% of those surveyed believed that talking with others increases trust. Although the number increased to 80% of respondents having had personal interactions with members of another tribe at *mid-term*, those who felt that people from other ethnic groups could be trusted was just 70% and fewer (69%) reported increased trust between communities.²⁷ In brief, although increased interaction was reported, the level of trust had not changed. This suggests that *many more factors are in play in South Sudan than exposure that affect trust*. In this study, however, all VSLA members agreed that the increase in cross-community interactions have been primarily positive for them. They said that IGAs have led to an increase in business activities, resulting in more income. Many VSLA business activities are done as a group within the community such as group farming, improving intra-community cohesion. Some have even crossed communities such as fishing groups and cattle rearing. The IGAs have made VSLA members feel increased respect and trust for each other and more unity. Therefore, compared to the mid-term study of ARC participants, which included non-VSLA members, it appears as if **VSLA membership – and/or the associated IGAs – likely favourably impact trust-building and positive interactions with others from outside tribes and communities.**

VSLAs and Resulting IGAs Enable Women to Build Bridges with Other Communities

As a result of their membership in a VSLA, women in ARC and other programmes have reported increased confidence.^{28 29} They gained the needed tools and skills to be able to participate in economic opportunities and their communities with the self-confidence needed. This has led to shifts in social norms, where **women are stepping up and becoming more appreciated for their contributions to their households and communities.** In this study, respondents overwhelmingly viewed women as being capable of initiating and managing business endeavours. Of VSLA members, only men in Twic East and young women in Duk said that the gender of a person

“The VSLA groups were able to improve the relationship among women. They have brought them together from different communities; those who once had conflict and, today, they have become sisters sitting side-by-side.”
– Female VSLA member in Pibor

would matter to them when deciding whether or not to go into business with them. Some community leaders in Twic East and Bor said they would not take an idea from a woman because women do not have the “right” ideas.

Interesting, **although respondents strongly felt that IGA activities were different for men and women, oftentimes both genders mentioned similar activities** such as tailoring, farming, and selling retail and grocery items (all ages and genders), making small loans out to others (men, girls, and women), animal trading (girls and boys), and cutting trees and grass (girls, women, and men). Despite mentioning engagement in similar IGAs through the VSLA, participants overwhelmingly felt that women’s activities are “light” (e.g., tailoring, tea selling, etc.) whereas men’s activities include heavier work and work that requires them to travel longer distances (e.g., cattle trading, fishing). The disconnect between what respondents perceive to be activities specific to certain genders compared to the actual IGAs in which they report engaging demonstrates the **strong gender social norms embedded within the culture that result in perceptions that may differ from reality.** Many studies suggest that although gender roles may have become more flexible to support women’s economic engagement, women’s burdens increase as they continue their traditional roles while simultaneously taking on economic roles.³⁰

Economic empowerment provided through VSLAs has supported women to take a more prominent role in their households, which impacts their communities. A short-term and tangible impact is that they are better able to provide food for their families, thus reducing hunger, which is one of the causes of conflict. Also, they are sending children to school leading to limited exposure to criminal activities, and they are able to teach their children to get less involved in activities like cattle raiding due to VSLAs. Many people in all communities (except for Bor) said that domestic violence has reduced for women. The income women are able to make through IGAs enables them to financially sustain their families. As a result, they have taken some of the stressors away from their husbands, leading to less domestic violence.

In all communities, most respondents said that **women have a role to play in peacebuilding.** This includes calling for peace meetings, acting as peace ambassadors, sharing peace ideas with other women in neighboring

²⁷ Atem, D., Alumai, G. F., Ayiik, J. K., Andi, R. J. (2019). “Addressing Root Causes Project in South Sudan Mid Term Review Report.” Innovation for Impact Solutions.

²⁸ CARE Nederland. (2020). “ARC Programme Annual Report 2019.”

²⁹ Whipkey, K. and Kakal, F. (2021). “Beyond Economic Empowerment: The Influence of Savings Groups on Women’s Public Participation.” The Hague: CARE Nederland.

³⁰ CARE International. (2015). “Our small peace cannot survive alone - Lessons in peacebuilding and economic development in South Sudan.”

communities, settling disputes, and more. Women's role in peacebuilding is still *primarily* amongst other women, though; women are responsible for settling disputes amongst themselves, including making decisions about punishments for wrong-doers. Others felt they had more indirect roles such as engaging in business activities, forming community groups, and cooking for the community. Participants felt that these roles for women have been changing as women become more (financially) independent with more freedom of expression. They are spreading more peace messages, taking more initiative, and forming stronger groups with other women. VSLAs have played a role by inspiring greater confidence and contributing toward increased respect as women prove themselves as successful income-earners, entrepreneurs, mobilisers, and leaders.

Most respondents across all counties (except for Duk) felt that **women are better agents of peace** than men primarily due to their propensity to create stronger and more peaceful relationships. Women are forming friendships through business activities; for example, the Dinka and Murle women are interacting peacefully in Pibor market thanks to trade activities across communities. Women who have been trained in leadership and management skills have become outspoken in the community, are taking the lead in preaching peace, taking up local leadership positions, and bridging the gaps between communities.

The findings from this study support prior research that **economic empowerment triggers improved status in communities**. The improved status, particularly for women, has led to cases of increased involvement in community decision-making including within community-based conflict resolution mechanisms.³¹ Women's involvement in VSLAs demonstrates that they can play roles as social actors beyond their role in the domestic sphere, and their voices are better positioned to be heard and their concerns addressed, which contributes positively to intracommunity cohesion.³² Having income on-hand has given them more influence over projects within and beyond their community. For instance, respondents said that VSLA women had financially contributed to dyke construction, school rehabilitation, and church services.

However, some were more cautious about women's increased role in peacebuilding. They felt that **regardless of women's economic status, they have no influence in peace building and social cohesion because the community looks at them as second class citizens**. In Pibor, for example, women are not involved in conflict resolution between communities as men are the ones to decide whether to fight or not, with which community, and when; in fact, women are instructed to be relocated when conflict is emerging.



Akur Ghak Awol, third-year VSLA member in Bor county

Akur Ghak Awol was born in Sudan while her parents were in exile as refugees. Later in life, she was able to repatriate home to South Sudan and settle happily in Bor. For the past three years, she has been a VSLA member and, as a result of a VSLA loan, has been able to open a tailoring shop and purchase material and other items to sell. Her tailoring business has even brought loyal customers in from other communities to make special orders for their families and friends.

"Through the VSLA meetings, women from different communities who once had conflict and could not sit together are now meeting together in the same group." Dialogues about conflict mediation and gender-based violence prevention have been especially meaningful, as they have created a sense of unity amongst women across payams and tribes. Moments of tension still arise occasionally, though. However, now the members are more prepared to mitigate the conflict. Akur was able to directly intervene and bring peace between two women in the group using her skills garnered through training on community dialogue.

Influence of Young Men's Involvement in VSLA Groups (in Cattle Camps) on Social Cohesion

For youth, improving their economic well-being has been found to be an enabling factor of peace and reducing conflict. Youth engagement in VSLAs and IGAs reduces the likelihood that they become engaged in violence.³³ Youth, particularly young men, have found significant benefits as a result of economic opportunities garnered through ARC's VSLAs. Many young men in Jonglei and GPAA have stated that they want to become more involved in peace processes because it is better for their economic opportunities.³⁴

Study participants confirmed the central role that young men play in conflict and peace. They explained that young men set the rules for the youth in the communities, hold peace talks amongst themselves, and engage in social activities between communities together. They are also responsible for defending the community from

³¹ Whipkey, K. and Kakal, F. (2021). "Beyond Economic Empowerment: The Influence of Savings Groups on Women's Public Participation." The Hague: CARE Nederland.

³² Spearing, M. (2016). "Addressing state fragility from the bottom up through inclusive community governance: Exploring theories of change." The Hague: CARE Nederland.

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ CARE & HDC. (2020). "Addressing Root Causes Programme Annual Plan 2021."

external aggression. However, these roles for **young men are beginning to see signs of change largely due to education and diversification of IGAs**. The young men are choosing to study and go into business with peers, especially selling airtime and operating boda-bodas,³⁵ rather than stay home with parents. In Pibor and Duk, leaders said young men are turning to cattle trading instead of cattle raiding. In Duk, men and young men said that the engagement of youth in cattle camps through VSLAs has the greatest potential to contribute toward reduced conflict; youth are traditionally the primary agents of violence, and the VSLA provides them with alternative activities and could give them another important role in the community.



Garang Duon Mabior, fourth-year VSLA member in Twic East county

For four years, Garang Duon Mabior has been a VSLA member in Twic East county. As a result of VSLA membership, he has expanded on his business of cattle rearing and now also sells fresh milk.

Garang sees VSLAs as a means for social cohesion for three main reasons. First, VSLA members come from different communities, creating a meaningful social bond. Secondly, as the main cause of conflict in his community is poverty, being a member of a VSLA has improved the financial well-being of members and minimised cause for conflict. Finally, youth have been empowered through trainings on skills such as carpentry and joinery. By putting these new skills to work, young people are now more concentrated on improving their lives than starting conflict.

He shared one specific example of how the VSLAs have mitigated conflict across neighboring communities: "In one of the dry seasons, cattle keepers (including VSLA members) went with their animals to the river side where there was water. Upon arrival, a disagreement arose about where cattle keepers were to be stationed for that season and which community could graze from the raised land, either Duk or Twic East. They started mobilising to fight; the winner would take the raised land and the loser would remain in the lowland. Due to the conflict management and peace building skills attained, I was able to hold an immediate meeting with the heads of the cattle camp in order to normalise the situation before it turned bloody, as people had guns. A peaceful resolution was reached to allow the cattle keepers use the land jointly, and any problem that will occur to be reported immediately to the heads of the cattle camp."

Conclusions

This study sought to answer if and how participation in VSLAs affects social cohesion. Based on the findings, it is clear that **VSLAs do have an influence on social cohesion through a variety of different ways; however, the extent of their influence is predominantly indirect, localised, and affected by other factors**. VSLAs are a positive force for improving social cohesion for two main reasons: first, strengthening personal agency and one's role in the community and second, reducing the impetus for conflict by improving economic status.

Strengthened personal agency has been especially important for women. Women have gained the tools and skills to be able to participate in economic opportunities and their communities with the self-confidence needed to trigger shifts in social norms. They are becoming more appreciated for their contributions to their households and communities. In particular, they are able to better provide for their families, pay school fees, and pay medical bills, which reduces the need for people to turn to violence to provide for their households. **For young men, VSLAs have given them a new outlet for having an important role in the community outside of being leaders during conflict.** By improving their economic opportunities and well-being, young men are experiencing a shift in their roles from conflict leaders to peace brokers. VSLAs have given them opportunities to become entrepreneurs and focus on their education.

VSLAs are a mechanism for improving economic activity, which has led to increased interaction between people both within the community and outside in IGAs and markets. **Improving economic status and equity has contributed toward improved social cohesion and peace as community members are not forced into conflict out of economic necessity.** IGAs catalysed by VSLAs are an impetus for engaging in external trade relationships, which has made members feel increased respect and trust for each other and more unity. The increased interaction due to IGAs has minimised (or removed) negative perceptions of people, thus allowing people to welcome others from different genders, communities or tribes.

However, **VSLAs do not seem to reduce conflict or improve peacebuilding in a silo: they must work in tandem with other approaches and be aligned with contextual factors.** When some members face hardship (e.g., family death, destruction of a small area of farmland, etc.), then the VSLAs can build overall resilience in the community. But, VSLAs cannot operate as the only resilient force when the whole community suffers from the devastation of a crisis, such as a flood. Also, incorporating peacebuilding trainings, identifying shared IGAs with

³⁵ Boda-bodas are motorcycles or bicycle taxis common in Africa.



Alim Diing Dau, woman leader and VSLA member in Twic East county

Alim Diing Dau has been a woman leader in her home community in Twic East for 15 years. Alim is a natural leader: she chooses to stay when challenges arise such as natural disasters. She mobilises women during these times in order to come up with lasting solutions and prepare the community for the next time the challenge might arise.

She joined a VSLA in order to further exercise her leadership skills and learn the financial management skills needed in order for her to start her own business and earn income. She believes that being in a VSLA has helped greatly in her role as a community leader because leadership in her community goes hand-in-hand with ownership of resources. Through the VSLA, not only has she been able to take loans for income generating activities, she has also been able to utilise the social fund from the group to hold meetings with women and youth community members. These meetings have enabled her to disseminate peace messages and activate her community to perform tasks together like dyke construction. Also, the skills she learned through the VSLA gave her new tools for peaceful conflict resolution during times of communal clashes, which she believes has earned her more respect.

which to engage, finding safe spaces for interaction, and having complementary activities with other community groups are some examples of factors that influence social cohesion outcomes outside of the VSLA membership.

While VSLAs do help bring together people from different backgrounds, members are still very similar.

This is due to the structure of VSLAs and how members are selected. Further, VSLAs still operate predominantly within their own communities (e.g., ethnic, geographic, age). Few instances of VSLAs merging different communities has occurred, so the potential of VSLAs themselves to reach people from different groups remains limited. The IGAs that result from VSLAs have had a larger influence over people from different tribes and communities meeting out of the necessity to sell and trade goods and livestock in markets or across communities.

Finally, VSLAs remain primarily an approach for reducing poverty and improving financial well-being.

While some members see the potential of VSLAs to reduce conflict and improve peacebuilding, they are focused on the savings and loan aspect of VSLAs almost exclusively. They recognise that VSLAs may reduce conflict indirectly because of the necessity of peace and stability in order to conduct business operations. Despite evidence that VSLAs may influence other types of outcomes such as peacebuilding or shifts in gender norms, *we must not lose sight of what they do best: improve the financial well-being of their members.* This

economic 'uplift' was the primary driver of both participation and positive outcomes according to participants, so, without that driver, the other secondary affects likely would not exist.

Recommendations

Donors

- **Invest in longitudinal research.** One of the key limitations of this study is the minimal level of longitudinal data to analyse. While monitoring data tracks specific variables over time, its rigour and consistency – and its ability to inform research questions – is limited. Building in funding from the programme start to annually gather qualitative data to better contextualise the quantitative monitoring data would be one useful contribution toward answering future research questions.
- **Advocate for institutionalised support for VSLAs.** Many countries have institutionalised the VSLA approach in their national economic and/or sustainable development plans. This gives members legitimacy and formalises their right to independent financial assets and participation in decision-making. By registering with the Directorate of Cooperatives and Rural Development, VSLA members can access formal financial services (e.g., bank loans) and public support programmes. As the fees and process for registration may be prohibitive for some VSLAs, advocate for a simplified registration process and a fee waiver in regions experiencing crises and/or high poverty, and in payams where VSLAs are newer.
- **Advocate for improved implementation of the National Gender Policy.** While South Sudan's National Gender Policy (and the Bill of Rights) recognises women's rights such as equality with men, right to equal pay, and equal participation in public life, the implementation of the policy is lacking. Advocating for stronger implementation, which will give more women more access to economic opportunity and influence in peacebuilding, will support greater stability.
- **Advocate for policies that promote education and financial opportunity.** Roles are positively changing for women and young people, primarily due to increased education and access to diversified economic opportunities. Advocating to enact policies that improve access to education and finance would improve the overall economic health of the country and positively impact stability and prosperity. Research shows that when policies that improve access to educational opportunities and finance for women are introduced, improved equality and economic growth often follows.³⁶ As South Sudan plans on a second constitutional review, it is an opportune time to ensure its inclusivity.

³⁶ Hakura, D. et. al. (2016). "Inequality, Gender Gaps and Economic Growth: Comparative Evidence for Sub-Saharan Africa." IMF Working Paper.

Practitioners

- **Establish VSLA cooperative associations.** When VSLAs from different communities join together in an association, not only do they have the opportunity to meet more regularly with people from diverse backgrounds in a safe environment with shared goals, but it also strengthens the economic power of VSLA members. Identifying and supporting the groups that are already connected through market linkages and trade routes to form cooperatives together could be an effective and efficient first step as they already have mutual interests and have built trust.
- **Incorporate trainings on peacebuilding and community participation.** Few ARC VSLA members acknowledged receiving trainings on peacebuilding through their VSLA. However, research has shown that such training positively influences peacebuilding outcomes in the community. Therefore, engaging members in peacebuilding trainings may improve social cohesion. Alternatively, as most ARC VSLA members are also in peace clubs or committees, building a stronger link between these community groups may sufficiently support improved outcomes and maintain the primary purpose of VSLAs: economic empowerment.
- **Increase focus on young men (in) VSLAs and their potential for conflict reduction.** Young men play a significant role in conflict and peace in Jonglei. The investment must be two-fold: 1) incorporating conflict resolution and dialogue trainings into VSLA activities, and 2) sustainably supporting young men's IGAs (e.g., establishing market linkages, skills-building). Some young men suggested a greater investment is needed in the young men's VSLAs (cattle camps) in order for them to realise their full potential.
- **Increase support to women and young women and build in social norms programming.** Study participants were certain that roles for women are changing rapidly in the community. However, social norms are still barriers to economic opportunities and the roles that women and youth can play in peacebuilding. Incorporating programming that is focused on social norms is essential for longer-term, sustainable change. As the study found disparities amongst women and men related to level of education, the gap in income-earning is closing between men and young women as they are increasingly educated compared to older women. Therefore, support could include capacity strengthening on things like literacy and community leadership, as well as the development and sustainability of their IGAs.
- **Solidify intra-community social cohesion.** Because Jonglei is geographically widely dispersed, improving cohesion across communities is challenging. Therefore, focusing on programming that strengthens intra-community cohesion will be most attainable and efficient. This may include activities such as establishing VSLAs that bring together more diverse members, introducing community activities and IGAs between tribes or age groups such as construction or communal gardens, or hosting culture days.
- **Build inter-community activities into planning.** Economic activities have been the key source of inter-community exchange, so building upon existing activities such as markets or cultural events would be most efficient. Making connections between buyers and sellers from different communities, supporting businesses to work together, and hosting learning exchanges while people are already meeting in shared locations could all be options for strengthening social cohesion across communities.
- **Identify and utilise safe spaces for interaction.** Community members typically identified churches and markets as the places where the most positive interaction occurs between people from other tribes and communities. Initiate interventions related to social cohesion in the spaces where community members already feel safe.
- **Train and/or identify skilled researchers.** The enumerators who were responsible for data collection were programme staff without adequate research training. Hiring qualified researchers from institutions or South Sudanese universities – or investing in capacity strengthening of staff or local groups on research methodology – will improve the quality of data gathered and subsequently strengthen the recommendations and learnings for programme implementation.



Mrs. Mary Oleyo Kuranga, fifth-year VSLA member in Pibor county

Mrs. Mary Oleyo Kuranga returned to her home in Pibor, South Sudan after living most of her life in Khartoum, Sudan where she had fled due to conflict and violence. She started a VSLA five years ago in order to support her children after the loss of her husband – her children were starving, and she wanted them to also be able to continue in schooling. Mary mobilised ten women in her community to establish a VSLA, and since that time, she has been able to build herself a tea making business.

Mary feels that VSLAs have been key in helping women overcome factors driving conflict and division. Before VSLAs, she felt that there was not any social cohesion, but with VSLAs, women started socialising and having dialogues together. This led to a better understanding of and compassion for each other. "VSLA groups have managed to unite us as one community. When one of us is sick, all of us contribute money for the treatment of that member," shares Mary. She explains that tools garnered through VSLAs such as conflict mitigation strategies and gender-based violence prevention methods have created strong unity among women from different villages, thus helping to reduce conflict in the community.