

Cattle raiders in South Sudan on what drives them and how peace can be achieved

PAX

Between pride and shame



Colophon

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Cover photo: A cattle camp in South Sudan.
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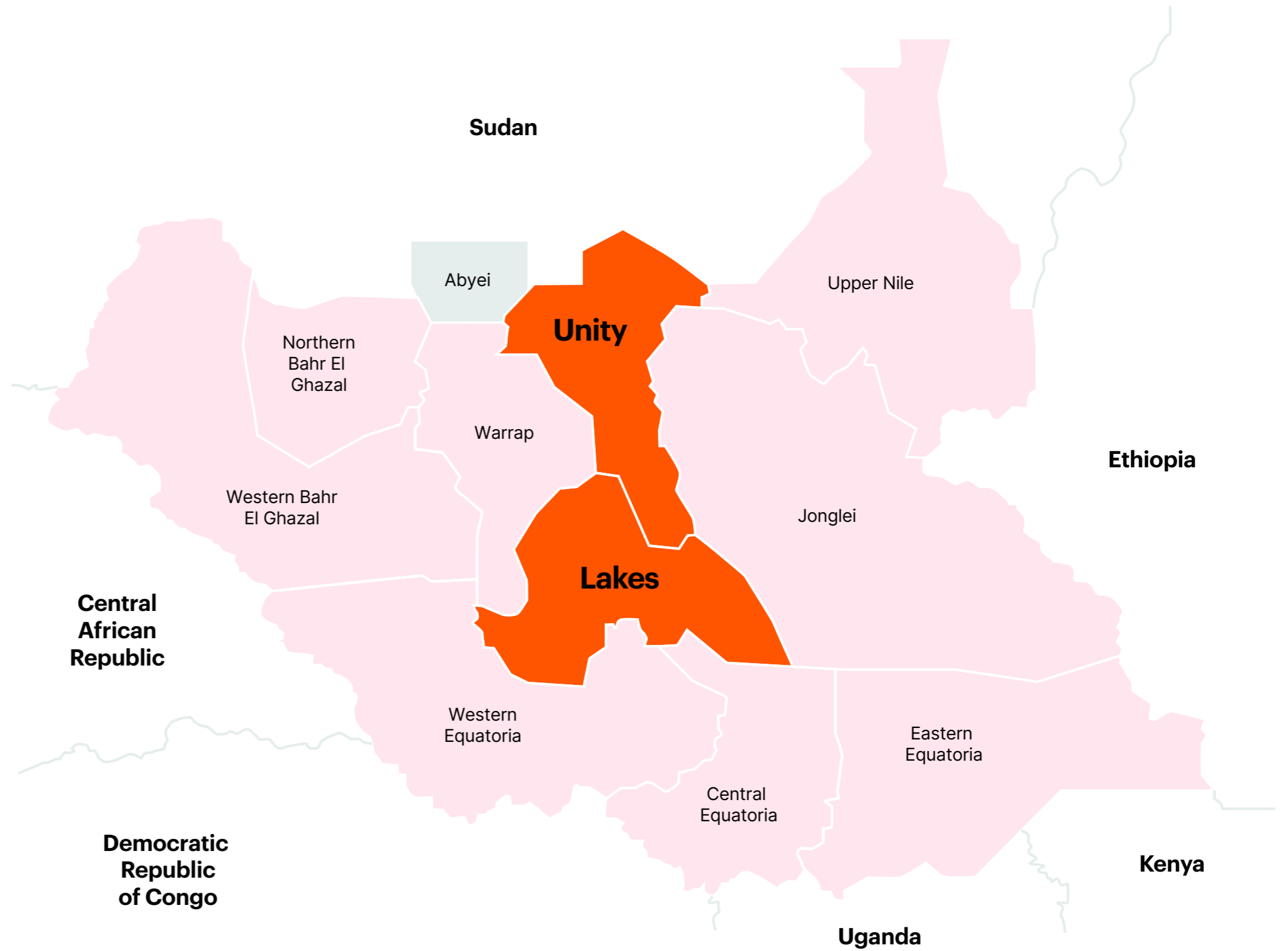
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List of acronyms

HSS	Human Security Survey
KII	Key informant interview
MHPSS	Mental health and psychosocial support
NGO	Non-governmental organization
RPG	Rocket-propelled grenade
SGBV	Sexual- and gender-based violence
SPLA-IO	Sudan People's Liberation Army in Opposition
SSPDF	South Sudan People's Defence Forces
UN	United Nations
UNMISS	United Nations Mission in South Sudan



▲ Figure 1 Map of South Sudan, highlighting Lakes and Unity States. ©Een Ander Bureau/PAX, 2026

1. Introduction

Cattle are the lifeblood of South Sudan. In the country's more rural areas, cows in particular serve as "the family bank account"¹ and are used for everything from providing basic nutrition to paying dowries and providing compensation for committed crimes. They also serve as large-scale capital reserves for the country's economic elite. Due to their importance, livestock are frequently the object of conflict. South Sudan has a long history of cattle raiding, where violence is used to steal cattle, often leaving casualties and property destruction in its wake. While in part a traditional practice, the violence and harm

associated with cattle raiding have escalated due to the wide availability of arms, which also raises the stakes for retaliatory raids and revenge killings. While its consequences are most visible at the individual and community levels, the practice also has a destabilizing impact nationally and undermines peacebuilding or peacekeeping efforts.

This research focuses on cattle raiding in the border area of Lakes and Unity States where raids have long contributed to, and are a part of, cross-border conflict. Multiple attempts have been made at local peace agreements,² but over the course of 2025 incidents of cattle raiding again grew in number, threatening to undermine hard-won yet fragile gains towards more security and stability. Perpetrators are typically the 'armed youth': young men who live in cattle camps where they look after their own and other people's

livestock. Championed as the protectors of community resources by some, they may be a large source of insecurity for others.

Yet, armed youth are rarely heard from or engaged with directly in local peace processes, and their voices are largely absent from non-governmental organization (NGO) and academic reporting on cattle raiding issues.³ This may reflect the hierarchical nature of much of South Sudanese society, where younger men's views are often considered as less valuable as those of their elders. It may also reflect access issues: Cattle camps are often located in remote, hard-to-reach areas. This makes it difficult for researchers and practitioners to reach them and, conversely, cattle camp inhabitants are often too poor or too vulnerable to attacks to hazard long travels to peace conferences or community dialogue sessions taking place in towns.

Given recent increases in cattle raiding and escalations in revenge killings in the border area between Lakes and Unity States, in November and December 2025, **PAX approached armed youth directly to learn more about their motivations to participate in cattle raids, their experiences with existing conflict resolution mechanisms, and their views on what is needed to lay down arms and achieve durable peace.** A total of 23 cattle keepers were interviewed for this research, 15 of whom have taken part in one or more cattle raids.⁴ This report relates the experiences of the armed youth: from descriptions of daily life in the cattle camps, to detailed reports of their participation in cattle raids and the impact of these raids' aftermath, to their views on what is needed to bring conflict and cattle raiding in their area to an end. The initial findings were subsequently verified through three data validation sessions, involving a total of 36 armed youth representatives, 35 armed youth leaders, 13 'spearmasters',⁵ three elders, and three local authority representatives.

By engaging with cattle keepers directly, it becomes easier to move beyond assumptions that either "exoticize"⁶ raiding practices or singularly place the blame with cattle camp youth because of their

perceived or assumed "natural propensity to violence",⁷ and instead expose a more comprehensive and nuanced picture of causes, contributing factors, and responsible parties. This may create more opportunities to address the grievances underlying such practices, which otherwise risk remaining a barrier to stability and peace. This explains why we have chosen to include many quotes throughout the report, so as to better foreground the experiences and views of the cattle keepers by relying more on their words than on our interpretation of them.

The report is structured as follows. Chapter 2 offers a more detailed description of the research methodology that was applied. Chapter 3, the executive summary, lays out the main research findings and recommendations. More background on cattle's socio-economic and cultural significance in South Sudan and the practice of cattle raiding is included in chapter 4, which also provides further details on (recently increasing) raids in Lakes and Unity States. Chapters 5 and 6 are largely based on interview data and provide descriptions of life in the cattle camps and experiences of cattle raids and their impact, respectively. Finally, chapter 7 outlines the views of the interviewed armed youth on existing and desired conflict resolution mechanisms.

1 Richard Chilvers, "Preventing cattle raiding violence in South Sudan," August 2016, Oxfam International, 4, <https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/617936/cs-cattle-raiding-south-sudan-040816-en.pdf?sequence=1>.

2 PAX has been engaging with local government officials and civil society representatives in the border area since 2016. Together with UNMISS and others, PAX has supported two peace conferences in 2018 and 2024. The first resulted in the signing of the Ganyiel peace agreement, about which PAX made the documentary 'Building our Peace: People to People Processes in South Sudan'. In 2024, local authorities requested another peace conference in Nyang to address rising intercommunal tensions, cattle raiding, and violence.

3 Notable exceptions are Peacebuilding Opportunities Fund, *What drives the cattle camps? Exploring the dynamics of pastoralist communities in western Lakes State, South Sudan*, May 2020, <https://www.csrf-southsudan.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/2020-06-What-drives-the-cattle-camps-Final-Report.pdf>; and John Ryle and Machot Amuom, "Peace is the Name of Our Cattle-Camp: Local responses to conflict in Eastern Lakes State, South Sudan," 2018, Rift Valley Institute, <https://archive.csrf-southsudan.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Peace-is-the-Name-of-Our-Cattle-Camp-by-John-Ryle-and-Machot-Amuom-RVI-SSCA-Project-2018.pdf>.

4 From our sample, 12 respondents admitted directly to participation; a further three respondents did not explicitly confirm this, but answers to other questions indicated they had, in fact, joined cattle raids on at least one occasion.

5 Spiritual leaders who, traditionally, play an important role in social governance and decision-making processes in cattle camps. See chapters 5 and 6 for further details on their roles and responsibilities.

6 Hannah Wild, Jok Madut Jok, and Ronak Patel, "The militarization of cattle raiding in South Sudan: How a traditional practice became a tool for political violence," *Journal of International Humanitarian Action* 3, no. 2 (2018): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41018-018-0030-y>.

7 Peacebuilding Opportunities Fund, *What drives the cattle camps?*, 6.

2. Methodology

The research for this report is largely based on key informant interviews (KIIs) with cattle keepers in Lakes and Unity States, which took place in November and December 2025. This is supplemented with insights from secondary literature – including United Nations (UN) and NGO reporting, academic literature, and media coverage – and with quantitative data from PAX’s Human Security Survey (HSS).

The key informant interviews

PAX hired two South Sudanese research consultants and two research assistants from Lakes State and Unity State. In November and December 2025, these teams travelled to 20 cattle camps in their respective states. They focused in particular on settlements in or near the border area where cattle movements, seasonal grazing, and cross-border interactions all frequently occur, and that have been identified by local stakeholders as hotspots for cattle-related conflicts. The visited cattle camps included large, permanent settlements, as well as smaller and semi-nomadic camps. Most camps were located in Payinjiar County in Unity State and Yirol East and Yirol West Counties in Lakes State (see figures 3 and 4 on p. 13). The visited camps belong to different factions in society: for instance, in Payinjiar County, the research consultant visited camps belonging to smaller clans or community sections within the larger Nuer group like the Luok and Thaak. Camps were further selected on the basis of input from local authorities and community leaders, and on their accessibility in terms of security and travel.

Linguistic and physical access was facilitated by selecting researchers who are themselves from the surveyed areas, which also helped in building trust with the interviewees. The consultants’ background was further helpful in the formulation of the interview questions and contextualizing these linguistically and culturally. Data collection was done in November and

December, on the cusp of the transition from the dry to the rainy season, when travel to remote camps is still possible. Large parts of Unity State especially become inaccessible in the rainy season due to flooding.

The research duos interviewed a total of 23 cattle keepers (ten from Lakes State, 13 from Unity State), using semi-structured questionnaires. The interviewees were between 19 and 50 years old, with the vast majority constituting so-called ‘armed youth’. Among them were five cattle camp leaders and 12 individuals who openly admitted to having participated in at least one cattle raid. A further three individuals answered ‘no’ when asked directly after participation, but answers to other interview questions indicated that they had, in fact, joined a raid on at least one occasion. The majority of professed raiders (11) were from Unity State.

These numbers are likely not an entirely accurate reflection of actual raiding balances between Lakes and Unity States. Based on observations from the research consultants and PAX field staff it appears that the implementation of harsh security measures in Lakes State, which can include the death penalty for those convicted of raiding (see also chapter 6), may have contributed to a greater reluctance among Lakes State-based interviewees – even on the basis of anonymity – to open up about such experiences. It was noticeable

that interviewees often referred to raiding in collective terms, thereby indirectly reporting on incidents and experiences. It is also important to note that there have been more (forced) disarmament campaigns in Lakes State, making these communities more vulnerable to cattle raiding from Unity State-based groups, where there have been fewer such state-led attempts.

Another factor that could explain higher cattle raiding occurrences in Unity State is geographical: The eastern part of Lakes State is situated at the edge of a fertile flood plain, on a slightly higher elevation than bordering Payinjiar County in Unity State. Payinjiar County, located next to the Nile, consists mostly of swamp areas, which flood extensively during the rainy season. This limits natural resources and opportunities for agriculture, making its inhabitants more reliant on cattle for their subsistence. The floods furthermore kill cattle every year, strain resources, contribute to displacement, force livelihood adaptations and – possibly, as a result – provide incentives for raids.⁸

Interviews were conducted on the basis of anonymity because of the sensitive nature of many of the topics that were discussed. The location of interviewees is made clear in the references, where respondents are mentioned by a letter-digit combination: the L stands for Lakes State, the U for Unity State. Preparation



▲ **Figure 2** Lead consultant Abraham interviewing a cattle keeper, whose face is blurred to ensure anonymity. ©Abraham Mou Magok, 2025

⁸ Peter Machieng Chan Gaduel, “Reviewing the climate-security nexus: The impacts of climate vulnerability on pastoralist conflicts in the Unity State region, South Sudan,” July 2022, University of London Queen Mary Global Policy Institute, <https://www.qmul.ac.uk/gpi/media/images/Policy-Report--Reviewing-the-Climate-Security-Nexus-FINAL.pdf>; “South Sudan’s climate-hit farmers find lifeline in healthier livestock,” UNDP, May 16, 2025, <https://www.adaptation-undp.org/south-sudans-climate-hit-farmers-find-lifeline-healthier-livestock>.

for interviews took place gradually, prioritizing the building of trust with cattle camp inhabitants. These communities are often cautious in interactions with outsiders, especially where it involves discussion of legally- or culturally sensitive issues like participation in cattle raiding or topics touching upon mental health or trauma.

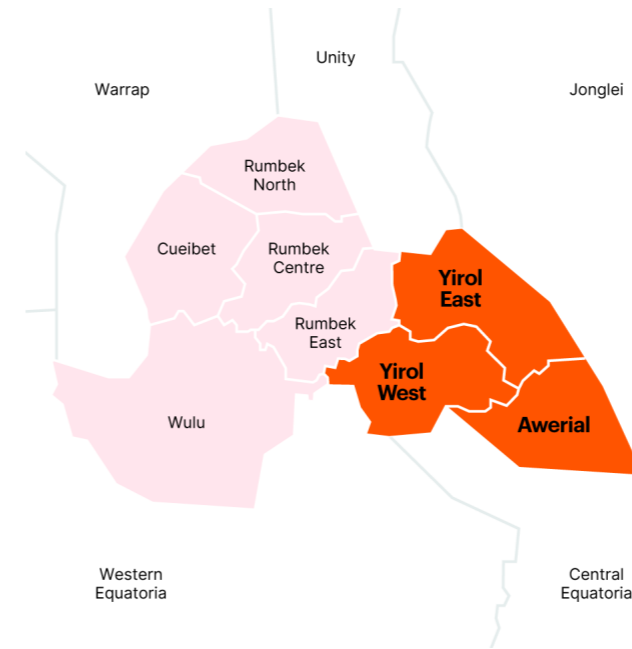
Our research consultants first approached cattle camp- and armed youth leaders to request their permission; once their approval was granted, the consultants went to speak with other cattle keepers, often identified by the leaders as being knowledgeable about the research topics. These, in turn, often recommended further people to speak to. Trust was gained through our consultants spending some time in the camps and having informal conversations before conducting the more formal interviews. These took place on a one-on-one basis so that respondents could speak openly and without the pressure or influence of their peers or seniors. Nonetheless, we cannot exclude the possibility that interviewees underreported on certain particularly sensitive issues, such as the violence used during raids, especially against women and children.

Between 30 March and 1 April, the research team in Unity State conducted three data validation sessions in Payinjiar County. In total, the validation sessions involved 36 armed youth representatives, 35 armed youth leaders, 13 ‘spearmasters’, three local authority representatives, and three elders. During these sessions, the main research findings were shared and checked with those present, as well as priorities discussed and identified for conflict resolution efforts. This served to validate this report’s contents, determine the best courses of action for PAX follow-up activities aimed at fostering peace, and creating more support for and ownership of conflict resolution proposals.

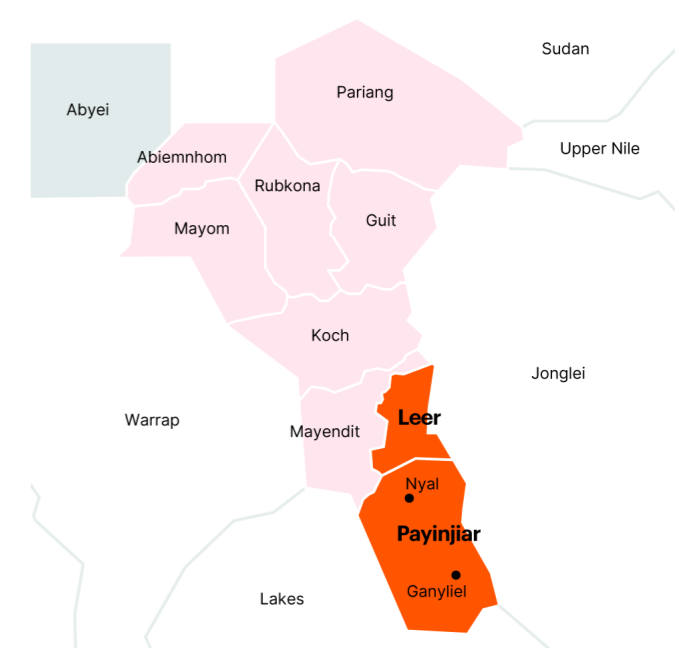
The Human Security Survey

Information from the KIIs and relevant secondary literature was supplemented with data from the HSS. This is a unique research and community engagement approach that PAX has implemented in South Sudan since 2016. It primarily consists of large-scale survey research on civilian experiences and perceptions regarding their security, which is followed up by local community engagement sessions and peacebuilding efforts. Additionally, the data is used to inform PAX’s national and international advocacy.⁹ Approximately every two years, local partners and consultants interview circa 500-600 civilians in targeted counties in each of the following five states: Jonglei, Unity, Lakes, Central Equatoria, and Eastern Equatoria.¹⁰ Data collection is done using random sampling techniques to build representative samples and reach generalizable findings. Relevant information from survey rounds between 2018-2025 in Lakes and Unity States locations – specifically where it pertains to data on cattle raiding incidents and perceptions of armed youth – was analyzed for this report, providing a broader, ‘big picture’ analysis based on a more diverse and comprehensive group of respondents. A selection of this HSS data is included in Annex A to this report.

In Lakes State, PAX conducts the HSS in the Greater Yirol area, consisting of Awerial, Yirol East, and Yirol West Counties. In Unity State, PAX currently conducts the HSS in Payinjiar and Leer Counties. Between 2018-2022, this was limited to Payinjiar County.



▲ **Figure 3** Survey locations in Lakes State.
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▲ **Figure 4** Survey locations in Unity State.
©Een Ander Bureau/PAX, 2026

Research limitations

Interviews were limited to armed youth and cattle keepers and did not include other stakeholders like local formal authorities, chiefs, or civilians who have been the victims of raids. This was a deliberate choice: Armed youth are important actors in contributing to both security – by protecting community resources – and insecurity – in threatening the resources of others and causing considerable civilian harm in doing so. Yet, they are rarely heard from or engaged directly in peacebuilding initiatives. In explicitly seeking out their perspectives, PAX hopes to provide a new angle to ongoing discussions about the role of armed youth in current cycles of violence, and to foreground their views on and needs for conflict resolution mechanisms. Nonetheless, in subsequent data validation sessions, we included a broader mix of participants, including male and female community elders, local authority representatives, and spiritual leaders in order to ensure that the research findings are also supported in terms of their experiences and views.

The sample of respondents for this research is small. Many cattle camps are located in remote, hard-to-reach areas, which require extensive and difficult travel. PAX sought to mitigate accessibility issues by planning the interviews during the dry season, but even then reaching certain camps could involve arduous journeys by boat or on foot across difficult terrain. As the research was also conducted in a period where

intercommunal conflict was on the increase again, this put additional restrictions on mobility, with travel having to occur during daylight hours. For example, our Unity State-based researchers sometimes had to make hours-long journeys by boat to reach certain camps, where they would then conduct one or two interviews before having to start their equally long return journey to arrive before nightfall. This meant that our researchers were typically only able to conduct one or two interviews per day, thereby limiting the overall number of possible interviews.



▲ **Figure 5** Lead research consultant James traveling by boat to cattle camps in Unity State. ©James Gatbany Machoak, 2025

⁹ More information on the HSS process, aims, and methodology can be found on our website, <https://protectionofcivilians.org/what-we-do/humansecuritysurvey/>.

¹⁰ Between 2016-2024, PAX carried out HSS data collection on an annual basis. Since 2025, this has been adapted to bi-annual data collections to allow time for more advocacy and community programming based on the survey results.

3. Executive summary

In November and December 2025, PAX spoke with 23 cattle camp inhabitants in Lakes and Unity States about escalating violence related to cattle raiding. These raids, and the resulting intercommunal tensions, challenge existing peacebuilding efforts between the communities along the border. Over half of the interviewees had themselves engaged in such practices. The aims were to better understand the drivers of the conflict, the personal motivations for participation, and respondents' views on where existing conflict resolution mechanisms fall short and what adaptations are needed.

Main findings

- **Cattle are hugely important for the inhabitants of cattle camps and the broader community**, serving as the main economic asset for rural households in particular. Cattle are used to afford marriage, to settle disputes, and to ensure basic food security.
- Over the course of 2025, **a fragile peace agreement between various communities in the Lakes and Unity States border area has come under pressure**, with increasing reports of cattle raiding and other forms of inter- and intracommunal violence.
- **Cattle raids most frequently occur during the dry season in South Sudan**, which runs from approximately November to April. During this time, migration movements mean that cattle camps from different factions often come into closer proximity to each other, increasing the chance of conflicts over access to resources, while the largely dry landscape offers more opportunities for raids.
- **The main causes of cattle raiding are retaliation and revenge, poverty, social pressure and/or prestige, and conflicts over access to resources.** Respondents to a lesser extent also mentioned conducting raids because of high bride prices, hunger, and because of lack of proper arrangements and guidance around seasonal cattle migration routes.

- Armed youth leaders decide on where and when to embark on a raid, but **elders, spiritual leaders ('spearmasters'), and – to a lesser extent – chiefs and formal authorities wield significant influence** over their decision making and may encourage raids for personal gains.
- **The widespread availability of firearms has exacerbated the violent nature of cattle raiding.** Resulting grievances and anger complicate mediation and reconciliation efforts, making revenge attacks and further cycles of violence more likely.
- **Cattle raiding has far-reaching and destabilizing impacts on armed youth, cattle camp inhabitants, and the wider community.**
 - Directly, cattle raiding results in deaths and injuries; loss of property, assets, or livelihood; and trauma for both victims and perpetrators.
 - Indirectly, cattle raiding results in endless cycles of revenge attacks; intercommunal grievances and deteriorated relationships; poverty; fear; decreased mobility and trade opportunities; the normalization of violence; and increased food insecurity and malnutrition.
 - Women suffer specific impacts, most notably displacement, loss of family members and breadwinners, and increased exposure to sexual- and gender-based violence (SGBV). The latter often remains underreported due to stigma, fear, and lack of accessible support systems for survivors.
- **Youth involved in cattle raiding are often caught in a mix of pride, shame, guilt, and fear over their actions.** There is considerable social pressure in camps to join raids, and prowess shown during confrontations can earn one great standing among peers. However, raiders often experience shame and considerable psychological stress as a result of their actions, especially where violence caused the deaths or injuries of innocent bystanders, and many share in a strong spiritual belief that this will invite divine retribution and may result in their own death.
- **The most commonly cited impediments to security raised by cattle keepers were uneven disarmament, absent and/or ineffective law enforcement, encouragement of raids by external actors, and limited participation of armed youth in peace processes.**
 - Cattle keepers raised that security requires successful and uniform disarmament of civilians, but were at the same time reluctant to let go of their own arms for fear of becoming vulnerable to attacks by other, not yet disarmed communities.
 - Armed youth further take matters into their own hands because of widespread perceptions that local police are absent in their areas and/or ineffective at preventing or successfully resolving cattle raiding violence.
 - Cattle keepers, in particular, those who admitted to raiding, indicated that elders and spearmasters often incite such violence. To a lesser extent, chiefs and formal authorities may encourage the practice as well, though the latter were also mentioned as actors that may contribute to conflict resolution and mediation.
 - Many cattle camp inhabitants, particularly younger men, do not participate in local peace processes for a variety of reasons (e.g., long distances, lack of awareness, insecurity). This results in a lack of representation and sense of ownership and responsibility.
- **Cattle keepers' priorities for successful conflict resolution included: the organization of more peace conferences in cattle camps, addressing hunger and poverty, the organization of (cross-border) cultural events and sporting activities, and establishing intercommunal mechanisms to share (access to) resources.**
 - Many armed youth expressed a desire to find a way out of recurring cycles of violence but feel too insecure and abandoned by (effective) state security actors to do so.
 - Armed youth were glad of the opportunity to directly voice their perspectives and grievances through the interviews and validation sessions and called for more direct and structured engagements with them in peace processes.
- In data validation sessions conducted in March and April 2026 in Payinjiar County, Unity State, armed youth representatives maintained that **cattle raiding had reduced in the area since December 2025, attributing this change to increased awareness and space for dialogue fostered by the interview process.**

Recommendations

PAX principally carried out this research in this manner to hear more *directly* from armed youth themselves on what drives them to raid the cattle of others, and what potentially could motivate them to put an end to this practice and the violence accompanying it. Through this research, we hope to draw more attention to their needs and perspectives. Our principal recommendation to a range of actors – from South Sudanese (sub)national authorities, to the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), traditional chiefs, and national and international civil society – is to replicate this approach of speaking *with* rather than *about* these groups. This enables the formulation and implementation of conflict resolution interventions that have more support and ownership from those actors that are frequently considered ‘spoilers’ in peacebuilding or peacekeeping efforts.

It may also enable a shift in mindset among cattle raiders. During one of the data validation sessions, for instance, one participant shared that the research discussions helped him realize that cattle raiding not only harms other communities but also leads to retaliation that affects his own family and community. This realization prompted him to change his behavior and consider non-violent alternatives.¹¹

Further, more specific recommendations are:

- **Organize more peace conferences and dialogue sessions directly in the cattle camps in the Lakes and Unity States border area** to hear cattle keepers’ and armed youth’s grievances and perspectives directly. At minimum, the active participation of cattle camp inhabitants – both camp leaders and armed youth representatives – should be proactively facilitated and encouraged if such sessions are organized elsewhere. This increases the chances that armed youth will respect and implement the resolutions that are often the outcome of such sessions.
- **Engage directly with ‘spearmasters’ and influential community elders** to help mitigate their negative influence in inciting cattle raiding violence, and to seek to use their standing and power in a more positive manner as a force for peace. In the data validation sessions, spearmasters appeared aware of their potential influencing power in cattle camps and among armed youth and expressed an interest in cultivating this influence in a manner to advocate for non-violent conflict resolution.

- **Better resource, equip, and train local police forces to effectively address cattle raiding incidents and prevent the (perceived) need of taking matters into one’s own hands.** When a more capable and accountable formal security or law enforcement structure emerges in the Lakes-Unity States border area that can protect the cattle camps, the herds and pastures in the border areas, as well as effectively address remaining intercommunal challenges between the various cattle camps, the armed cattle keepers no longer need to rely solely on their arms and self-protection mechanisms. Under these circumstances, it is more likely that the armed youth voluntarily disarm, and submit to formal law enforcement agencies for security provision.
- **Train and build the capacity of cattle camp- and armed youth leaders and ‘spearmasters’ in aspects of non-violent conflict resolution and peaceful negotiations.** This may provide opportunities to ‘reposition’ these actors as peacemakers rather than inciters of violence.
- **Prioritize livelihood generation and diversification activities for armed youth members in peacebuilding activities,** in order to address one of the root causes of cattle raiding. Interviewees, for instance, mentioned a desire to gain more agricultural skills.
- **Organize and resource mobile veterinary care services, targeting remote cattle camps** to increase livestock health and so reduce incentives for cattle raiding. Some respondents raised the idea that vaccination days could be organized and/or overseen by cross-border committees, so as to introduce a peacebuilding and reconciliation element to these activities.
- **Prioritize cross-border and intercommunal cultural and sport events in peacebuilding activities,** such as wrestling and football tournaments, or community theater performances in which reconciliation is modeled.
- **Prioritize mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services in efforts targeting (former) cattle raiders,** many of whom display symptoms consistent with trauma over their direct participation in and exposure to violence.

¹¹ Data validation session on 30 March 2026 in a cattle camp in Payinjjar County, Unity State, involving 30 armed youth representatives.

4. Context: Cattle and cattle raiding (trends)

This chapter provides background information on the importance of cattle to South Sudanese society, the functions of cattle camps, and historic and contemporary cattle raiding practices – both nationally and in the Lakes and Unity States (border) areas. It draws primarily on existing literature and research, providing the general context, while subsequent chapters are predominantly based on our own interview data.

Cattle and cattle camps

It is hard to overstate the importance of cattle in South Sudan. Over 80 percent of the country’s population relies mainly on agropastoralism, a percentage that is potentially even higher in the Greater Bahr el Ghazal and Greater Upper Nile areas encompassing Lakes and Unity States.¹² Traditionally, the Dinka and Nuer groups inhabiting this region lived a nomadic pastoralist lifestyle, migrating with their livestock in search of water and pastures. Even after the adoption of a more sedentary lifestyle in the course of the 20th century, much of present-day Dinka and Nuer identities, status, and wealth continue to be centered around cattle.

Keeping livestock is not only essential for daily food security but provides rural communities access to the cash economy, while the accumulation of wealth and financial capital is measured in cows in the absence of (reliable) bank accounts. Essentially, cattle serve simultaneously as savings, insurance, credit, and transactional currency. Cows are traditionally used to pay bride prices or customary fines or compensation when crimes or transgressions are committed, thereby forging or restoring damaged relations between

¹² The World Bank, *South Sudan Resilient Livestock Sector Project (P500553): Project Information Document*, December 2023, <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099122023205014179/pdf/P50055318fd6ae0a18a771cf2141ef621c.pdf>.

individuals and connected kin.¹³ The amount of cattle a man keeps is further seen as an important indicator of his social status. This can range from dozens of cows for ordinary families to thousands of heads of cattle for the country's socio-economic elite. A man with few or no cows can feel isolated from or ridiculed by his community.¹⁴

Most cattle are kept and looked after in cattle camps in often remote, rural areas. These can range from small camps – inhabited by a handful of people and a small number of cattle – to large camps where hundreds of people live and where livestock can number into the thousands.¹⁵ Some camps consist only of the livestock kept by the men and families present, but in most cases these settlements also guard the cattle of external community members. Despite their usually hard-to-reach locations, this means that there exist strong linkages between the camps and their inhabitants and the broader community. Because of this and cattle's overall socio-economic importance, cattle camps and cattle keepers are generally well respected. Traditionally, many boys are sent there at a young age to get introduced to all skills and traits of animal husbandry, an indispensable part of coming of age as a Dinka or Nuer.¹⁶ Some children later leave the camps to pursue an education, while many others remain and devote their lives to the care and protection of the herds of cattle entrusted to them as precious family heirlooms. In more rural areas, education for children is often not accessible – financially or physically – and therefore not a priority, which affects long-term literacy, skills development, and access to alternative livelihoods, thereby perpetuating cycles of poverty and dependency.

Formation and militarization of armed youth

The legacy of war in South Sudan – both preceding and following its independence from Sudan in 2011 – has resulted in the widespread presence of (small) arms in the hands of civilians.¹⁷ This includes the men looking after and guarding cattle in the cattle camps. During various wars and conflicts in recent decades, this was perceived as a necessity. As noted in a report by Saferworld: “Young people began to acquire weapons to protect themselves, their communities and their herds. [...] Encouraged by the easy access to weapons, attacks by armed youth on each other's communities escalated significantly.”¹⁸ At the same time, parties to the various (civil) wars in the 1990s and following independence deliberately recruited and mobilized such armed cattle camp youth, often in return for payment in the form of raided cattle. Well-known examples of such ‘militarized cattle keepers’ are the Nuer White Army and the Dinka *gelweng*.¹⁹

As cycles of conflict surged and declined, the combination of this ‘militarization’ of armed youth and eroded formal and customary authority meant that the youth militias set up during the war endured in Lakes: “Today, the *gelweng* in Yirol – armed youth without an official role in governance or administration – have become a key component of the emerging local order – a factor both in the spread of violence and the control of it.”²⁰ The result is a country flooded with small arms and ammunition, where security institutions are weak and largely absent, particularly in the more remote rural areas. This has not been helped by a history of partial, inconsistent, and sometimes even violent disarmament campaigns imposed by the government. The disarmament of one community often left them vulnerable to attacks by others who had not surrendered their arms, eroding overall willingness

of communities to disarm and/or driving rearmament processes (see also chapter 7).

In this context, local armed youth have become the main protectors of rural communities and their livelihoods, predominantly cattle. Weapon ownership and use among them have become normalized. Local communities' reliance on these actors is also evident in PAX's HSS results.²¹ The general approval rates of local armed youth militia as a security provider rose from about 40 percent of respondents in Lakes State saying they were “(very) good” at providing security in 2017, to more than 60 percent in 2022.²² In Unity State, approval rates of the local armed youth militia hovered between 70-75 percent between 2017-2020.²³ Nonetheless, community perceptions of these actors are often mixed: While the armed youth are seen as providing protection, there are also concerns about their autonomy and lack of accountability, as well as their involvement in criminal or retaliatory activities.

Cattle raiding: causes and developments

The practice of (armed) cattle raiding goes back a long time and is about as old as the cattle migrations themselves. Historically, it has strong socio-cultural significance: Boys and young men would be encouraged by songs or stories to ‘find their own cows’ in the cattle camps of neighboring communities, and take a few armed with sticks or spears as part of their rites of passage into adulthood. This way, they could both prove themselves and impress their peers and potential brides, while also collecting the necessary number of cows for marriage. Usually, just a handful of cows would be taken, and while these raids could result in low-intensity rivalries, the ensuing violence was

hardly ever lethal or massive, and the resulting impact on intercommunal dynamics in the area remained limited.²⁴ This was also indicated during PAX-facilitated community dialogues in the Lakes-Unity border area, where people declared that, “We have been doing cattle raiding in the past. It used to be something normal taken from our grandfathers, but without killing women and children. This is a new thing.”²⁵

A report from the Institute of Security Studies points out that across eastern Africa, cattle raiding has moved away from a relatively harmless and traditional practice, escalating into a more violent and opportunistic lifestyle and means of livelihood generation for criminal cross-border networks.²⁶ According to the researchers Wild, Jok, and Patel, political and military actors have tried and ultimately succeeded, from the 1990s onwards, to coopt localized armed pastoralist militias in support of their political agendas by incorporating intercommunal animosities and historic grievances into the national political power struggle. This has made conflict in South Sudan more intractable and complex to overcome, especially since the traditional hierarchies, social norms, and dispute resolution mechanisms that could control, regulate, or minimize conflict in the past, have been gradually and deliberately undermined and eroded.²⁷

The war has (in)directly brought about broader socio-economic changes that contribute to the occurrence of raids. Decades of conflict and largescale displacement have increased poverty and destitution, which is exacerbated by a lack of overall employment and business opportunities.²⁸ Additionally, bride prices have risen sharply across the country, making it difficult for many young men to acquire enough cattle to have a chance at marriage.²⁹ Because economic opportunities to legitimately collect the necessary capital have waned, it has become increasingly acceptable to go and raid cattle to collect the required number of

13 Jan Pospisil et al., “Bring Enough Cows to Marry: Brideprice, Conflict, and Gender Relations in South Sudan,” February 2024, The University of Edinburgh, PeaceRep and Coventry University, <https://peacerep.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Bring-Enough-Cows-to-Marry-BridePrice-Conflict-and-Gender-Relations-in-South-Sudan-DIGITAL.pdf>; Heidi Riley, “‘Killing is part of their life’: The men raised on violence who are both perpetrators and victims as South Sudan faces return to civil war,” *Democracy in Africa*, May 2025, <https://democracyinafrica.org/killing-is-part-of-their-life-the-men-raised-on-violence-who-are-both-perpetrators-and-victims-as-south-sudan-faces-return-to-civil-war/>; Wild, Jok, and Patel, “Militarization of cattle raiding.”; Ryle and Amuom, “Peace is the Name.”

14 Riley, “Part of their life.”; Deo Gumba, Nelson Alusala, and Andrew Kimani, “Vanishing herds: Cattle rustling in East Africa and the Horn,” December 2019, ENACT, <https://enact-africa.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/2019-12-18-vanishing-herds-research-paper-10.pdf>; Wild, Jok, and Patel, “Militarization of cattle raiding.”

15 Ryle and Amuom, “Peace is the Name.”

16 Ryle and Amuom, “Peace is the Name.”

17 Chilvers, “Preventing cattle raiding violence.”; Bithou M. Mayik, “Investigating the impact of child abduction and cattle raiding among the Dinka, Nuer and Murle communities in Jonglei State, South Sudan,” *International Journal of Peace and Development Studies* 11, no. 2 (2020): 9-14, <https://doi.org/10.5897/IJPDS2020.0376>; Ryle and Amuom, “Peace is the Name.”

18 Chilvers, “Preventing cattle raiding violence,” 5.

19 Wild, Jok, and Patel, “Militarization of cattle raiding.”

20 Ryle and Amuom, “Peace is the Name,” 16.

21 See chapter 2 for more details on PAX's HSS methodology.

22 Anton Quist and Abdullatif Sleibi, “Human Security Survey South Sudan: Trend Analysis 2017-2022, Greater Yirol,” May 2023, PAX, <https://protectionofcivilians.org/infographic/hss-2016-2022-trend-analysis-of-greater-yirol-south-sudan/>.

23 Anton Quist, “Human Security Survey South Sudan: Trend Analysis 2017-2022, Payinjiar County (Unity),” October 2022, PAX, <https://protectionofcivilians.org/infographic/hss-2016-2022-trend-analysis-of-payinjiar-county-unity-south-sudan/>.

24 Ryle and Amuom, “Peace is the Name.”

25 Anton Quist, “Human Security Survey: 2017 Annual Summary Report Payinjiar (Unity), South Sudan,” May 2017, PAX, 5, <https://protectionofcivilians.org/report/human-security-survey-2017-annual-summary-report-payinjiar-unity-south-sudan/>.

26 Gumba, Alusala, and Kimani, “Vanishing herds.”

27 Wild, Jok, and Patel, “Militarization of cattle raiding,” 1-3, 6.

28 Gumba, Alusala, and Kimani, “Vanishing herds,” 3; Chilvers, “Preventing cattle raiding violence.”

29 During a community dialogue in Lakes State, a direct connection between cattle raiding and forced (child) marriage by older men was explained: “They claimed that cattle raiding and forced marriages are clearly interlinked: it was argued that especially raided cattle is used in forced marriages (‘it leads to marriages to be concluded quickly and forcefully’), and as bride prices have soared over the years, the need for men to marry also drives the occurrence of new cattle raids, as more and more young men and their families cannot afford to collect enough cattle to marry, which is claimed to be the reason why only old men can marry young girls nowadays”. (In: Anton Quist, “Human Security Survey: 2020 Annual Summary Report Greater Yirol, Lakes State, South Sudan,” June 2022, PAX, 6, <https://protectionofcivilians.org/report/hss-2020-summary-findings-from-greater-yirol-lakes-south-sudan/>).

cows.³⁰ In a 2024 report, of over a thousand surveyed people, in some states up to 20 percent of men admitted to having resorted to cattle raiding in order to afford marriage.³¹

Young men also experience societal and peer pressures to partake in raids to prove their courage and manhood, and refusing to join may lead to being ridiculed and being socially ostracized, issues explored in greater depth in chapter 6. Wives and mothers are documented to play important roles as well, sometimes putting pressure on their sons or husbands to join raids and accumulate wealth, while at other times appealing to them to stay out of harm's way, and mitigating in intercommunal conflicts.³²

Impacts

The centrality of cattle to people's livelihoods and sense of identity means that the loss of cattle has wide-reaching implications. The dependence on cattle as the single dominant economic asset makes people highly vulnerable to threats like floods, droughts, livestock diseases, and cattle raiding. Raided communities find themselves victimized and impoverished after losing dozens, sometimes even hundreds of heads of cattle in a single raid, which has a big impact on people's ability to access basic services, send children to school, or afford bride prices. Furthermore, because cattle are also used in traditional conflict resolution and social governance systems – for instance, as compensation payments – their loss has social implications in addition to economic consequences, and can easily affect entire kinship networks.

What becomes apparent from our interviews is that for all cattle keepers, whatever their background, the more destructive and deadly cattle raiding becomes, the more important revenge becomes as a driving force for more cattle raiding incidents (see chapter 6). The widespread availability of firearms and the use of ever deadlier weapons, such as AK-47s and even rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) during raids lead to ever bigger numbers of cattle being taken in a single raid, and the likelihood of (many) fatalities.³³ This then raises

the stakes for the communities involved and increases the likelihood of revenge attacks and more casualties, leading to endless cycles of cattle raiding, as well as other deadly intercommunal violence, such as targeted revenge killings and road ambushes. Therefore, cattle raiding can certainly be seen as an indicator or even predictor of other forms of intercommunal violence in predominantly pastoralist areas of South Sudan.

Cattle raiding in Lakes and Unity States

This research is focused on the border area between Lakes and Unity States, a pastoralist heartland with a long history of both peaceful coexistence and intercommunal violence. The state boundary also marks the border between Dinka- and Nuer-dominated areas, which, especially since the outbreak of the 2013 civil war, has become a contentious border. The majority Dinka in Lakes State and the majority Nuer in Unity State found themselves on the opposite ends of political allegiances: Lakes State was controlled by the national government of Salva Kiir, while Payinjiar County in southern Unity followed Riek Machar's SPLA-IO.³⁴ The breakdown in relations between the formal political authorities also trickled down to the communal level. Intercommunal conflict between armed youth from both sides of the border was rife – manifesting itself in cattle raids, road ambushes, and revenge killings.³⁵

PAX has been conducting its Human Security Survey in both Greater Yirol (Lakes State) and Payinjiar (Unity State) since 2016. Cattle raiding has always been in the top three most frequently mentioned security incidents experienced by participating households. Respondents in Greater Yirol reported increased frequency of cattle raids in 2017, 2018, and 2020, followed by a decrease in 2022.³⁶ Surveyed communities in Payinjiar County similarly reported higher incidence of raids in 2017 and 2018, with decreases in 2020, 2022, and 2023.³⁷ However, HSS data and reports in the media and from local authorities and community representatives

suggest that cattle raiding began to increase again in both counties in 2025.³⁸

There have been numerous attempts at brokering peace between the communities in the border area. The first successful effort occurred in 2018 when cross-border delegations of customary chiefs pushed for a peace agreement to restore mutual relations.³⁹ This effort – in the face of continuing or resurging violence – was reiterated between the border communities of Greater Yirol and Greater Rumbek and Payinjiar in a peace treaty concluded in September 2024.⁴⁰

Peace again proved fragile, however: from 2025 onwards, the number of cattle raids and related deadly intercommunal violence in the Lakes-Unity border area again increased. Between February-June 2025, local media, UN bodies, and PAX community security committees recorded a minimum of 36 cattle raids across the Greater Rumbek and Greater Yirol areas of Lakes State, in which between 5,000-10,000 cattle were taken.⁴¹ This occurred alongside frequent reports of revenge attacks, the abductions of women and children, and road and river ambushes, claiming – by very conservative estimates due to limited reporting on these matters – the lives of at least 60 people, mostly ordinary civilians.⁴² The reasons for this upsurge are not immediately apparent, but it likely stems from a combination of deep economic pressures, and political rivalries and developments at the national level – such as the trial against former Vice President Riek Machar⁴³ – which have a trickledown effect on sub-national levels.

Also in 2026, there were new reports of violent clashes and cattle raiding incidents,⁴⁴ although PAX field staff observed a reduction in overall raiding trends between December 2025 and April 2026, reported by armed youth and other community members in the March

and April 2026 data validation sessions. This may prove to present a critical window for efforts aimed at consolidating peace and strengthening stability in the Lakes-Unity border areas.

30 Average bride price in pastoralist communities in South Sudan is 40-50 cows, but there can be peaks of 200-250 cows. See Pospisil et al., "Bring Enough Cows."

31 Pospisil et al., "Bring Enough Cows," 36-37.

32 Gumba, Alusala, and Kimani, "Vanishing herds.": Peacebuilding Opportunities Fund, *What drives the cattle camps?*

33 Chilvers, "Preventing cattle raiding violence.": Peacebuilding Opportunities Fund, *What drives the cattle camps?*

34 Ryle and Amuom, "Peace is the Name."

35 Ryle and Amuom, "Peace is the Name."

36 Quist and Sleibi, "HSS South Sudan: Greater Yirol Trend Analysis." See also Annex A.

37 Quist, "HSS South Sudan: Payinjiar Trend Analysis." See also Annex A.

38 Abdullatif Sleibi, "Human Security Survey South Sudan: Greater Yirol (Lakes State) – August 2025," September 2025, PAX, <https://protectionofcivilians.org/infographic/hss-2025-data-summary-from-greater-yirol-lakes-state-south-sudan/>. See also Annex A.

39 This first peace agreement was facilitated by AMA, PAX, UNMISS and other organizations, a documentary about the conference and the road towards the peace agreement can be seen on our website, <https://protectionofcivilians.org/video/building-our-peace-people-to-people-peace-processes-in-south-sudan/>.

40 This peace agreement was a revitalization and extension of an earlier peace agreement between (paramount) chiefs of Greater Yirol County (Lakes State) and Payinjiar County (Unity State), facilitated by PAX, UNMISS, and other NGOs, in May 2018.

41 Based on a literature review conducted by the PAX South Sudan office, collecting reports from local media, UN contacts, and local communities.

42 See, for instance, "51 passengers missing after boat attack in Yirol East: official," *Radio Tamazuj*, October 1, 2025, <https://www.radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/51-passengers-missing-after-boat-attack-in-yirol-east-official>; "Suspected criminals from Payinjiar kill 7, wound 5 in Yirol East," *Radio Tamazuj*, October 30, 2025, <https://www.radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/suspected-criminals-from-payinjiar-kill-7-wound-5-in-yirol-east>.

43 Daniel Akech, "A Trial for South Sudan's Frail Peace," *International Crisis Group*, November 27, 2025, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/qna/africa/south-sudan/trial-south-sudans-frail-peace>.

44 See, for instance, "Armed youth from Payinjiar kill 2 in Yirol East," *Radio Tamazuj*, February 2, 2026, <https://www.radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/armed-youth-from-payinjiar-kill-2-in-yirol-east>; "Communal violence in Lakes State leave 10 dead," *Radio Tamazuj*, March 24, 2026, <https://www.radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/communal-violence-in-lakes-state-leaves-10-dead>.

5. Life in the cattle camps

This section provides more details about life in the cattle camps, focusing on the camps' composition, daily rhythm, challenges, and the lines of influence running between the camps and external actors and communities.

Cattle camps

PAX spoke to 23 inhabitants of cattle camps located throughout Lakes and Unity States, focusing in particular on the border area, a traditional hotspot for violence and cattle raiding. Many of these camps are in remote areas, sometimes requiring up to four or five hours of travel from the nearest town or village, and contributing to a relatively isolated way of living for its inhabitants. The camps vary considerably in size: from counting just three inhabitants to camps with a population of 40-45 people in our sample, and they can be permanent or mobile settlements.⁴⁵ Predominantly male-dominated spaces that some consider “not suitable for women and children”,⁴⁶ some camps house entire families. Their presence is not always consistent throughout the year, however. Some men mentioned that their families will accompany them in the camps during the dry season, but that the wives and (most) children return to the villages in the rainy season to cultivate the farms.⁴⁷ When wives join, their tasks usually involve cooking, foraging fruits and vegetables, fetching water, tending to the weaker animals in the

herd, and milking the cows,⁴⁸ though many of our male interviewees described carrying out similar tasks.

Many cattle keepers join the camps from a young age onward – some as young as four years old, others as teenagers – and typically at their fathers' orders.⁴⁹ As siblings, this choice can be the difference between life in a cattle camp and pursuing an education; a choice that some men lamented, feeling that they had missed out on broader opportunities in life.⁵⁰

It was my father who decided for me to join the cattle camp and the same thing is going to happen to my children later on: I will take some of my children to the cattle camp and leave the rest to educate in the schools.⁵¹

In the camps visited by PAX, most inhabitants related having lived there for several years already; some men were born in the camps and had only rarely ventured into the towns. Combined with their remote location, this explains how many of the camps have become semi-independent living environments for the youth who stay there with their livestock.

The camps' main function is to keep and care for cattle that is owned both by the camps' inhabitants and by 'outside' community members.⁵² As elaborated in greater detail in the previous chapter, cattle have huge cultural and socio-economic importance for South Sudanese communities. Cattle represent wealth, are used for dowries, and are many people's main source of food and nutrition.⁵³ The camps can therefore be considered “a bank of livestock where all wealth is kept and taken care of”.⁵⁴

Cattle camps are often, though not always, mobile encampments. Their movement is dictated primarily by two factors: physical security, and sufficient access to water and pastures for grazing.⁵⁵ Typically, camps will relocate to highland areas, which are less prone to floods, during the rainy season when there is an abundance of water and pastures (ca. May-October/November), to then move nearer to permanent water sources like rivers and lakes in toch ('lowland areas') during the dry season (ca. November-April) when access to pastures is more scarce. Nuer herders sometimes follow historical patterns of movement that are tied to ancestral grazing lands or 'home areas', to which they will return during specific periods of the year. Cattle keepers will often also move in search of salt lick areas to maintain herd health. These are predominantly found near the border of Unity State's Payinjiar County, and it is primarily during migration between these areas that many intercommunal conflicts and cattle raiding takes place because men from different factions temporarily live in closer proximity to one another. This can both increase tensions over access to shared resources, and presents more opportunities for raids as herders have left the relative safety of their more established settlements. It may also erupt in violence because of historical grievances and long-standing inter-clan rivalries that exist between some of the factions that then encounter each other.

45 Cattle camps can be much larger: some have grown into large settlements that can house several hundreds of people, along with large numbers of cattle.

46 Interview with U3, a cattle keeper, on 4 December 2025.

47 Interviews with L4 and L5 on 22 November and 2 December 2025. Such partial 'sedentarization', where women and (some) children settle in a town, while other – usually male – members of the household continue care of livestock is typical for many east African rural and pastoralist societies. See, for instance, Elizabeth Stites, “Gender Dynamics in Pastoralist Livelihood Systems in Africa,” April 2024, Tufts University, <https://fic.tufts.edu/publication-item/gender-dynamics-in-pastoralist-livelihood-systems-in-africa/>.

48 Peacebuilding Opportunities Fund, *What Drives the Cattle Camps?*

49 Interviews with L2, L6, L7, L8, L9, U1, U5 and U11 on 21 November and 3-7 and 10 December 2025.

50 Interview with L2, a cattle keeper, on 21 November 2025.

51 Interview with L9, a cattle keeper, on 10 December 2025.

52 Interview with L9, a cattle keeper, on 10 December 2025.

53 Interviews with L1, L2, L3, L4, L6, L7, L8 and L9 on 21-22 November and 4, 6-7 and 10 December 2025.

54 Interview with L3, a cattle camp leader, on 23 November 2025.

55 Interviews with L1, L2, L3, L4, L5, L6, L8, L9, L10, U1, U3, U4, U5, U6, U8, U9 and U10 on 21-22 November and 3-5, 7-10 and 12 December 2025.



▲ Figure 6 Daily life in the cattle camp. ©Egret Publishers/PAX, 2026

Daily life and responsibilities

Across the interviews, a clear and consistent picture emerged of the rhythm and activities that characterize daily life in the camps. Early in the morning, cattle keepers milk the cows and remove *weer* ('cow dung'). The dung is then burned, resulting in a substance called *arop*, which the cattle keepers use to clean the cows' bodies and make their hides shiny, as well as to protect them from the sun and insects. By day, the cattle are released for grazing. When herders return with the cattle in the evening, they tie the cows down, check their numbers to ensure none have gone missing, and leave them by the fire to protect them from cold and insects. Some lactating cows may be milked a second time.⁵⁶ Other common tasks in the camps include the repairing of the outer fences – the

kraal – setting traps for predators, providing specific care for the weaker cows and calves, and preparing the food, often consisting of simple pounded sorghum and fresh milk.⁵⁷ In the evening, the men often gather around a fire to sing together or listen to elders telling clan histories.⁵⁸

Several interviewees put emphasis on the apprenticeship nature of life in the camps, where the older cattle keepers are treated with respect and educate the younger inhabitants on how to perform certain activities. The attribution of certain tasks and their successful execution are indicated as markers of responsibility and honor.⁵⁹ The roles in the camp often rotate, meaning that the men may be required to stand night guard at certain times, while responsible for daytime grazing and patrols, or for veterinary care

56 Interviews with L1, L4, L6, L7, L8, L9, L10, U1 and U3 on 21-22 November and 3-4, 6-7, 10 and 12 December 2025.

57 Interviews with U1, U3 and U4 on 3-4 December 2025.

58 Interview with U1, a cattle keeper, on 3 December 2025.

59 Interviews with U1, U3 and U4 on 3-4 December 2025.

and fence repairs on other days.⁶⁰ Some interviewees indicated also having other roles or sources of income, such as those of cattle trading or performing as an artist.⁶¹

Hierarchy and external influences

Decisions in the camp are primarily made by designated camp leaders, or *bany wuot*. This leadership role is often hereditary, passed on from father to son.⁶² Among the respondents were five cattle camp leaders: three from Lakes State and two from Unity State. They described being responsible for most day-to-day decisions in the camp (sometimes consulting the more influential senior youth in the camps), the management of resources, ensuring camp discipline, and the settling of – usually small – internal disputes.⁶³ A cattle camp leader from Lakes State described his role as following:

Being a leader, you have to take responsibility for many things: If there is someone who took away a cow by force, I have to intervene to stop a fight from escalating. If there is somebody who impregnated a girl and the relatives come after their daughter, I have to mitigate the situation and pay some dowries to them so that they go back and leave their daughter as someone's wife.⁶⁴

However, the leaders and other interviewees indicated that larger disputes – for example, related to murder or adultery – are generally escalated to external chiefs or the payam administrator.⁶⁵ These actors are also involved in coordinating the movements of multiple cattle camps, so as to mitigate the potential for conflict over access to resources.⁶⁶

60 Interview with U4, a cattle keeper, on 4 December 2025.

61 Interviews with L2, L7 and U10 on 21 November and 6 and 9 December 2025.

62 Interview with L3, a cattle camp leader, on 22 November 2025; Peacebuilding Opportunities Fund, *What Drives the Cattle Camps?*

63 Interviews with L1, L3, L4, U2 and U9 on 21-22 November and 3 and 8 December 2025.

64 Interview with L4, a cattle camp leader, on 22 November 2025.

65 In South Sudan, four sub-national administrative levels are distinguished starting from the *boma* level (a cluster of villages) to *payam* (a larger area, often under the authority of a chief), *county* (a government unit consisting of several *payams*), and *state* (a higher administrative unit under the control of a governor).

66 Interviews with L1, L2, L3, L4, L5, L6, L7, L8, L9 and L10 on 21-22 November and 2, 4, 6-7, 10 and 12 December 2025.

67 Interview with L1, a cattle camp leader, on 22 November 2025.

68 Interviews with L5, L6, L7, L8, L9 and U9 on 2, 4, 6-8 and 10 December 2025.

69 Interviews with L3, U1, U2, U3, U4, U5, U6, U7, U8, U9, U10 and U11 on 22 November and 3-10 December 2025.

70 Interviews with L5, L8, L9, L10, U1 and U5 on 2-3, 5, 7, 10 and 12 December 2025.

71 Peacebuilding Opportunities Fund, *What Drives the Cattle Camps?*

72 Peacebuilding Opportunities Fund, *What Drives the Cattle Camps?*

Generally, because of the importance of cattle camps to the wider community and the fact that many camps also guard cattle owned by chiefs, formal authorities, or other influential individuals living outside of the camps, there are many linkages between the camps – however remote these may be – and these outside communities. As one camp leader indicated, "Cattle camp life is linked to formal and political authorities because they function as the center for wealth and social structure. Cattle ownership is the only source of wealth and [therefore] a foundation of political power in the community."⁶⁷ Such external actors typically wield considerable influence over decision making in the camps.⁶⁸ Respondents from Unity State in particular mentioned the influence exerted by elders, influential and older community members, who will on occasion visit the cattle camps.⁶⁹

Interviewees also raised the connections of camps to spiritual leaders, often referred to as 'spearmasters'. These are influential community figures, who sometimes reside in camps, but often live in towns where camp leaders visit them for consultations.⁷⁰ Traditionally, there is a strong belief in an underlying spiritual dimension that determines a camp's success and survival.⁷¹ For example, spearmasters can play a role in rain making, blessing marriages, and identifying and blessing grazing grounds or fishing waters. When a new camp is constructed, spiritual leaders may conduct ceremonies that involve circling the camp, taking milk, and conversing with dead ancestors to ensure their protection of the community.⁷² Our respondents, however, primarily discussed spearmasters in relation to their involvement in (encouraging) cattle raids, something that is explored in greater detail in the next chapter.

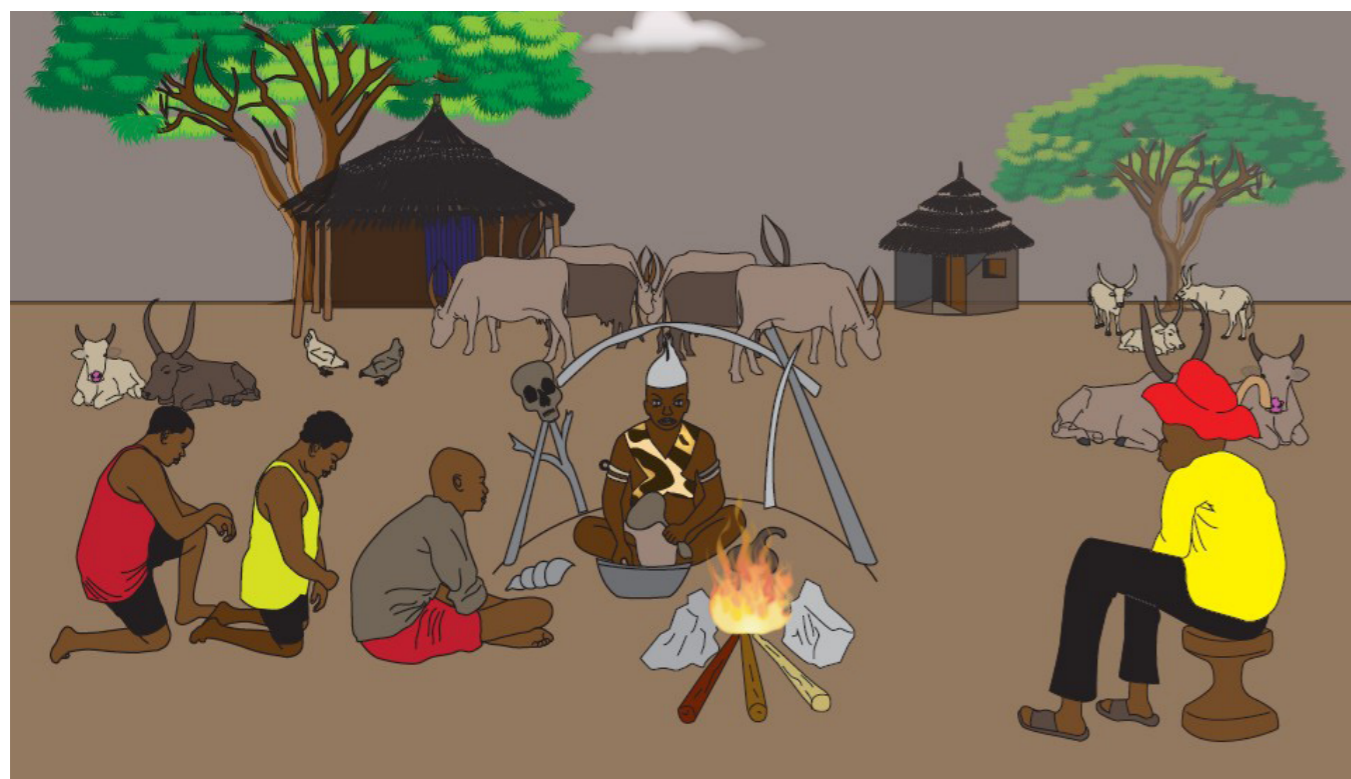
Challenges

Life in the cattle camps is not easy. It is typically characterized by poverty and the constant threat of food shortages.⁷³ One interviewee described how “some eat today and others eat tomorrow; that is how we live”.⁷⁴ Another challenge concerns resource scarcity, particularly of water and grazing sites, which some argued have become worse due to climate change-related increases in both droughts and floods.⁷⁵ Many cattle keepers complained of lack of access to basic services, such as water, sanitation, and healthcare.⁷⁶ Lack of medical care in particular was often raised as a concern, both in relation to their own healthcare and as veterinary care for sick cattle.⁷⁷ Many respondents, particularly in Lakes State, mentioned recent increases in diseases affecting their cows, which has an immediate and dire impact on food security: “Our cattle are sick and people are starving, [there is] no more milk because the cattle have some

diseases”.⁷⁸ This appears to be linked to climate change: As climate change results in more frequent and more intense floods, droughts, and heatwaves, pests and diseases spread more rapidly, directly putting people’s food and livelihood security at risk.⁷⁹ These developments raise considerable concerns for longer-term food and economic security:

*If [cattle] remain untreated, then their numbers will reduce in the next five years. There is a disease killing them now in the cattle camps silently – and no treatment. And if there is no treatment, then they will die from the disease, and this will result in a reduction of produce and eventually their numbers in the next five years.*⁸⁰

Not surprisingly, therefore, poverty appears to be one of the main drivers of continued cattle raiding, something that is explored in greater detail in the next chapter.



▲ **Figure 7** A spearmaster conducting a ritual. ©Egret Publishers/PAX, 2026

73 Interviews with L1, L2, L4, L6, L7, L9, L10, U1, U3, U4, U5, U6, U7, U8, U9 and U10 on 21-22 November and 3-10 and 12 December 2025.

74 Interview with L2, a cattle camp leader, on 21 November 2025.

75 Interviews with L1, L4, L5, L6, L9, L10 and U10 on 21-22 November and 2, 4, 9-10 and 12 December 2025.

76 Interviews with L1, L3, L5, L10, U1, U4, U5, U6, U7 and U9 on 21-22 November and 2-6, 8 and 12 December 2025.

77 Interviews with L1, L2, L3, L5, L6, L7, L8, L10 and U10 on 21-22 November and 2,4, 6-7, 9 and 12 December 2025.

78 Interview with L10, a cattle keeper, on 12 December 2025.

79 UNDP, “South Sudan’s climate-hit farmers.”; Kheira Tarif et al., “South Sudan: Climate, Peace and Security Fact Sheet,” March 2025, NUPI and SIPRI, https://www.nupi.no/content/pdf_preview/29938/file/SIPRI%E2%80%933NUPI%20Fact%20Sheet%20South%20Sudan%202025.pdf.

80 Interview with L3, a cattle camp leader, on 22 November 2025.

6. Cattle raids and civilian harm

This section explores the cattle raiding practices witnessed or executed by our interviewees. Some concerns first-hand data of men who have participated in raids; other interviewees describe general raiding trends and practices. Of the 23 cattle camp inhabitants PAX interviewed, 12 admitted to having participated in one or more cattle raids. Not counted among these 12 are three interviewees – one from Lakes State, two from Unity State – who answered ‘no’ when asked directly after participation in raids, but whose answers to other questions indicated that they have participated in a raid at least once.⁸¹ The section describes perceptions regarding overall cattle raiding trends; provides descriptions

of how, when, and why raids are conducted; and outlines how these raids impact both the involved armed youth and the broader community.

Cattle raiding trends

Secondary data – described in chapter 3 – indicates that cattle raiding-related incidents in the Lakes and Unity States border area on the whole seem to be increasing again. Accounts of our interviewees varied considerably, however, with some adamant that cattle raiding incidents had decreased in number over the last 6-12 months, whereas others saw an unchanged situation or even increases in raiding. Several men from Lakes State attested that raids in their state had generally decreased, with four of them pointing specifically towards the influence of their state’s (former) governor, Rin Tuony.⁸² Between 2021-2026, he imposed strict security measures. Punishments like the death penalty for those caught participating in raiding may be an important cause for decreases in raids (see the below text box). At the same time,

81 See chapter 2, ‘Methodology’, for a more elaborate description of the composition of interviewees for this research, and possible motivations for denying participation in raids.

82 Interviews with L1, L2, L4, L5, L7, L8, L9 and L10 on 21-22 November and 2, 6-7, 10 and 12 December 2025.

some Lakes State interviewees acknowledged that cattle raiding had remained high at the border area with Payinjar County in Unity State.⁸³ One interviewee who had previously attributed decreases to the former governor's influence acknowledged that, more recently, cattle raids seemed to be "getting back worse".⁸⁴ This was echoed by numerous cattle keepers in Unity State who perceived cattle raiding to have increased in 2025.⁸⁵ According to one interviewee, "cattle raiding has become rampant between the Payinjar [Unity State] and Yirol East County [Lakes State] communities since June of this year".⁸⁶

Law and order under (former) Governor Rin Tueny

Lakes State has a long history of crime and intercommunal violence, including high levels of cattle raiding that have resulted in vicious cycles of revenge killings. According to one report, "[Lakes] State remained so unstable that the main road linking the two centres of Rumbek and Yirol was inaccessible without armed protection".⁸⁷ Upon assuming the office of Governor in 2021, Rin Tueny Mabor sought to address these issues by implementing what has been described as "a heavy-handed, security-first approach".⁸⁸ This has resulted in a steady reduction in violence, and perception surveys in the state showed that people felt safer and generally approved of the former Governor's methods.⁸⁹

Rin Tueny chiefly relied upon the South Sudan People's Defence Forces (SSPDF) and police to restore order. This was done through a combination of laudable actions, such as strengthening the ability of courts to judge "quickly and fairly"⁹⁰ on cattle raiding-related incidents, but also through actions constituting human rights violations, such as normalizing and expanding the use of the death penalty and locking people up in detention centers in poor conditions without informing their relatives.⁹¹ Nonetheless, because of significant improvements in people's day-to-day experiences of security, the former Governor appeared to have generally been popular among the Lakes State population.⁹² This may have also been aided by the fact that the former Governor was himself from Lakes State. In January 2026, Rin Tueny was replaced by Major General Madhang Majok Meen.⁹³

Cattle raiding mostly occurs during the dry season, which runs approximately from November to April.⁹⁴ During this time, men face less difficulties in finding, stealing, and escaping with cattle: "The grass has dried up and the floods have gone down, so it becomes easier for [the raiders] to run away with raided cattle."⁹⁵ Additionally, raids often occur when cattle keepers migrate their cattle to the *baar* ('salt lick area'), a natural area where animals gather to consume salt and other minerals to maintain herd health.⁹⁶ Many such salt lick areas are found near the Nile in the Lakes-Unity States border area near Payinjar County, which can lead to tensions when different factions bring their cattle there at the same time.

Raids in practice

Cattle raids are typically planned by a small group of prominent youth or elders. The latter refer to influential people, typically over 60 years old, who may reside in the cattle camps or in the villages. These are predominantly men, although there are some areas with female elders as well. Elders are typically regarded as the custodians of customary law, cultural norms, and conflict resolution mechanisms. In relation to cattle raids, elders will often be the ones to advise going on raids, following communal discussions, but it will be armed youth or cattle camp leaders who usually make the decisions on when to raid and how.

Raids are conducted at night when camps are directly targeted or, in some cases, by day when the cattle are out grazing away from the camps and are guarded by only one or a few cattle keepers.⁹⁷ Interviewees described how raids are rarely spontaneous occurrences; rather, these usually involve days or weeks of extensive planning. Scouts will venture to other cattle camps to gather intelligence on the number and quality of cattle that are present, on likely escape

routes, and sometimes on whether vulnerable groups like children are present.⁹⁸ Raiders may also involve local informants to know which *kraal* – a cluster of huts surrounding an enclosure for livestock – are lightly guarded.⁹⁹ Cattle raiders plan carefully:

*They gather extensive security information about the cattle camp or community that they have agreed to attack. The targeted camp must have prestigious bulls, lots of cows, no force to block any entry, and there must be someone who knows the way to that cattle camp.*¹⁰⁰

Interviewees described the use of different weapons during raids, ranging from sticks, spears, and machetes to firearms like guns, AK-47 rifles, and RPGs.¹⁰¹ The men all voiced how the heavier weaponry has increased the severity of, and risks related to cattle raids. A young raider from Unity State mused that "weapons change behavior; when a firearm is present, the stakes feel higher, and operations escalate".¹⁰² A cattle camp leader from Unity State, who both leads cattle raids and, at times, mediates on their outcomes, voiced how mediation is often much more difficult when raids have been carried out with firearms. The more lethal outcomes lead to stronger revenge impulses, the containment of which sometimes requires weeks of discussion and mediation.¹⁰³

Once cattle are forcibly taken from another camp or community, the raiders' escape is similarly characterized by planning and guile. Professed raiders spoke of using reed bundles to muffle the sound of their footsteps or the bells on stolen cattle.¹⁰⁴ The livestock is guided along riverbeds to confuse trackers or moved during foggy mornings to mask the scent.¹⁰⁵ One young raider recounted how he had improvised traps "to deter hunter dogs" and how, once, he was forced to hide in the swamps for several days, at times submerged up to his neck to avoid detection.¹⁰⁶

83 Interviews with L1, L3 and L7 on 21-22 November and 6 December 2025.

84 Interview with L1, a cattle camp leader, on 21 November 2025.

85 Interviews with U11 and U13 on 10 and 14 December 2025.

86 Interview with U11, a cattle keeper, on 10 December 2025.

87 Jan Pospisil, "Changing Lakes State? Rin Tueny's Inclusive Deterrence Approach in Practice," November 2023, HSBA and Small Arms Survey, 4, https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/Lakes_state_BP_WEB.pdf.

88 Pospisil, "Changing Lakes State?" 3; James Kunhiak Muorwel and Jan Pospisil, "Peace in Transition: The Case of South Sudan," April 2024, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, <https://peacerep.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Peace-in-Transition-the-Case-of-South-Sudan-DIGITAL.pdf>.

89 Pospisil, "Changing Lakes State?"; Anton Quist and Ioana Murgoci, "Human Security Survey Expert Panel Monitor: Q1-Q2 2023, Greater Yirol," November 2023, PAX, <https://protectionofcivilians.org/report/hss-expert-panel-monitor-q1-q2-update-from-greater-yirol-lakes-state-south-sudan-2/>; Quist and Sleibi, "HSS 2022 Annual Summary Report."

90 Pospisil, "Changing Lakes State?" 5.

91 Pospisil, "Changing Lakes State?"; Muorwel and Pospisil, "Peace in Transition."

92 Pospisil, "Changing Lakes State?"; Anyar Kuol, "Lakes residents divided over Rin Tueny's removal," *The Radio Community*, January 20, 2026, <https://theradiocommunity.org/lakes-residents-divided-over-rin-tuenys-removal-5263>.

93 Gen. Rin Tueny thanks Kiir, backs successor after removal as Lakes State governor," *Sudans Post*, January 21, 2026, <https://www.sudanspost.com/gen-rin-tueny-thanks-kiir-backs-successor-after-removal-as-lakes-state-governor/>.

94 Interviews with L2, L4, L5, L6, L7, L8 and L9 on 22 November and 2, 4, 6-7, 10 and 12 December 2025; Stephen Akroyd, "From Cattle Raids to Peace Talks: How communities are driving local peacebuilding efforts in South Sudan," *Oxford Policy Management*, November 2024, <https://www.opml.co.uk/insights/cattle-raids-peace-talks-how-communities-are-driving-local-peacebuilding-efforts-south>; Ryle and Amuom, "Peace is the Name."

95 Interview with L10, a cattle keeper, on 12 December 2025.

96 Interviews with L2-4, L6, L7 and L10 on 21-22 November and 4, 6 and 12 December 2025.

97 Interviews with L1, L9, U1-5, U7 and U10 on 21 November and 3-6 and 9-10 December 2025.

98 Interviews with L1, L8, L9, U3, U6, U8, U12 and U13 on 21 November and 4-5, 7, 10-11 and 14 December 2025.

99 Interview with U6, a cattle keeper, on 5 December 2025.

100 Interview with L8, a cattle keeper, on 7 December 2025.

101 Interviews with L1-2, L5-7, L9, L10 and U1-11 on 21 November and 2-10 and 12 December 2025.

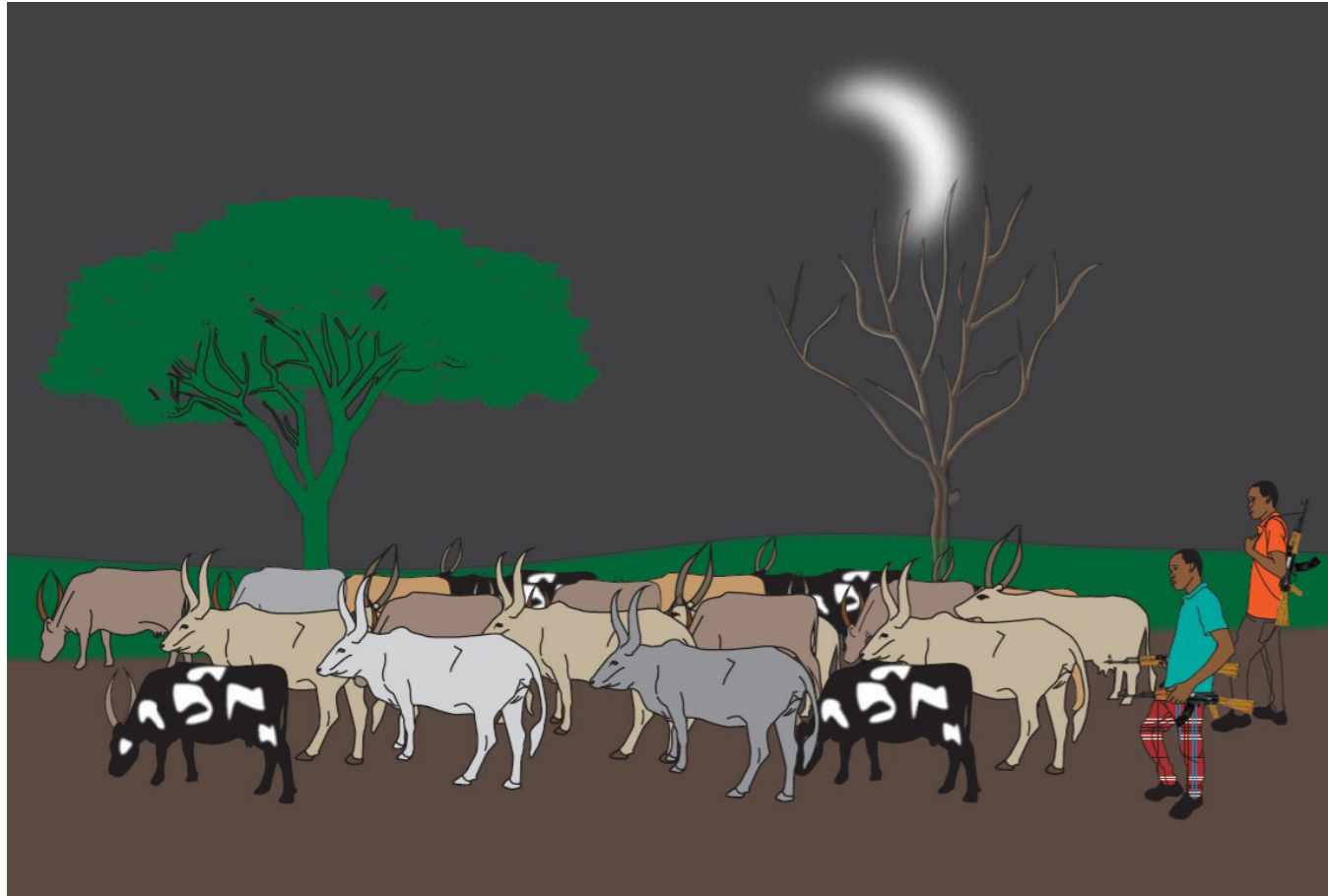
102 Interview with U6, a cattle keeper, on 5 December 2025.

103 Interview with U9, a cattle camp leader, on 8 December 2025.

104 Interviews with U3, U5 and U11 on 4-5 and 10 December 2025.

105 Interviews with U3, U6 and U10 on 4-5 and 9 December 2025.

106 Interview with U13, a cattle keeper, on 14 December 2025.



▲ **Figure 8** Armed youth raiding cattle at night. ©Egret Publishers/PAX, 2026

Following a successful raid, stolen cattle are distributed among the raiders, with the *kat-teeng* ('ringleader') taking the biggest share.¹⁰⁷ While not mentioned explicitly by our respondents, secondary literature also points to other stakeholders taking or demanding their share, such as elders or 'spearmasters' (see next sub-section).¹⁰⁸ Raiders can choose to keep or sell the cattle, but one interviewee acknowledged that the latter is usually the preferred choice, given that – if law enforcement would be to follow up on and retrieve the stolen cattle – you would be left with nothing.¹⁰⁹

While community elders were frequently mentioned as the people deciding on raids, two interviewees mentioned that elders may also advise restraint or mediation, but that their standing in the community is no longer what it used to be – likely due to years of

armed conflict and related militarization of society, which has armed and empowered younger men, while also eroding cultural norms and changing the nature of motivations for raids – so that they choose to ignore them.¹¹⁰ According to a cattle keeper and raider from Unity State, "community leaders have less authority: when elders attempt to mediate, younger fighters sometimes ignore tradition, claiming elders are out of touch with modern threats."¹¹¹

The role of spearmasters

Of particular note is the role of spiritual leaders, or 'spearmasters', in facilitating or even encouraging the raids, mentioned specifically by 11 interviewees, including multiple raiders.¹¹² Armed youth or their leader

107 Interviews with L5, L9, L10, U1 and U2 on 2-3, 10 and 12 December 2025.

108 Riley, "Part of their life.": Peacebuilding Opportunities Fund, *What Drives the Cattle Camps?*

109 Interview with L5, a cattle keeper, on 2 December 2025.

110 Interviews with U4 and U5 on 4-5 December 2025. This finding was corroborated in data validation sessions held in March and April 2026, in which 35 cattle camp leaders and three elders were consulted.

111 Interview with U4, a cattle keeper, on 4 December 2025.

112 Interviews with L2, L4-9, U1, U6, U9 and U12 on 21-22 November, 2-8 and 10-11 December 2025.

may seek out spearmasters to receive charms or spells blessing their endeavors and, so it is believed, granting physical protection to the men. This occurs specifically in relation to cattle raiding, as well as broader ventures that are perceived to require luck or blessings.¹¹³ Their role extends to actively encouraging raids by promising the young men that they will be successful and return with huge numbers of cattle.¹¹⁴ A young raider from Unity State emphasized the spiritual preparation that takes place before a raid, typically involving prayers, the rubbing of 'protective ash' over their bodies, and ritual drinking ceremonies.¹¹⁵ The complicity of spiritual leaders has previously been described in academic literature and NGO reports and is likely linked to these individuals sharing in the bounty of successful raids.¹¹⁶

These same authors indicate that spearmasters, albeit less commonly, can also use their standing and influence to temper the desire for raids or revenge killings, and in March 2026, spearmasters from across Lakes State indeed came together to call for an end to violence.¹¹⁷ This positive role was not mentioned by our interviewees, however. In follow-up data validation sessions, some consulted spearmasters challenged these findings, while others conceded that their influence could be 'misinterpreted' or 'misused' by armed youth. Many of them, however, expressed a willingness to wield their influence in a more positive manner, repositioning themselves as messengers and brokers of peace.¹¹⁸

Causes for raids

There are many factors that may compel armed youth to get involved in cattle raids, which often overlap or influence each other. The most frequently cited motivations by far are raids to avenge past thefts or other offences, poverty and a desire for increased wealth, and as a response to social pressure and the sense that participation will raise prestige among peers.¹¹⁹ According to one interviewee, "You raid from

113 Interviews with L5, L6, L10, U1, U2 and U5 on 2-5 and 12 December 2025.

114 Interviews with L6 and L7 on 6-7 December 2025.

115 Interview with U6, a cattle keeper, on 5 December 2025.

116 See, for instance, Peacebuilding Opportunities Fund, *What Drives the Cattle Camps?*; Wild, Jok, and Patel, "Militarization of cattle raiding."

117 "Rumbek: Spear masters call for end to revenge killings," *Radio Tamazuj*, March 12, 2026, <https://www.radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/rumbek-spear-masters-call-for-end-to-revenge-killings>.

118 Data validation sessions on 31 March and 1 April 2026 in Payinjia County, Unity State, involving 13 spearmasters.

119 These were mentioned by 21, 16 and 13 of 23 respondents respectively.

120 Interview with L5, a cattle keeper, on 2 December 2025.

121 Data validation session on 31 March 2026, in a cattle camp in Payinjia County, Unity State, involving armed youth leaders and spearmasters.

122 Interviews with U7 and U8 on 6-7 December 2025.

123 Interviews with L1 and L8 on 21 November and 7 December 2025.



▲ **Figure 9** A 'spearmaster' in Unity State. ©James Gatsby Machoak, 2026

the community that has raided your community in the past. It is revenge for sure. People retaliate in return and this can escalate into a big issue that engulfs the whole community."¹²⁰ Sometimes, mere rumors about violence and cattle raids by certain groups can be sufficient to mobilize armed youth into action.¹²¹ Others noted how "raids become a way to gain status among peers", that refusing is "socially risky", and that "there is increased pressure on younger boys to prove themselves", perpetuating cycles of violence.¹²² Two interviewees specifically noted how one's masculinity may be called into question when refusing to participate, potentially lowering their desirability towards potential brides.¹²³ This can provide a particularly strong incentive for raids in a societal context where marriage continues to be seen

as an important rite of passage that confers status on the male.

Interestingly, these notions appear to primarily reflect perceptions inside the cattle camps, rather than reflecting general societal attitudes towards cattle raiding. During several PAX survey cycles in Lakes and Unity States between 2018-2025 (see ‘Methodology’ for more details), there was consistently a sizeable majority that disagreed with the statement that ‘A young man who raids lots of cattle from a neighbouring [sic] community is to be respected.’¹²⁴

Other causes that were mentioned include high bride prices, hunger, and competition over scarce resources,¹²⁵ all of which can be seen as elements of poverty or economic concerns as the overarching issue. However, the issue of bride prices is particularly notable. While men brought them up as a cause for raids, several also noted that men have decreased marriage chances as a result of the raids when losing their cows.¹²⁶ One respondent, a victim of raids by others, lamented his inability to get married because of it.¹²⁷

Though more rare, some interviewees pointed to the influence of external actors. Two men from Lakes State argued that some chiefs encourage raids from communities beyond their state; alleging that chiefs would not condone raids from communities within the state because of the risk of getting caught by law enforcement.¹²⁸ As one of them put it:

*The local chiefs sometimes encourage external raids [outside of Lakes State] more than internal ones [inside of Lakes State] [because] they are convicted by the government when it happens internally, but for external raids, like in Payinjiar County, the government does not intervene.*¹²⁹

At least one interviewee openly accused senior government representatives in Unity State of personally benefiting from the violence by taking raided cattle for himself, while another more subtly hinted at the involvement of formal authorities in encouraging raids for personal gains.¹³⁰ Another cattle keeper argued that “political differences” between politicians and authorities in Lakes and Unity States have furthermore been an impediment to the return of cattle that was stolen in cross-border raids.¹³¹ Relatedly, others mentioned political manipulation as a cause for raids,¹³² and in data validation sessions armed youth leaders specifically highlighted external political influence as a considerable factor in fueling tensions between cattle camps and mobilizing armed youth.¹³³ This corresponds with findings in secondary literature that describe how armed youth and cattle keepers have often been co-opted by rival military factions in South Sudan.¹³⁴ One interviewee saw evidence for this in the type of weapons that raiders use: “They might have been encouraged by their government because they use big artilleries for attacks and cattle raids. These big artilleries cannot be used by civilians; they are for organized forces.”¹³⁵ Generally, the prevalence of firearms in the hands of civilians is considered a negative influence, both because it escalates the nature of raids, and – as several interviewees alleged – it tempts men to conduct raids in the first place.¹³⁶

Finally, some respondents mentioned that it is the lack of proper arrangements and guidance around seasonal cattle migration that contributes to the raids,¹³⁷ or simply the fact that raiding is engrained into some local cultures.¹³⁸ One man from Lakes State accused his neighbors in Unity State, specifically the people from Payinjiar County, of having made raiding “into a culture” due to “their grandfathers [passing] these bad practices of raiding on to them”.¹³⁹ There are further persistent perceptions among Lakes State

interviewees that their Payinjiar neighbors raid their cattle because of a lack of agricultural opportunities on their side of the border: “People from Payinjiar County do not have good land for farming crops, that is why they come and raid cattle from us.”¹⁴⁰ And:

*Nuer from Unity State like to raid our cattle, while Dinka from Lakes State try to escape with their livestock towards safer areas, but they [Nuer] still come to take them. Nuerland [Payinjiar County, Unity State] lacks groundnuts and long-term sorghum; they only grow maize and short-term sorghum. But we have all of those, including cattle. So, they say that they should take cattle from us, while we remain with groundnuts and long-term sorghum to feed our people.*¹⁴¹

Civilian harm from cattle raiding

In dissecting the impacts of cattle raiding, a useful distinction can be made between so-called direct and reverberating civilian harm effects. The former refers to “immediate and (usually) physical impact” caused directly by the use of force,¹⁴² whereas PAX uses the term reverberating civilian harm to classify “those effects that are not necessarily caused directly by the attack, but are nonetheless a product thereof”.¹⁴³ It is important to note, however, that many of these effects do not occur in isolation; rather, people may experience several negative impacts simultaneously, and these may even intersect to create overall worse outcomes (so-called ‘compounding effects’).¹⁴⁴ Moreover, it is difficult with regard to the impacts of raids to strictly distinguish between their negative effects on the raiders and cattle keepers themselves, and on the

wider community, given the important function cattle camps and their inhabitants fulfill in South Sudanese society and the many linkages that exist between the camps and the ‘outside’ communities.

Direct effects of cattle raids

Not surprisingly, our respondents overwhelmingly referred to deaths and physical injuries as common consequences of the raids, both among raiders and bystanders.¹⁴⁵ Young men who participated in raids lamented that what start out as small injuries become exacerbated due to lack of medical care, with pain becoming a chronic part of their lives.¹⁴⁶ Another frequent occurrence is the loss or destruction of property, which has devastating consequences for these communities where cows are more than ‘just’ property, but represent people’s entire livelihood or capital.¹⁴⁷ Many interviewees mentioned the specific psychological toll of raids and the violence that goes with it. Again, this is seen to be negatively affecting raiders, non-raiding cattle keepers, as well as the wider community. Some referred specifically to fear,¹⁴⁸ observing for instance that “children grow up afraid of public spaces”.¹⁴⁹ Others focused more on the trauma following raids.¹⁵⁰ A 22-year-old cattle keeper from Lakes State recalled his emotions following a raid: “I feared being followed. I had a nightmare and felt sleepless during the nights. It seems like the owners of the raided cattle are still fighting with us.”¹⁵¹ Various interviewees acknowledged that the raids come with a long-term emotional cost, making many hypervigilant, distrustful, or more apathic. According to one, “boys who once laughed easily, now flinch at sudden sounds”.¹⁵²

None of the interviewees mentioned kidnappings or sexual violence when describing (the impacts of) the

124 See Annex A for the specific survey results.

125 Explicitly mentioned by five, four, and two interviewees respectively. During data validation sessions in March and April 2026 in Payinjiar County, Unity State, resource-related conflicts emerged as a more prominent causal factor for raids.

126 Interviews with L2, U1, U4, U6 and U7 on 21 November and 3-6 December 2025.

127 Interview with L2, a cattle keeper, on 21 November 2025.

128 Interviews with L3 and L7 on 22 November and 6 December 2025.

129 Interview with L3, a cattle camp leader, on 22 November 2025.

130 Interviews with U9 and U12 on 8 and 11 December 2025.

131 Interview with L9, a cattle keeper, on 10 December 2025.

132 Interviews with L1 and L3 on 21-22 November 2025.

133 Data validation session on 31 March in a cattle camp in Payinjiar County, Unity State, involving 25 armed youth leaders.

134 See, for instance, Wild, Jok, and Patel, “Militarization of cattle raiding.”

135 Interview with L3, a cattle camp leader, on 22 November 2025.

136 Interviews with L1, L2, L8, L10 and U3 on 21 November and 4, 7 and 12 December 2025.

137 Interviews with L1 and L4 on 21-22 November 2025.

138 Interviews with L9, U1, U3 and U8 on 3-4, 7 and 10 December 2025.

139 Interview with L9, a cattle keeper, on 10 December 2025.

140 Interview with L10 a cattle keeper, on 12 December 2025.

141 Interview with L7, a cattle keeper, on 6 December 2025.

142 Sarah Holewinski et al., “Beyond Casualty Counts: Building Dynamic Models to Capture and Foresee Civilian Harm,” 2021, Frontlines Lab, 5.

143 Ellen Nohle and Isabel Robinson, “War in Cities: The Reverberating Effects of Explosive Weapons,” *Humanitarian Law and Policy*, March 2, 2017, <https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2017/03/02/war-in-cities-the-reverberating-effects-of-explosive-weapons/>.

144 Erin Bijl, Welmoet Wels, and Wilbert van der Zeijden, *On Civilian Harm* (PAX, 2021), 245, <https://protectionofcivilians.org/on-civilian-harm/>.

145 Interviews with L1, L2, L3, L4, L5, L6, L8, L9, L10, U1, U2, U3, U4, U9, U12 and U13 on 21-22 November and 2-4, 7-8, 10-12 and 14 December 2025.

146 Interviews with U9 and U13 on 8 and 14 December 2025.

147 Interviews with L1, L2, L3, L4, L5 and L7 on 21-22 November and 2 and 6 December 2025.

148 Interviews with L1, L5, L6, U2, U11 and U12 on 21 November and 2-4, 11 and 14 December 2025.

149 Interview with U12, a cattle keeper, on 11 December 2025.

150 Interviews with L2, L4, L5, U1, U6, U9, U10 and U13 on 21-22 November and 2-3, 5, 8 and 14 December 2025.

151 Interview with L5, a cattle keeper, on 2 December 2025.

152 Interview with U10, a cattle keeper, on 9 December 2025.

raids, even though these occurrences are documented elsewhere.¹⁵³ One interviewee mentioned, unprompted, that abduction of children and sexual violence do not happen “unless these people whom you went after for revenge did these things to your community members”,¹⁵⁴ which may indicate underreporting of these particular forms of violence by our interviewees – for instance due to social stigmas or a perceived need to frame violence in terms of self-defense – more than their absence being an accurate reflection of current cattle raiding practices.¹⁵⁵ In a data validation session with community members, including several women, this finding was indeed challenged: Participants highlighted that women are disproportionately affected by cattle raiding violence as it results in the deaths of family breadwinners, in displacement, and leads to increased exposure to SGBV. The latter, however, often remains underreported due to fear, stigma, and the lack of accessible support services for female survivors.¹⁵⁶

Reverberating effects of cattle raids

The impacts of raiding go far beyond what is listed above, creating reverberations across large parts of Lakes and Unity States’ society. As previously mentioned, the loss and harm associated with individual raiding incidents often invite retaliation and further violence: “When a cow is taken from a cousin, the decision to retaliate is fast and communal.”¹⁵⁷ This can escalate rapidly. One interviewee spoke of what he calls “family sin lines”, which are “lines of blame across generations”.¹⁵⁸ As a result, whole communities live at odds with each other, undermining formerly close trading relationships.¹⁵⁹ The ongoing violence reshapes families and daily life: mothers become permanent caregivers because men spend months away, children’s school attendance declines because they are needed to guard the cattle, marriages get delayed due to lost ‘bride wealth’, and boys increasingly display

violent behavior and aggression.¹⁶⁰ Regarding the normalization of violence, interviewees indicated that “young men boast of kills, younger boys mimic violent play, and some youth adopt a more hardened and suspicious stance towards outsiders”, and that “boys as young as twelve imitate adult fighters”.¹⁶¹

Due to ongoing violence, people feel less secure traveling and may even abandon their home villages.¹⁶² This, in turn, has a devastating impact on the local economy:

*Fewer traders travel to markets near the border, reducing opportunities to sell surplus milk and take milk to places like Ganyliel and Nyal for selling to earn money that can, in turn, be used for buying medicines for the animals and clothes for the people in the camp.*¹⁶³

Negative economic impacts and the destruction of livelihoods were frequently lamented consequences of the cattle raids, mentioned by almost all interviewees. Raids represent a loss of important economic assets in the form of cows but also keep farmers from traveling to fields further away. This leads to reduced crop yields and contributes to food insecurity.¹⁶⁴ The loss of cows also provides decreased access to milk, which interviewees described as being particularly harmful to children and contributing to their malnutrition.¹⁶⁵ A man from Unity State recalled a specific period when his family was close to starvation and had to resort to eating wild roots because their milking cows had been stolen.¹⁶⁶

Caught between pressure, pride, and shame

Armed youth in South Sudan often perform a dual role: They can be seen as providing security to their own communities, often in the absence of functioning law enforcement, but are considered threatening and instigators or perpetrators of violence by others. This duality is strongly present, not only in how others in the community perceive armed youth and cattle raiders, but also in how they view themselves, and in the emotions they experience following a raid. Many of our interviewees who admitted to having raided cattle reflected on the sense of pride they feel in their abilities after a successful raid.¹⁶⁷ It provides them with the status and admiration of their peers. Some interviewees told us of the nicknames they have earned in the camps that praise, for example, their lethality or effectiveness in combat.¹⁶⁸

At the same time, these raiders also admitted to feelings of fear, shame, or guilt alongside – or sometimes even outweighing – their pride.¹⁶⁹ Feelings of guilt are common when people are killed during a raid. One cattle raider mentioned that “raids sometimes target the most vulnerable, like *kraals* with few guards or elderly caretakers. This creates shame among us fighters, especially when women and children are injured or killed.”¹⁷⁰ Fear is also common: Pride following a raid is sometimes short-lived and soon replaced by fear of revenge attacks. This results in nightmares and emotional exhaustion.¹⁷¹ According to one respondent, “raids transform the camp’s morale”, with feelings of “fatigue, chronic worry, and distrust of strangers” taking over.¹⁷² Raiders are acutely aware of the risks they expose themselves to, observing that “a person who participated in cattle raiding never lasts long”,¹⁷³ either because he will become the victim of

revenge or because of a more spiritual understanding of retribution.¹⁷⁴ The latter was raised by several respondents,¹⁷⁵ and described as the belief that “gods of the cattle will follow the raiders, and kill them and their relatives”.¹⁷⁶

Yet, there remain sufficient incentives to engage in raiding. One respondent mused that the benefits outweigh these risks because while “the raiding of other people’s cattle may lead to death”, it also means that “you can easily get married and when you die during cattle raiding violence, your team can sit together and contribute cows to give to your wife or brothers who are still alive”.¹⁷⁷ Another dominant incentive is that – particularly within the camps, but sometimes also by the wider community – young men who refuse to join raids are regarded as cowards and may find themselves excluded from the group.¹⁷⁸

Several interviewees also believed that ‘outsiders’ see them primarily as heroes and protectors because they protect community resources.¹⁷⁹ One man noted that “we work for the community welfare, we help the government to protect civilians and their livestock”.¹⁸⁰ They may also fill an important void left by often weak and ineffective law enforcement presence (discussed in greater detail in the next chapter): “We are seen as community protectors because the government does not respond in time, but we do.”¹⁸¹ However, many interviewed cattle camp inhabitants acknowledged that, for many people living outside the camps, these perceptions are often more mixed, with armed youth being seen as both guardians and threats depending on the context and their behavior.¹⁸²

153 See, for instance, Chilvers, “Preventing cattle raiding violence.”; Regional Centre on Small Arms and Light Weapons, *Regional report on the nexus between illicit SALW proliferation and cattle rustling*, May 2023, <https://www.recsasec.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/cattle-rustling-pdf.pdf>.

154 Interview with L5, a cattle keeper, on 2 December 2025.

155 Potential explanations are that certain forms of violence, especially those causing harm to children or women, carry strong moral condemnation, making it more likely that respondents will omit such details from their interviews. Armed youth may also want to present their actions as legitimate, citing defense or retaliation, and excluding more problematic forms of violence that do not fit such narratives.

156 Data validation session on 1 April in Ganyliel town, Payinjiar County (Unity State), involving community representatives.

157 Interview with U3, a cattle keeper, on 4 December 2025.

158 Interview with U11, a cattle keeper, on 10 December 2025.

159 Interviews with L7, L10, U2, U3, U5, U7, U10, U12 and U13 on 3-6, 9, 11-12 and 14 December 2025.

160 Interviews with U4, U5, U6, U7, U10 and U12 on 4-6, 9 and 11 December 2025.

161 Interviews with U5 and U6 respectively on 5 December 2025.

162 Interviews with L5, L6, L7, L9, L10, U1, U2, U5, U6, U7, U8, U10, U12 on 2-12 December 2025.

163 Interview with U5, a cattle keeper, on 5 December 2025.

164 Interviews with L6 and L9 on 4 and 10 December 2025.

165 Interviews with L1, L9, U1, U6, U7, U10 and U11 on 21 November and 3, 5-6 and 9-10 December 2025.

166 Interview with U10, a cattle keeper, on 9 December 2025.

167 Interviews with U1, U3, U4, U5, U7, U8 and U10 on 3-7 and 9 December 2025.

168 Interviews with U6, U7, U12 and U13 on 5-6, 11 and 14 December 2025.

169 Interviews with U1, U3, U4, U5, U7, U8, U9, U10, U11, U12 and U13 on 3-11 and 14 December 2025.

170 Interview with U13, a cattle keeper, on 14 December 2025.

171 Interviews with U1, U4, U7 and U9 on 3-4, 6 and 8 December 2025.

172 Interview with U7, a cattle keeper, on 6 December 2025.

173 Interview with L1, a cattle camp leader, on 21 November 2025.

174 Research by the Peacebuilding Opportunities Fund among cattle camp inhabitants similarly found that these men are often acutely aware of the “very tangible risks” related to cattle raiding – predominantly in the form of death or becoming haunted by spirits. See Peacebuilding Opportunities Fund, *What Drives the Cattle Camps?*, 27.

175 Interviews with L1, L8 and L10 on 21 November and 7 and 12 December 2025.

176 Interview with L1, a cattle camp leader, on 21 November 2025.

177 Interview with U3, a cattle keeper, on 4 December 2025.

178 Interviews with L2, L4, L5, L6, L7, L8, L10, U1, U7 and U8 on 21-22 November and 2-4, 6-7 and 12 December 2025.

179 Interviews with L5, L6 and L9 on 2, 4 and 10 December 2025.

180 Interview with L9, a cattle keeper, on 10 December 2025.

181 Interview with L6, a cattle keeper, on 4 December 2025.

182 Interviews with L7, L8, L10, U1, U3, U4, U5 and U6 on 3-7 and 12 December 2025.

7. Conflict resolution mechanisms and needs

As evident from the previous chapter, armed youth involved in cattle raiding often recognize the considerable harm that their actions inflict on themselves, the cattle camps, and the wider community. At the very least, they feel ambivalent about their actions, and have – in our interviews – more than once expressed a desire to find a way out of this cycle of violence. This chapter explores what conflict resolution mechanisms exist, and why these fail to fully address or prevent the violence. Beyond that, it will present the views of our respondents on

what peace means to them and how they believe it can be achieved.

(Uneven) Disarmament

Many respondents attributed the prevalence of cattle raiding and/or the intensity of the violence accompanying the raids to the widespread availability of firearms.¹⁸³ Many specifically highlighted that uneven disarmament efforts in South Sudan create insecurity that exacerbates cattle raiding trends. Cattle keepers in Lakes State in particular were adamant that disarmament efforts in their area had left them vulnerable to attacks by their neighbors in Unity State, where the authorities have hardly imposed disarmament or law enforcement campaigns.¹⁸⁴ One man described how “we in Greater Yirol are vulnerable people: we lose our cattle every day because we are disarmed.”¹⁸⁵ Another posited, referring to armed youth from Payinjiar County in Unity State, that “when

they hear that disarmament has taken place in Lakes State, they attack immediately because they know no guns have remained in the hands of civilians.”¹⁸⁶ One interviewee from Lakes State, however, acknowledged that disarmament efforts in his area had not been successful either, with many community members still owning guns.¹⁸⁷ Accounts of where the arms come from varied but included mentions of local traders and government and army officials.¹⁸⁸ One person alleged that “the dishonest army collects guns and resells them to civilians”.¹⁸⁹ This is consistent with other reporting that summarizes the issue as “the gun store has two doors”: arms that are confiscated usually find their way back quickly into society due to corruption.¹⁹⁰

Not surprisingly, several interviewees raised that successful conflict resolution would require the national government to apply uniform disarmament across the country.¹⁹¹ Some tied this explicitly to the demand that the government make work of implementing the national peace agreement in good faith.¹⁹² Despite this sense that peacebuilding requires disarmament, many interviewees simultaneously raised that their current protection hinges on being armed themselves until there is a government that can guarantee security to all.¹⁹³ One interviewee summarized this dilemma by stating that “a bull whose horns have been curved cannot fight a bull whose horns have been sharpened”.¹⁹⁴ Another interviewee mentioned:

People have mistaken us by concluding that all cattle keepers are bad people who fight each other. This is not true: We are good people who are carrying guns to protect our resources and our own lives from aggressors. We keep arms to protect our cattle from being taken away by those who do not have cattle.]¹⁹⁵

This effectively creates what PAX in a previous report described as a ‘catch-22’ situation: security requires disarmament but until there is sufficient security, people will be reluctant to disarm.¹⁹⁶ It also points to a wider issue that disarmament campaigns that do not address the root causes of conflict do nothing to take away motivations for rearmament; in fact, perceptions that uneven disarmament makes one community more vulnerable to the attacks of others may perpetuate and accelerate the demand for arms.¹⁹⁷ This helps explain why armed youth, when asked in data validation sessions to rank various conflict resolution options in terms of perceived effectiveness, generally gave less priority to disarmament over other, more community-led approaches.¹⁹⁸

(Ineffective) Law enforcement

The perceived need for youth and cattle camp inhabitants to remain armed is exacerbated by the (perceived) inability of government actors – specifically the police – to provide security. They have been described as too weak to provide protection, and 15 interviewees were outright negative of the police’s role in resolving cattle raiding issues.¹⁹⁹ This sentiment was especially prevalent among armed youth from Unity State. The lack of sufficient state security actor presence has led to feelings of abandonment and insecurity among armed youth, which they cited as an important reason to arm themselves.²⁰⁰ Just three individuals were more positive, mentioning cases where the police had successfully returned stolen cattle and contributed to security and justice,²⁰¹ while one cattle camp leader indicated that police would sometimes be effective, sometimes ineffective.²⁰²

183 There are no recent, reliable statistics on the number of arms in the country, but in a 2016 national survey 15 percent of respondents reported that their household owned at least one firearm. This does not account for considerable regional variation; a subsequent assessment in Rumbek County in Lakes State in 2017 indicated that ca. 80 percent of households owned at least one firearm. See Kuyang Harriet Logo and Moncef Kartas, “Challenges to small arms and light weapons control in South Sudan,” November 2022, Saferworld, SRIC, and CACDA, 7, <https://www.saferworld-global.org/resources/publications/1412-challenges-to-small-arms-and-light-weapons-control-in-south-sudan>.

184 Interviews with L2, L3, L5, L6, L7, L8, L9, L10 on 21-22 November and 2, 4, 6-7 and 10 December 2025.

185 Interview with L2, a cattle keeper, on 21 November 2025.

186 Interview with L3, a cattle camp leader, on 22 November 2025.

187 Interview with L10, a cattle keeper, on 12 December 2025.

188 Interviews with L1, L4, L7, L8 on 21-22 November and 6-7 December 2025.

189 Interview with L4, a cattle camp leader, on 22 November 2025.

190 Ryle and Amuom, “Peace is the Name,” 59.

191 Interviews with L1, L5, L6 and L10 on 21 November and 2, 4 and 12 December 2025.

192 Interviews with L5, L6, L7, L9 and L10 on 2, 4, 6, 10 and 12 December 2025.

193 Interviews with L7, U1 and U2 on 3 and 6 December 2025.

194 Interview with L4, a cattle camp leader, on 22 November 2025.

195 Interview with L7, a cattle keeper, on 6 December 2025.

196 Geoffrey L. Duke and Hans Rouw, “The catch-22 of security and civilian disarmament,” September 2013, SSANSA & IKV Pax Christi, <https://paxforpeace.nl/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/import/import/the-catch-22-of-security-and-civilian-disarmament.pdf>.

197 Duke and Rouw, “The catch-22.”

198 Data validation session on 30 March in a cattle camp in Payinjiar County, Unity State, with 30 armed youth representatives.

199 Interviews with L3, L4, L6, L10, U1, U2, U3, U4, U5, U6, U7, U8, U9, U10 and U11 on 22 November and 3-10 and 12 December 2025.

200 Data validation sessions on 30-31 March and 1 April in Payinjiar County, Unity State.

201 Interviews with L2, L7 and L8 on 21 November and 6-7 December 2025.

202 Interview with L1, a cattle camp leader, on 21 November 2025.

Interviewees complained, for instance, that police “do not run after raided cattle if they are not ordered to by their commanders”,²⁰³ or that they may “run after the raiders, but sometimes delay until attackers have disappeared with cattle”.²⁰⁴ One respondent explained that they “do not pursue raided cattle due to a fear of being overpowered by the attackers [and that] their monthly salaries are often delayed, making them reluctant to protect civilians”.²⁰⁵ One cattle keeper specifically related this poor law enforcement performance to the need for having armed youth around, saying that “the local police play no role nowadays in communal conflicts because they fear death. Armed youth help the community if there is any external aggression or attack”.²⁰⁶

Community perspectives on law enforcement performance

The low trust of cattle keepers in the police stands in contrast to the generally high levels of trust and appreciation that community members residing in villages and towns have in the police. In Greater Yirol (Lakes State), between 73-86 percent of respondents over four separate survey rounds found the police’s overall performance to be “(very) good”; in Payinjiar County (Unity State), this was 75-90 percent, which is higher than the performance rates for armed youth.²⁰⁷ When asked whether their community relies on police or armed youth for security, between 64-83 percent of respondents in Lakes State responded in favor of the police.²⁰⁸ In Unity State, this ranged between 34-65 percent; during two survey rounds, the armed youth scored higher than the police.²⁰⁹

203 Interview with L3, a cattle camp leader, on 22 November 2025.

204 Interview with L4, a cattle camp leader, on 22 November 2025.

205 Interview with L10, a cattle keeper, on 12 December 2025.

206 Interview with L6, a cattle keeper, on 4 December 2025.

207 Quist and Sleibi, “HSS South Sudan: Greater Yirol Trend Analysis.”; Quist, “HSS South Sudan: Payinjiar Trend Analysis.”

208 Quist and Sleibi, “HSS South Sudan: Greater Yirol Trend Analysis.”

209 Quist, “HSS South Sudan: Payinjiar Trend Analysis.”

210 See, for instance, *Bridging the law enforcement gap in South Sudan*, Silvano Yokwe (2021, PAX), documentary, <https://protectionofcivilians.org/video/bridging-the-law-enforcement-gap-in-south-sudan/>.

Often, community members regard police and armed youth as almost mutually exclusive: In areas where local government and police are present, the need for informal self-defense groups is less, while armed youth – often considered less accountable to local government authorities – are usually present in remote areas where there is hardly any police and/or local government. Many HSS respondents have expressed hopes that a well-functioning formal police force that is accountable to local government authorities will ultimately make self-protection mechanisms and armed youth militia redundant, and pave the way for civilian disarmament campaigns.

However, current police capabilities are often not considered sufficient to match these expectations: not in the towns and villages, let alone in the remote bush where cattle camps are usually located. Frequent community dialogues and PAX engagements with local authorities and police have painted a picture of a poorly resourced police body. They often lack sufficient manpower and/or arms and ammunition, have not received formal training (in the absence of a national police academy or curriculum), and are sometimes forced to work without dedicated police stations, detention cells, vehicles, fuel, or even regular salaries.²¹⁰

(Malign) Influence from external actors

Our interviewees had a generally more positive perception of the influence and role of other actors – most notably chiefs and formal authorities – in providing functioning mechanisms for conflict resolution. Chiefs often live outside of cattle camps but exert a lot of (in)direct influence on the life in the

camps (see also chapter 5). A majority of interviewees asserted that they can be an important actor in settling cattle raiding disputes or ensuring that stolen cattle is returned.²¹¹ For instance, by helping regulate cattle camp movements so that cattle keepers are less likely to enter into conflict with each other or with farmers over access to water and pastures.²¹² The latter is also done by formal authorities, particularly in Lakes State, where payam administrators or county commissioners have to be consulted on cattle camp movements.²¹³ Such arrangements are sometimes negotiated between neighboring, or even cross-border, communities, but are often fragile and easily break down when there is a lack of sustained dialogue, trust, or enforcement mechanisms.

More specifically in relation to cattle raiding, the Lakes State authorities under leadership of (former) Governor Rin Tueny put in place security measures and laws that are said to successfully help prevent cattle raids.²¹⁴ According to one interviewee, “now, you can leave your cow outside and sleep inside your house during night hours. In the morning, you can find it safe, which is good.”²¹⁵ The measures in question, however, often violate human rights, and can involve capital punishment for those who are found guilty of cattle raiding (see also the text box in chapter 6).²¹⁶ Other interviewees mentioned accountability measures that involved paying (high) fines and the peaceful return of cattle.²¹⁷ However, because of perceived gaps in terms of the overall effectiveness of justice and accountability measures, these do not seem sufficient to deter potential cattle raiders.

In addition to concerns over the punishments that are being imposed on some raiders, there are more caveats to consider in relation to the role played by chiefs and formal authorities. Some cattle keepers explicitly linked these actors to inciting cattle raiding for personal gains, an issue explored in greater detail in chapter 6 under ‘Causes for raids’.²¹⁸

211 Interviews with L6, L7, L8, L9, U1, U2, U3, U4, U5, U6, U7, U8, U9, U10 and U11 on 3-10 December 2025.

212 Interviews with L3, L8 and L9 on 22 November and 7 and 10 December 2025.

213 Interviews with L1, L2, L3, L4, L5, L6, L7, L8, L9 and L10 on 21-22 November and 2, 4, 6-7, 10 and 12 December 2025.

214 Interviews with L1, L2, L5, L7 and L8 on 21 November and 2, 6-7 December 2025.

215 Interview with L7, a cattle keeper, on 6 December 2025.

216 Interviews with L1 and L5 on 21 November and 2 December 2025; Pospisil, “Changing Lakes State?”

217 Interviews with L2 and L7 on 21 November and 6, 8 and 14 December 2025.

218 Interviews with L3, L4, L7, U9 and U12 on 22 November and 6 December 2025.

219 “Yirol East: Border communities sign 21 peace resolutions,” *Radio Tamazuj*, September 9, 2024, <https://www.radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/yirol-east-border-communities-sign-21-peace-resolutions>; “Nyang Peace Conference,” PAX, September 6, 2024, <https://protectionofcivilians.org/event/nyang-peace-conference/>.

(Limited) Participation in local peace processes

Given the failings of national actors to provide peace and security, and the complex interplay between national and sub-national interests and dynamics, peacebuilding efforts in South Sudan are often targeted at more grassroots and sub-national levels. In Unity and Lakes States, as well as the border area, there have been repeated attempts at brokering local peace agreements to address cross-border issues, most recently in 2024 through the Nyang peace conference (see box below).

The 2024 Nyang peace conference

On 5-6 September 2024, a two-day conference took place in Yirol East County, involving community representatives and authorities from both Lakes and Unity States, to discuss causes and impacts of intercommunal violence – which had been on the rise again in the preceding period – and possible means to address and resolve cross-border conflicts. The conference was organized by South Sudan’s Ministry of Peace Building, with support from UNMISS and PAX. Specifically, the dialogue centered on grievances and needs from the Rumbek North, Rumbek Center, Rumbek East, Yirol West, and Yirol East Counties in Lakes State, and Payinjiar County in Unity State. The peace conference was concluded with the adoption of 21 resolutions for peaceful coexistence, signed by state ministers, county commissioners, and customary chiefs. Cattle raiding was one of the top agenda items during the two days and, as a result, resolutions were included that, among other things, sought to achieve the recovery of stolen livestock and provision of justice to perpetrators.²¹⁹



▲ **Figure 10** The gun store has 'two doors', whereby confiscated arms quickly reenter society through corruption. ©Egret Publishers/PAX, 2026

Yet, for many cattle keepers and specifically the men who make up the armed youth, access to and participation in local peace processes or conferences remains difficult, even though they play a significant role in both causing insecurity to some while providing protection to others. Our interviewees mentioned a number of contributing factors. Due to strict camp hierarchies and their relatively young age, some men are never considered for participation in peace processes, which was lamented by several men as this leads them to believe that their grievances are never heard or taken into account.²²⁰ Others raised that insecurity and/or long distances keep them from traveling to the location of such conferences,²²¹ or that there is a lack of available information about the processes.²²² For some, there is also a lack of trust in their outcome, for instance because of perceived political interference or patronage networks undermining the possibilities for peace.²²³

220 Interviews with L7 and U1, U3, U8, U9 and U12 on 3-4 and 6-8 December 2025.

221 Interviews with L4, L5, U1, U2, U3, U4, U9, U10 and U11 on 22 November and 2-4 and 8-10 December 2025.

222 Interviews with L4, L5, L9 and U1 on 22 November and 2-3 and 10 December 2025.

223 Interviews with L4 and U12 on 22 November and 11 December 2025.

224 Interviews with U6 and U11 on 5 and 10 December 2025.

225 Interviews with L1, L2, L3, L5, L6, L7, L8, L9, U1, U2, U3, U5, U10 and U11 on 21-22 November and 2-7 and 9-10 December 2025.

Conflict resolution needs

When asked about conflict resolution needs and solutions to bring violent cattle raiding practices to an end, our interviewees brought up a range of possibilities and needs. As elaborated above, there is a broad call for the establishment of more effective rule of law and security provision. To address cases where cattle raiding has already occurred, two interviewees further offered the idea of setting up compensation mechanisms that would be overseen by a neutral or cross-border committee and which would facilitate the return of stolen animals. This would then lessen the perceived need among affected cattle keepers to recover their herds through violent means.²²⁴ A majority of interviewees specifically requested that more peace conferences be organized in the cattle camps themselves (as opposed to in towns) and at the border area.²²⁵ A cattle keeper from Unity State expressed that

"youth feel understood when organizations visit them directly",²²⁶ while another indicated:

*I appeal for more peace meetings to be extended to cattle camps, so that small children, elderly people, and armed youth listen with their own ears. They are good listeners and they do not forget what they have heard and seen.*²²⁷

Two men from Unity State who had participated in raids also suggested to target the elders, chiefs, and spiritual leaders who play a role in encouraging the raids "to stop the influence that they inculcate into our mindsets".²²⁸

A large number of interviewees recognized that durable peace or stability would require addressing the root causes of cattle raiding. Significantly, a large majority agreed that addressing poverty and hunger would be one of the top priorities, for instance through generating alternative livelihoods,²²⁹ because "a hungry man is an angry man".²³⁰ This resonates with findings from the South Sudan Peacebuilding Opportunities Fund, which found in interviews with cattle camp inhabitants in 2020 that there is great desire among youth to not be reliant exclusively on cattle but to diversify income through gaining other livelihood skills like farming.²³¹

A related demand was the repeated request that government and/or NGOs provide vaccines and medicine for livestock, so as to keep the herds healthier and thereby reduce the need for raids to foresee in one's own livelihood and food security.²³² A cattle camp leader in Lakes State related:

There is a disease that affects the ears of a cow: water leaks out from the cow's wounds. It is killing the cattle beneath our hands [...] Veterinary services need to be increased for livestock health. The cattle have taken a lead in our economy by feeding people, their use

226 Interview with U2, a cattle keeper, on 3 December 2025.

227 Interview with L3, a cattle camp leader, on 22 November 2025.

228 Interviews with U9 and U12 on 8 and 11 December 2025. The quote is from U12.

229 Interviews with L1, L2, L3, L4, L10, U1, U2, U3, U4, U5, U6, U7, U8, U9, U11 and U13 on 21-22 November and 3-8, 10 and 12 December 2025. This notion was reinforced in data validation sessions in March and April 2026 in Payinjia County, Unity State.

230 Interview with L2, a cattle keeper, on 21 November 2025.

231 Peacebuilding Opportunities Fund, *What Drives the Cattle Camps?*

232 Interviews with L1, L2, L3, L4, L5, L9, L10, U9 and U10 on 21-22 November and 2, 8-10 and 12 December 2025.

233 Interview with L1, a cattle camp leader, on 21 November 2025.

234 Interview with U8, a cattle keeper, on 7 December 2025.

235 Interviews with L3, L4, L7 and L9 on 22 November and 6 and 10 December 2025.

236 Interviews with L9, U1, U5, U7 and U8 on 3, 5-6 and 10 December 2025.

237 Interviews with U1, U3, U8, U9 and U12 on 3-4, 7-8 and 11 December 2025.

238 Data validation sessions in March and April 2026 in Payinjia County, Unity State.

239 Interviews with L1, L2, L4, L5, L6, L7, L8, L9, L10, U3 and U6 on 21-22 November and 2, 4-7, 10 and 12 December 2025.

*as ox plough, and by providing dowries.*²³³

Other voiced peacebuilding needs focused more on agreements around shared resources to reduce the potential for conflict by, for instance, establishing neutral grazing corridors that would be patrolled by cross-border community groups,²³⁴ constructing more *haffir* ('water catchments') to make resources less scarce,²³⁵ and establishing joint grazing or vaccination days overseen by representatives from different clans and communities.²³⁶ Various young men also advocated for creating youth liaison positions with chiefs, so that selected representatives could attend conflict prevention meetings or other peace processes and make their voices and grievances heard.²³⁷ During data validation sessions, participants further stressed the need to establish more effective early warning mechanisms and informal communication channels between rival groups in order to quell the potential negative impact of rumors.²³⁸ Many of such proposed mechanisms already exist and are part of traditional practice. However, they are often implemented only informally and at a small scale; with only limited support by government actors or external actors like the UN or NGOs for such initiatives, their potential in achieving sustainable, long-term impact often remains small.

Finally, there were many interviewees who recognized the role cultural events and activities could play in fostering better community relations and preventing raids. Many men expressed a desire for sporting activities like wrestling and football tournaments to bring together youth from different, cross-border cattle camps.²³⁹ This is not an uncommon practice in South Sudan and wrestling tournaments in particular can draw huge crowds, where spectators become the recipients of peace messages, and where participants can achieve status through their performance. According to one interviewee, young men who participated in such events in the past have "abandoned raids and walked together, and shared

their experiences and talent through sport”,²⁴⁰ while another mentioned that “cultural sporting activities like wrestling and dancing have brought peace among us and our neighbors”.²⁴¹ Similarly, some interviewees suggested that community drama groups could be established to use theater to roleplay reconciliation, conflict resolution, and non-violent responses.²⁴²

Visions for peace

When asked what a situation of peace would look like for them, a majority of our respondents referred to living in harmony with other communities.²⁴³ A cattle camp leader in Lakes State specifically noted that “as my community members do not participate in cattle raiding, it has led them to have many friends from other communities”.²⁴⁴ Many also mentioned that peace means to feel secure and move around freely without any fear.²⁴⁵ Others put the emphasis on having more youth participation in decision making,²⁴⁶ and on having more wrestling and other sporting events with participants from all different communities.²⁴⁷ According to a cattle keeper from Lakes State, “peace means that people dance together, share cattle camps, wrestle each other without fear, and visit other communities.”²⁴⁸ Several interviewees also acknowledged their own role in contributing to an environment more conducive to peace, by taking messages of peace and passing these along in their communities and cattle camps.²⁴⁹ A cattle keeper from Unity State who acknowledged having been part of many raids framed the desire for an end to the ongoing insecurity as follows: “I am a great raider, but I blame myself. I support peace more than I do violence, because violence does not make a way forward, but peace does.”²⁵⁰

240 Interview with L7, a cattle keeper, on 6 December 2025.

241 Interview with L2, a cattle keeper, on 21 November 2025.

242 Interviews with L1, U4 and U10 on 21 November and 4 and 9 December 2025.

243 Interviews with L1, L3, L4, L5, L6, L7, L8, U3, U4 and U8 on 21-22 November and 2, 4 and 6-7 December 2025.

244 Interview with L1, a cattle camp leader, on 21 November 2025.

245 Interviews with L1, L4, L5, L6, L8, L9, L10, U1, U3, U4, U5, U6, U7, U8, U9, U10 and U11 on 21-22 November and 3-10 and 12 December 2025.

246 Interviews with U1, U7 and U11 on 3, 6 and 10 December 2025.

247 Interviews with L2 and L6 on 22 November and 4 December 2025.

248 Interview with L6, a cattle keeper, on 4 December 2025.

249 Interviews with L4, L6 and L7 on 22 November and 4 and 6 December 2025.

250 Interview with U10, a cattle keeper, on 9 December 2025.

Annex: Human Security Survey results, Lakes and Unity States 2018-2025

The below table includes an overview of selected data from HSS surveys in Lakes and Unity State localities between 2018-2025.²⁵¹ More information on the contents of the table, including the phrasing of the questions in the survey is included below.

1. Location In **Lakes State**, PAX conducts the HSS in three counties of Greater Yirol: Awerial, Yirol East, and Yirol West. In **Southern Unity**, PAX conducts the HSS in Payinjiar and Leer Counties. Between 2018-2022, the HSS was only conducted in **Payinjiar** County.

2. Year The year data was collected and published.

3. N The number of total respondents who completed the survey.

4. Likely exposure to violence 'Which of the following people or groups do you consider most likely to be exposed to violence in this community?' (options: People from specific ethnic groups, elderly people, IDPs or refugees, young men and boys, young women and girls, small children, people with physical or mental disability, family members of people in the organized forces, cattle keepers, farmers, addicts (drugs/alcohol), other, I don't know, refused to answer)

5. More trust in armed youth than outside security actors 'In my payam, we trust local armed youth for our security more than any security actors from outside. Do you mainly agree or disagree?'

6. Cattle raiders to be respected 'A young man who raids lots of cattle from a neighbouring community is to be respected. Do you mainly agree or disagree?'

7. Influence dowry on cattle raiding 'The increased prices of dowry lead to more frequent cattle raiding. Do you mainly agree or disagree?'

8. Cattle raiding as factor most likely to be causing conflict 'What do you think are the 3 main factors that are most likely to cause further conflict in your community in the next year?' (options: poverty or lack of livelihood opportunities, high crime rates, poor governance at national level (Juba), poor governance at the local level, competition over resources, tribalism or discrimination between ethnic groups, cattle raiding and the increase in dowry prices, alcoholism, easy access to weapons, lack of basic services, lack of well-trained or well-equipped security forces, none of the above/it is unlikely that there will be more conflict here, other, I don't know, refused to answer)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Location	Year	N	Likely exposure to violence	More trust in armed youth than outside security actors	Cattle raiders to be respected	Influence dowry on cattle raiding	Cattle raiding as factor most likely to be causing conflict
Greater Yirol (L)	2025	429	15.5% (#1)	47.6% mainly agrees	33.3% mainly agrees	N/A	14%
Southern Unity (U)	2023	460	14.1% (#3)	39.8% mainly agrees	3.91% mainly agrees	N/A	11%
Greater Yirol (L)	2022	582	12.5% (#4)	48.8% mainly agrees	27% mainly agrees	43.1% mainly agrees	9.6%
Payinjiar (U)	2022	588	21.4% (#2)	48.5% mainly agrees	12.9% mainly agrees	56% mainly agrees	8%
Greater Yirol (L)	2020	407	15.2% (#2)	35.9% mainly agrees	31.9% mainly agrees	40.3% mainly agrees	6.5%
Payinjiar (U)	2020	450	16.2% (#2)	68.4% mainly agrees	41.1% mainly agrees	68.4% mainly agrees	9%
Greater Yirol (L)	2018	513	N/A	55.2% mainly agrees	20.1% mainly agrees	N/A	N/A
Payinjiar (U)	2018	354	N/A	87% mainly agrees	35.9% mainly agrees	N/A	N/A

▲ Figure 11 HSS data from Lakes and Unity States, 2018-2022.

²⁵¹ More data from these surveys or from surveys in other areas of South Sudan can be accessed through <https://protectionofcivilians.org> or by reaching out to PoC@paxforpeace.nl with specific inquiries.

Make peace work.

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