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# INTERSECTIONALITY, CLIMATE CHANGE AND CONFLICT:
# INSIGHTS FROM SOUTH SUDAN

## The Research

Now in its 14th year of independence, South Sudan continues to face significant challenges related to environmental hazards and sub-regional and intercommunal conflict, mass displacement and insecurity. Despite efforts to establish a power-sharing government after the civil war that ended in 2018, ethnic divisions and mistrust persist, exacerbating instability and hindering economic recovery. With millions in need of humanitarian aid, the country faces a complex crisis, marked by ongoing conflict, economic hardship, and environmental disasters.

Globally, climate change impacts are felt most urgently by the most vulnerable communities, especially those living in conflict-affected and conflict-prone regions, where a rise in state-based and non-state violent conflicts has caused complex and protracted humanitarian crises and development setbacks. Literature shows that whilst climate change is not a direct driver of violent conflict, it can exacerbate and multiply existing conflict drivers, and that this very complex and multi-dimensional relationship needs to be examined in different contexts, keeping in mind that vulnerabilities are greatly shaped by compounding multiple forms of inequality.

To help address and further explore this knowledge gap, DCA, with funding from Denmark's development cooperation (DANIDA), commissioned a study in 2024, with the aim to capture and generate a refined understanding of the impacts, interactions, and interlinkages between the effects of climate change, the nature and dynamics of violent conflict, and the intersectional inequalities of vulnerable groups in South Sudan and Ethiopia. Drawing from data collected between October and December 2024 through key informant interviews and focus group discussions, the study sought to provide actionable insights that can enhance DCA's programming, advocacy, and strategic interventions in these highly vulnerable areas by formulating evidence-based recommendations and identifying best practices.

This brief presents a summary of the research findings and recommendations in the context of Akobo County (Jonglei State) and Pibor County (Greater Pibor Administrative Area), South Sudan.

## The Findings

In short:
- Climate change and environmental degradation are worsening the already fragile security and humanitarian situation in Akobo and Pibor County.

- Intercommunal conflicts between Lou Nuer, Murle, and Anyuak groups, driven by limited access to scarce resources, political exploitation of divisions, and historical grievances, continue to fuel violence and displacement.
- Women, children, and displaced persons are disproportionately affected, facing severe food insecurity, gender-based violence (GBV), and exclusion from decision-making.
- Young men are central actors in many conflicts, though their actions are shaped by socio-economic vulnerability, cultural practices, and peer or political influence, and they hold great peacebuilding potential.
- There is an urgent need for climate-sensitive and inclusive peacebuilding and governance interventions, to support and expand community resilience strategies.

South Sudan faces **extreme climate variability,** including recurrent floods, droughts, and erratic rainfall, which severely impact livelihoods, food security, and displacement patterns. In both Akobo and Pibor, seasonal flooding destroys crops and pastures, while droughts deplete water sources and reduce livestock health. Deforestation, overgrazing, and soil degradation further contribute to environmental stress, exacerbating vulnerabilities for pastoralist and agro-pastoralist communities.

> Due to the loss of livelihoods, especially in agriculture or pastoralism, this has led to some unnecessary movements from one place to another [..] there are some conflicts that are occurring as a result of this.
> **Woman member of Peace and Protection Committee, Pibor**

Both Akobo and Pibor experience **high levels of violent intercommunal conflict.** Although occurring primarily along ethnic lines, these conflicts are not rooted in ethnic hatred but are rather driven by resource competition and historical grievances. In Akobo, conflicts are highly localised with limited influence by national politics. They occur both between and within ethnic groups and long pre-date the civil war. The main lines include conflict between the Lou Nuer and the Murle; the Lou Nuer and the Anyuak; and the Lou Nuer and the Jikany Nuer. Among the Murle, the age-set system – where individual men are often grouped according to their proximity in age – has historically structured social organisation and leadership, but in recent years has become a key driver of violence. Especially young people's age-set groups often engage in violent confrontations over resources, which due to the possession of guns become more deadly and difficult to resolve. In Pibor, intercommunal conflict mirrors the dynamics in Akobo, but with

some additional complexity due to the involvement of national-level political elites. The conflict predominantly pits the Murle against the Nuer and Dinka communities, with tensions fuelled by ethnic identities and political interference. Disruptions caused by climate change, such as displacement and new migration patterns, exacerbate these conflicts by increasing competition over already scarce resources, and drive tensions between displaced and host groups.

> **"** We are not treated equally [...] A vulnerable man is more respected than a vulnerable woman.
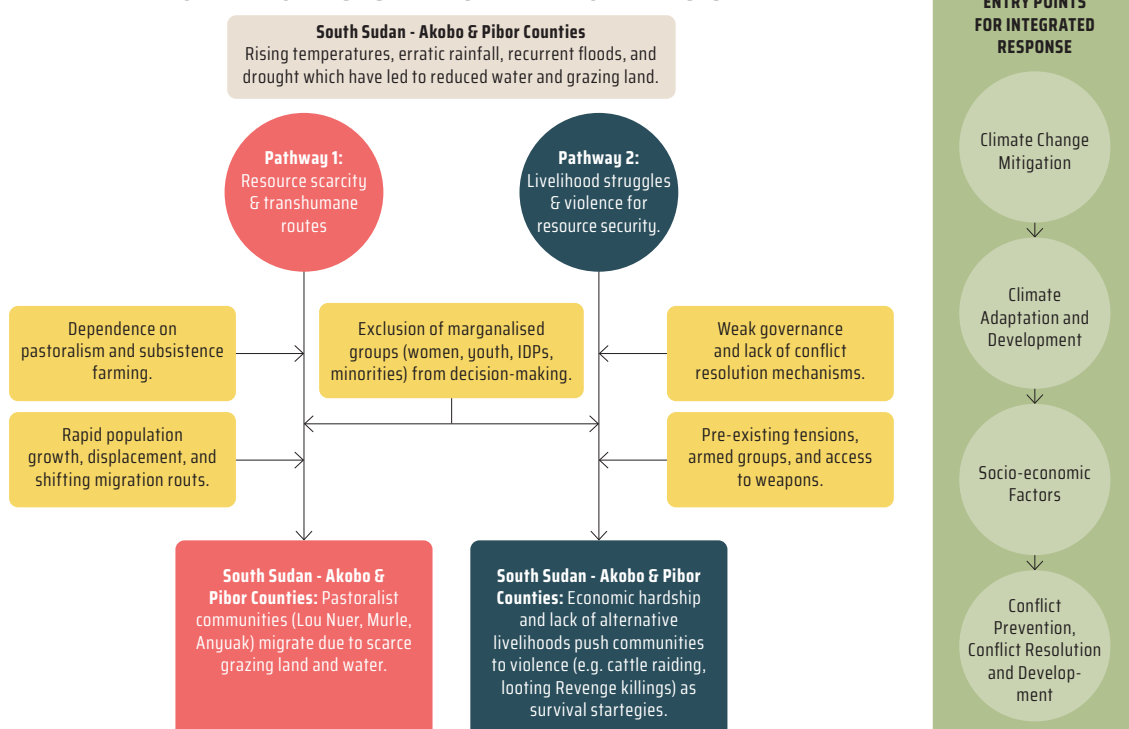> **Women's Group member, Pibor**

Climate change and conflict **disproportionately affect marginalised groups,** including women, children, older people, people with disabilities and displaced persons. **Women** face heightened risks of GBV, economic marginalisation, and exclusion from decision-making. Conflict-induced losses, such as displacement and the death of male family members, combined with deteriorating economic conditions, have compelled many women to assume the role of breadwinner, placing a dual burden on them. The changing roles within households also exacerbate social tensions, and lead to a rise in domestic and intimate partner violence, highlighting the intersections of gender inequality, economic stress, and climate vulnerability. Traditional gender norms limit opportunities for women and girls, including limited access to education, financial services, restricted property and land rights, reinforcing systemic inequalities and barriers to resilience. **Young men,** particularly those organised in age-set groups, are main actors in most conflicts, though their actions are often shaped by the social and political environment in which they live. Economic status, and access to funding and training opportunities, plays a significant role in shaping the resilience of young people to conflict and climate-related stress. **Displaced populations** face acute vulnerabilities stemming from the confluence of conflict, climate change, and socioeconomic exclusion: they experience severe food insecurity and inadequate access to basic services. The psychological and emotional impact of repeated displacements is profound.

Communities employ a range of **coping strategies** to manage these impacts:

- **Local peacebuilding:** Local leaders, such as chiefs and county officials, mediate disputes and organise peace dialogues, combining traditional practices with formal legal frameworks to foster conflict resolution and ensure peace, despite limited resources. Clan, family, and religious networks provide social, emotional, and economic support, fostering social cohesion and enabling safe movement, while religious leaders also contribute to conflict resolution. Women play crucial roles in advocating for peace and non-violence.
- **Cross-Border movement:** South Sudanese people frequently move between Akobo and Gambella, Ethiopia, to access safety, food, and basic services, alleviating pressures on local resources and enabling access to international aid.
- **Livelihood diversification and migration:** Communities diversify livelihoods through subsistence farming, fishing, and small-scale trade, while pastoralists migrate with livestock to safer grazing lands during climate shocks or conflict, though this can lead to new conflicts.
- **Cross-border trade:** Local trade across the Ethiopia-South Sudan border supports local economies and regional stability, though insecurity and climate-induced challenges sometimes disrupt trade, leading to price increases and affecting food security.
- **International assistance and collaboration:** Humanitarian organisations provide essential resources like food, shelter, and healthcare, supporting peacebuilding efforts and assisting vulnerable people on the move in areas where the government is unable to provide sufficient support. NGOs, community groups, and local authorities collaborate on peace dialogues and climate change initiatives, enhancing community resilience and empowering vulnerable groups, particularly women, to cope with conflict and environmental challenges.

## CLIMATE CHANGE & ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES

**South Sudan - Akobo & Pibor Counties**
Rising temperatures, erratic rainfall, recurrent floods, and drought which have led to reduced water and grazing land.

**Pathway 1:** Resource scarcity & transhumane routes

**Pathway 2:** Livelihood struggles & violence for resource security.

Dependence on pastoralism and subsistence farming.

Exclusion of marganalised groups (women, youth, IDPs, minorities) from decision-making.

Weak governance and lack of conflict resolution mechanisms.

Rapid population growth, displacement, and shifting migration routs.

Pre-existing tensions, armed groups, and access to weapons.

**South Sudan - Akobo & Pibor Counties:** Pastoralist communities (Lou Nuer, Murle, Anyuak) migrate due to scarce grazing land and water.

**South Sudan - Akobo & Pibor Counties:** Economic hardship and lack of alternative livelihoods push communities to violence (e.g. cattle raiding, looting Revenge killings) as survival startegies.

**ENTRY POINTS FOR INTEGRATED RESPONSE**

Climate Change Mitigation

Climate Adaptation and Development

Socio-economic Factors

Conflict Prevention, Conflict Resolution and Development

# The Recommendations

To respond to the growing, interlinked and compounding impacts of the effects of climate change, violent conflict, and intersectional inequalities in Akobo and Pibor, DCA proposes that international, local and funding partners pursue an integrated approach across programming, strategy and political engagement, along the following guidance:

**Informed, Inclusive and Integrated Programming Responses**

Programming that is well informed across disciplines and that seeks integrated approaches needs to be prioritised. Baseline gender sensitive conflict analyses, as well as climate vulnerability and environmental risks analysis, need to be integrated into project designs. Stakeholders should be engaged to ensure decision-making processes include women, young people, and marginalised groups to promote sustainable and equitable conflict resolution and community-led approaches. Coordination between humanitarian and development actors needs to be improved, also to ensure equitable distribution of aid, helping to reduce tensions.

**Strengthening Governance and Conflict Resolution Mechanisms**

In addition to supporting local peace committees and traditional leaders, which allows communities to address both conflict and climate risks in Akobo and Pibor, it is recommended to specifically promote inclusive decision-making processes at local and regional (state or area) levels to address land and resource conflicts, leveraging traditional knowledge and formal governance structures. Joint resource management platforms involving both refugees/ IDPs and host communities should be established to foster collaboration and reduce tensions.

**Improving Climate Change Resilience and Livelihood Diversification**

Sustainable and conflict sensitive resource management initiatives, e.g. on agroforestry, reforestation, water harvesting and conservation systems, should be supported to combat land degradation and water scarcity, focusing on community-led projects integrating traditional ecological knowledge with modern techniques. Local environmental committees need to be directly supported. Initiatives should include livelihood diversification strategies with a market systems approach that are economically viable and climate-resilient, such as small-scale trade, sustainable fishing, and eco-friendly handicrafts.

**Addressing Vulnerabilities and Transforming Inequalities**

In addition to the inclusion of vulnerable groups, gender-transformative programming needs to be prioritised. Concrete interventions may include education, vocational training, and financial literacy initiatives for young women and men. In addition to measures preventing and responding to GBV, and providing MHPSS services, it is crucial to identify and support safe and women-only spaces and to verify that partners and interventions are culturally sensitive.

**Advancing Local Governance and Policy Reforms and Fostering (Regional) Collaboration**

Programming should include trainings and awareness on land rights, property ownership, and gender equality, especially for women, young people, and marginalised groups. Community-based land dispute resolution mechanisms should be strengthened, and local leaders trained in land tenure and resource management. Collaboration between institutions in South Sudan should be fostered to address shared challenges like displacement, resource management, and cross-border trade, and links to regional platforms like IGAD strengthened. Regular cross-border meetings between local leaders and stakeholders along the South Sudan-Ethiopia border should be supported to enhance cooperation and develop collective responses.

**MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF DENMARK**