

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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# Youth's Mesopolitical Agency: A Valuable Lens for Peace Research and Praxis

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## Abstract

This brief article introduces a new empirical assessment of the concept of mesopolitical agency to examine youth engagement in peace and conflict in South Sudan. Mesopolitical agency refers to an active role of managing power across multiple spheres of life. Drawing on data from a people-to-people peacebuilding project, the assessment focuses on the analytic power of mesopolitical agency to (i) explore youth engagement in peace and conflict in the Unity State and, in so doing, to (ii) contribute to advancing peace research and praxis. The assessment was conducted using governance diaries, interviews, focus groups, and documentary data from multiple stakeholders. The findings demonstrate, inter alia, that youth actively engage with local systems of power through conflict and emerging roles in modest peace initiatives. The findings illustrate youth's exercise of mesopolitical agency, where the substance and extent of their participation or disaffection can significantly shape and be shaped by the dynamics of peace and conflict. Overall, this article notes challenges to essentialist perspectives on youth as subjects of inherent, static, or unidimensional determinable positionalities vis-à-vis peace and conflict. Finally, there are concrete implications for research and practice that may achieve a stronger understanding and optimization of youth's potential role in peace.

**Keywords:** *Intercommunal Conflict; Mesopolitical Agency; Peace Praxis; Project Interventions; Youth.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

South Sudan has faced several decades of conflict. From the Second Sudanese Civil War to the South Sudanese Civil War, national-level contestations for power and resource control have often diffused into local-level conflict (Gibb et al., 2022). As they do, they draw in youth that are often characterized as a key demographic for targeted responses from researchers, development, and humanitarian practitioners (Price & Orrnert, 2017). Thus, it is no surprise that South Sudan, along with four other African countries, is overrepresented in local-level peace agreements that reference the youth's role (Ozcelik & Shaw, 2023). This dual trend of conflict diffusion and demographically aligned political and development programming is epitomized in the Unity State. Located in the Greater Upper Nile region in northeastern South Sudan, Unity has experienced extreme levels of violence since 2013 (Danish Refugee Council, 2017) and unusual flooding since 2019.

In Mayendit and Koch, the two Unity counties with which this brief article is concerned, the mesopolitical agency of youth represents a key entry into understanding not only their orchestrated engagement in conflict but also their probable contribution to peace. 'Mesopolitical agency' refers to the conscious and interdependent effort of youth in managing power within and across the two counties (Oosterling, 2014). The concept helps researchers approach youth as active agents acting through the conflict-peace continuum, shifting along depending on external factors influencing the extent and efficacy of their agency (Oosterling, 2014). This brief article introduces a new empirical assessment of this concept to establish its significance in peace research and praxis. This assessment demonstrates that the mesopolitical agency of youth in Mayendit and Koch is influenced by environmental disasters, political polarization, economic scarcity, service poverty, judicial corruption, and gendered social factors.

This assessment is then followed by reflection on how youth mobilize their mesopolitical agency in navigating this strong multidimensional influence vis-à-vis peace-and-conflict interventions from the government, traditional leaders, NGOs, and others. Finally, this empirical assessment of the conceptual lens of mesopolitical agency is distilled into concrete implications for academic and non-academic data collection efforts concerned with understanding and optimizing youth's contribution to peace. This assessment is premised on youth being 18-40 years old. We acknowledge that this age categorization can vary significantly across different contexts.

For example, in its African Youth Charter, the *African Union* (2009) defined "youth" synonymously with "young people" as referring to all people between the ages of 15 and 35, although it also used "minors" to refer to young people aged 15-17 years. As practitioners, we made the pragmatic dual decision to exclude people from falling into the universalized children category (below 18) and to extend the upper age limit to 40 to gain some insight into youth's mesopolitical agency as they transition from youthfulness to social seniority. We made this decision after careful review of pertinent literature, which *Price and Orrnert* (2017, p. 2) summarize concisely: "In South Sudan, youth is not a fixed biological category, but a fluid social construct, and broadly refers to young men aged between 18 and 40/45."

Further to this premise, we follow pertinent empirical, theoretical, and philosophical research that assumes youth have significant, albeit contingent, agency in (everyday) settings of conflict and peace (Choo, 2020; Mac Ginty, 2014; Oosterom et al., 2016), including in South Sudan (Daoust, 2018; Oosterom, 2017). Equally importantly, we planned for the assessment to explore the mesopolitical agency of both male and female South Sudanese youth. However, limited access to female participants skewed the assessment focus on male youth. We discuss the implications of this skewed focus in the conclusion of this article.

## 2. EMPIRICAL ASSESSMENT

The empirical assessment reported in the themes was generated through a people-to-people peacebuilding project *Communities Managing Conflict* (CMC), implemented by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The project's goal was to strengthen the interdependence and peaceful coexistence between Koch and Mayendit. The empirical assessment was conducted through governance diaries, a methodological approach combining strengths from "a medium 'n' survey which gathers information in a single snapshot, and a detailed ethnography taking place in several locations" (Loureiro et al., 2023, p. 9). This methodology was used to assess the extent to which the project achieved its goal. First, focus groups with project participants were sampled to represent men and women of different age groups at six implementation sites. These focus groups were followed by an iterative sequence of three semi-structured individual interviews with 20 traditional leaders and young and old men and women community members at the project implementation sites.

Focus groups data was triangulated against that from interviews. Data collected through both methods were supplemented with a review of project documents, such as activity reports, monitoring, and evaluation results. Overall, this multi-method data collection offers a rich base of empirical knowledge to assess project success, that is, perceptions of what worked or did not, how, and why. In addition, this data collection process privileges subjective perceptions, whose sharing may be influenced by social desirability bias. The multiple methods and participant groups involved in data collection, as well as the prompt and follow-up probes used during interviews and focus groups, were carefully planned to mitigate this potential bias (see Bergen & Labonté, 2019). For example, community members who benefited extensively from the CMC project were excluded from participation in the research.

Using the data collected, this brief article addresses two main research questions: How do youths engage in conflict and/or peace in Koch and Mayendit counties? What promise, if any, does the concept of 'mesopolitical agency' bring to scholarly and practical work on youth and peace? *Braun and Clarke's* (2016) thematic analysis was applied to the data, using Dedoose, to identify prevalent community perceptions of youth engagement in "peaceandconflict," so spelled to reflect the messiness and singularity (rather than discreteness) of peace and conflict (Mac Ginty, 2021). This scope of analysis was fit for the immediate purpose of this article in demonstrating the scholarly significance and practical utility of 'mesopolitical agency' in researching youth and peace and conflict in (and beyond) South Sudan. The resulting themes below demonstrate some of the ways in which South Sudanese youth engagement in peace and conflict is perceived to be amenable to the intersecting influence of environmental, political, economic, and gendered social factors.

## 3. CONFLICT DRIVERS

A cross-generational and communal majority of men and women participants highlighted the specific challenges they perceived to be driving the local dynamics of conflict in Unity. These ranged from flooding, looting, cattle raiding, guns among youth to hunger, and a lack of public services and economic opportunities. The participants elaborated on these conflicting drivers as follows.

They reported a cyclical relationship between flooding, hunger, and conflicting eruptions. They noted that flooding caused displacement, decreased opportunities for crop farming, and increased cross-communal stress on resources. A young man described how this cyclical relationship prevents individual people from having "peace in them anymore". An older man redescribed hunger as "one of the diseases that lack proper treatment". He further commented how this disease causes life to feel "meaningless" such that "during the hunger, a high percentage of the community members prefer to go for theft, stealing cows, and others think of a way to loot a house, in that regard, the conflict within or between the communities increases."

Describing the ensuing violent and lawful competition over resources, the participants said that it primarily involved looting and cattle raiding, often led by youth. They explained this violence as a means of maintaining survival but also of improving marriage prospects, achieving economic prestige, and securing ‘a seat at the table’ in public community life. Echoing others, a young man from Koch said, “There are a lot of reasons” for youth to perpetuate raids. He went on to summarize some of these reasons in clear terms:

*“If you do not have a cow or herd of cattle in the community, you are nothing in the community and, at some point, you can be a voiceless person in the community. People consider cows a useful resource because they are normally used for marriage and as a source of income for the family as people depend on it”.*

A similar cross-generational and communal majority of male and female participants noted one further key conflict driver: lack of quality public services, especially education, healthcare, and justice. Without schools, a young woman from Mayendit said that children would be uneducated and more likely to perpetuate looting and continue the conflict. Without hospitals, she continued, the community loses its elders to diseases, and youth ride their pride unchecked by the wisdom of the elders. Without fair, impartial, and gender-inclusive justice mechanisms, several participants predicted that there would not be a durable or peaceful resolution of disputes and conflicts in Unity. The following quotes from a community leader, an older man, and a young woman illustrate this prevalent view among the participants:

*“Court members usually take sides because of their relationships with others who might have fallen guilty. Therefore, there is no proper conflict-resolution mechanism in this county”.*

*“Many traditional leaders used to accept bribery to capitalize on behalf of the person who feels guilty in court, which has discouraged everyone in this community because you cannot claim their rights”.*

*“Women have no position in county-level high courts. There are only men in this payam<sup>1</sup> for whom local chiefs sit on top of everyone, without a woman representative. There is still no gender balance, and where there is no equality, there is a high chance of misunderstanding between people/communities”.*

#### **4. YOUTH AND PUBLIC ACTORS: AN INTERRELATIONSHIP OF PEACE AND CONFLICT**

Reflecting on parties that benefit from exploiting or perpetuating the effects of these conflict drivers, the participants identified two main groups: youth and public actors, that is, local government officials and politicians. Gangs, militias, and armies were notably absent from participants reported assessments. Instead, a cross-generational and communal many of them explained conflict perpetuation as well as peace promotion on account of a key interrelationship between armed youth and public actors. A young mans contribution illuminates this perceived interrelationship.

*“Previously, when conflict erupted between the government and the opposition, it was the government from both sides who always encouraged youth to loot or raid cattle from other communities. They always benefit from conquering or controlling the area that is called their territory. They encourage youths to engage in territorial control. When they [youth] are raiding or looting, they give a percentage to local leadership”.*

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<sup>1</sup> In South Sudan, a payam is second-lowest administrative division. It comes above boma and below county.

Another participant from Mayendit articulated an inverse effect of the interrelationship between youth and public actors:

*“Local youth used to refuse peace, but after a long run, they realized that there was nothing they benefited from during the war. Now, they stop with violent behaviour. Last time, they did this because local governments used to support them in raiding and looting, so that they [government officials] were getting something. However, since the local government from the counties has agreed to have peace now, the youth have stopped violent practices because they are not gaining anything out of it, and the local government does not support the practice”.*

Several participants described public actors as having a significant, if not oversized, influence on violence eruption and perpetuation, violence reduction, and conflict resolution processes. The participants ultimately professed that public actors, chiefly the local government, should take a stronger approach to youth disarmament, law enforcement, and the application of justice mechanisms. They also reasoned that increased service accessibility can itself cause conflict reduction, noting that this reduction may be sustainable as long as more children access education, which means they can chart more peaceful lives in Unity.

## 5. ACTORS PROMOTING PEACE

In addition to youth and public actors, the participants cited other groups and individuals as playing a significant role in promoting peace between the Koch and Mayendit counties, including faith leaders and educated and influential community members. All the participants from Koch said that the most important pro-peace actors were peace committees. These groups harness diverse community representations to promote peace (Duku SFC, 2022). The project strengthened the work of six pre-existing ones and led to the establishment of two more. These committees were perceived to be effective in addressing grievances, with one elderly participant noting that they were so in part because of their ability to garner respect and engagement from within their community and across different communities. In Mayendit, actors perceived as pro-peace were more diverse, including youth, women, civil society, and local government officials (when not engaging in conflict entrepreneurship). Crucially, traditional leaders were assigned primary importance in dispute resolution despite critical views of their relationship with the two identified key groups, youth and public actors, as explained below. The participants reflected that community members turn to traditional leaders to resolve marital and family issues, most notably those arising from dowry payments, pregnancy, girls elopement, issues of sexual violence and killings, and land disputes and inter-county violence resulting from cattle raiding. Across the two counties, the participants pointed out a further, though less manifestly engaged, pro-peace force, the civilian population’s eagerness for peace, and vulnerable groups such as women, children, elderly people, and persons with disabilities.

These perceptions demonstrate that the role of youth cannot be considered isolated from that of other actors, although the relationship between youth and traditional leaders may be of paramount significance. Indeed, a major point of prevalence among the participants is that there is little trust between traditional leaders and the youth. One reason cited by the participants was gun ownership. For example, one young woman from Mayendit said that when traditional leaders ordered armed youth to return stolen possessions, the latter refused to comply, forcing traditional leaders to use equivalent means of violent mobilization to achieve justice. This shows the perhaps large extent to which youth are perceived to have a significant influence over peace and conflict between Koch and Mayendit. In addition, traditional leaders imposition on local authorities and perceptions of their corruption and unfair decision-making were other reasons cited for the lack of trust between the two groups. To illustrate, an old man from Koch reasoned, “many traditional leaders used to accept bribery to capitalize on behalf of

the person who feels guilty in the court. This has discouraged everyone in this community because you cannot claim your rights.” Similarly, a young man assessed, “when someone who killed people was forcefully appointed by the government to lead the community, such people can bring conflict again.” This finding may help explain the earlier point where youths wielding of influence may be shaped by their sense of trust in sociopolitical institutions and judicial processes.

Two other points are salient in the participants data related to the perceived role of the CMC project and that of women in this context of peace and conflict. Both points are presented in the subthemes below, which extend the illumination of youth mesopolitical agency as potentially implicated in the dynamics of (i) external intervention, e.g., projects; and (ii) gender norms and perceptions.

## **6. PERCEPTIONS OF THE CMC PROJECT ACTIVITIES**

Commenting specifically on the CMC project activities that promoted peace between Koch and Mayendit, the participants cited those that brought people together through cultural practices of peaceful coexistence. Highlighted activities included the traditional youth dance festival, in which an older male in Koch lauded as a “wonderful occasion for every youth member to promote peaceful coexistence within and between the communities”; community storytelling sessions where “storytellers entertain participants with influential stories that promote peaceful coexistence and social cohesion activities at the community level”, as described by a young woman from Koch; the inter-payam football and volleyball tournaments for peaceful coexistence among youth, which an older woman from Koch noted “create a safer environment for [our] children.” The participants also reported significant appreciation of the mechanisms and approaches introduced to resolving disputes peacefully, from dialogue sessions and training on negotiation and arbitration to traditional leader-led “blood compensations,” or financial compensations made to a victim’s family. Importantly, participants reported being hopeful that the knowledge, skills, and attitudes learned through such project activities would be shared by direct beneficiaries with other community members.

## **7. PERCEPTIONS OF WOMEN’S STATUS**

During their account of peace and conflict actors, the participants frequently referred to women in Unity as experiencing a dynamic, though not necessarily all-positive, change in their public role. The participants accounts outlined three elements of this perceived change: (i) that women’s public engagement and leadership, including in promoting peace, seem to be increasingly accepted and less criticized; (ii) that women have little to no engagement in conflict perpetuation, with their engagement in everyday disputes also decreasing; and (iii) that conflict leaves a disproportionately higher effect on women in terms of victimizing them and demanding their caring duties. In addition to the participants’ accounts, project documents demonstrate that women exercised (potentially more of) their agency during their tenure on peace committees, as well as through their participation in gender action discussions, contribution to community dialogue, and leadership in awareness-elevation activities.

## **8. SUMMARY**

These three themes illuminate some of the potential mesopolitical agencies that South Sudanese youth in the Unity state can exhibit. Youth have demonstrated this agency by navigating and engaging with local systems of power, whether through conflict for survival and status, such as looting and cattle raiding, or through emerging roles in (however modest) peace initiatives, such as heeding local government support for peace and participation in peaceful coexistence.

Their actions influence broader social and political landscapes, revealing their potential role as critical agents, whose participation or disaffection can determine the stability and resilience of their communities. The empirical evidence here warrants a reassessment of how the category of ‘youth’ may be (un)gendered and used in research and praxis of peace. This reassessment is presented in the following, final section.

## 9. CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

The themes present challenges to essentialist and popular views of youth as necessarily a homogenous force or concern for peace (see McEvoy-Levy, 2024). Instead, they show that male South Sudanese youth are major enforcers and stakeholders in peace and conflict between Koch and Mayendit, engaging in violent conflict for survival and sociocultural gain, but also play a key role in maintaining peace and celebrating peaceful coexistence. Although the themes reveal comparatively little about the role of female South Sudanese youth, they capture a stage of perceived larger possibilities for (young) women to be more public with and acknowledged in their vision, voice, and influence, mostly for peace (cf. Search for Common Ground 2018).

The findings also broaden the understanding of youth engagement in peace and conflict beyond what may be revealed by individual explanatory categories such as economic hardship or unemployment (Amarasuriya et al., 2009), waithood and impeded transition to adulthood (Bangura, 2023; Felix da Costa, 2023), elite corruption or political exploitation (Omale, 2013), and natural disasters (Ensor, 2021). While valuable, these individual categories can result in segmented, if not narrow, explanatory claims about why youth engage in peace and conflict in the ways observed. Our findings demonstrate the greater plausibility of relying on a dynamic analytic framework. The one we used here, mesopolitical agency, allowed us to consider the empirical evidence of youth engagement in peace and conflict and to interpret this engagement as being amenable to the *intersecting* influence of environmental, political, economic, and gendered social factors. This analytic stance is consistent with the latest cross-country empirical evidence of African youth having their engagements and (political) positionalities shaped by the intersecting influence of opportunities, or lack thereof, for health, education, work, financial services, and political participation (Homonchuk et al., 2024). A wider analytic lens to appreciate this wide group of factors may better support researchers in taking the openness of the social world seriously (Fleetwood, 2016).

Importantly, these themes may suggest a perceived reality of the youth’s active mesopolitical agency. The findings demonstrate that South Sudanese youth in Koch and Mayendit engage in peace and conflict in ways that are amenable to the combined stress of environmental-economic disaster cycles and demanding gendered social expectations; moreover, the findings demonstrate that youth in Koch and Mayendit engage in peace and conflict in ways that are responsive (i) to their gendered interdependence, e.g., for marriageability and social standing; (ii) their political interdependence with public actors during violence and peace; (iii) their criticism of insufficient, corrupt, and politicized state functions; and (iv) their own creative imagination of inter-county peace, including when supported by external interventions/projects. These findings emphasize the need for still greater attention to youth in peace and conflict at the local level (Ozcelik & Shaw, 2023). The findings also demonstrate the potential value of mesopolitical agency as a key analytic stance with which research and advocacy can be better informed to address the absence of youth from interstate peace agreements. This absence is evidenced in *Ozcelik and Shaw’s* (2023) dataset, which shows that only 0.4% of interstate peace agreements included a reference to youth.

The understanding of youth engagement in peace spans both empirical and potential strands of reality (Galtung, 2009); that is, it considers their pro-peace engagements that are already demonstrated and those that are possible though not yet actualized. The findings demonstrate the following dual process

that may be necessary to allow greater actualization of South Sudanese youth's potential for peace: alleviating the pro-conflict stress ensuing from environmental events, political arrangements, economic conditions, and sociocultural norms, synchronized with the elicitation of youth's deliberate exercise of their power in effecting some positive change in inter-county relations of peace and conflict.

As may be clear, this understanding of youth is not merely demographically defined. As mesopolitical agents, the youth's role is not presumed to be essentially for peace nor for conflict. Instead, their roles were considered more analytically and dynamically. It is conceptualized as emergent in the context of the larger multidimensional forces of reality. It is "reproduced and transformed through a dialectical process" where they "experience [physical and] social structures... and, through human activities, transform or reproduce these... structures" (Smith & Seward, 2009, p. 22). In this dialectical process, the efficacy of youth's role in building peace is further conceptualized as contingent on their active, pro-peace engagement, through which they can co-constitute an inter-county reality of more peace. It follows that conscientizing and capacitating youth may enhance their deliberate exercise of mesopolitical agency, and therefore, the power of their co-constitution of a state of peace between Koch and Mayendit. This recharacterization of youth as peace and conflict actors further coheres with Barnett's (2008) proposition of *Peace as Freedom*, where he synthesizes Galtung (1969), Giddens (1984), Sen (1999), and others pertinent work on social phenomena, of which peace is one, as relational. According to this proposition youth alone, even with the support of the most impactful interventions cannot generate peace. Structural change and politically conscious engagement with existing structures, including through coordinated youth efforts, is needed to give rise to the phenomenon of (inter-county) peace.

In summary, the findings invite a creative assumption of the pro-peace contribution of youth as one that can better emerge if pro-conflict structural influence is reduced, their autonomy increased, and their pro-peace mesopolitical agency supported, while simultaneously accounting for the strong influence of local government officials and ideally preventing their pro-conflict efficacy. Crucially, the findings about female South Sudanese youth, while limited due to low participation, suggest that gender processes should be explored as a central, rather than auxiliary, force of youth's mesopolitical agency in peace and conflict settings.

## 10. IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

The creative assumption drawn above from the CMC project and this research effort can be useful to peace researchers and practitioners. To the former, this assumption can be deployed through the research planning and design stage to broaden the focus on youth to the entire data collection and analysis process, rather than limiting it to the population choice and sampling procedures. This means using data collection methods and techniques as well as theoretical, conceptual, and analytical models that are suited to uncovering exercises of youth's pro-peace mesopolitical agency, constraints and affordances thereto, opportunities for minimizing the former and maximizing the latter, and the gender processes influencing these exercises, constraints, affordances, and opportunities.

Knowledge produced through such research can, in turn, have immediate value in peacebuilding policy and practice. Policymakers and practitioners can use funding, policy, project, and advocacy tools at their disposal to support interventions that address structural and gendered factors of pro-conflict influence and prohibitive effect on youth's mesopolitical agency. Policymakers and practitioners can also use their tools to equip youth with technical capacities to exercise their mesopolitical agency in pro-peace ways and with critical knowledge to do so in ways that consider real and constructed barriers, such as environmental disasters and gendered norms.

By adopting the ethos of praxis, practitioners can further integrate project monitoring and evaluation activities into continuous exploration of structural limits on and opportunities for the pro-peace mesopolitical agency of youth. They should ensure that this exploration is done *with* youth and

community members to build inclusive knowledge of what has (not) worked and how to better proceed. Crucially, youth reflection through such a participatory MEAL approach may serve further functions of conscientization, empowerment, and shared accountability. Ideally, such continuous and participatory exploration of limits on and opportunities for youth's pro-peace mesopolitical agency should be followed by action—at the activity, project, and higher levels—to address the identified limits.

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No conflicts of interest.

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The authors did not use any AI tools in the production of this manuscript.

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### **Data Availability**

The data used in this study cannot be publicly shared owing to privacy and ethical restrictions. Inquiries to the corresponding author are welcome.

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